

*Joost Raessens*

# Homo Ludens 2.0

## The Ludic Turn in Media Theory

**Universiteit Utrecht**  
*Faculteit Geesteswetenschappen*





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## **Inaugural Address**

Delivered on November 19, 2010 on the occasion of accepting the  
Chair of Media Theory at Utrecht University.

*For my mother.*

## 1. Introduction

Including those among you who do not engage in media studies will be familiar with today's subject – the concept of play. Just open your newspaper and see how this concept imposes itself, both in word and image. Take for example the Dutch cabinet formation in 2010: “Formation rules out of date” *de Volkskrant* announces. And *NRC Next* points out that the “formation game is not played properly” and that the process shows signs of “rough play.” Imagery in *de Volkskrant* similarly uses the play metaphor to denote the political situation. Wilders is depicted as a puppeteer pulling the strings at whim while the political arena is reduced to his playground. Rules: No Muslims, no leftist elite and no judges. Closing time – or how long will this cabinet stay in power? – ask it to Mr. Wilders.<sup>1</sup>

A second example – this time from the field of media studies – is offered by the film *Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle 2008). It is remarkable that this particular film was the big winner at the Academy Awards – the Oscars – in 2009. Suspense in the film largely depends on the format of a major television genre, the game show, and more specifically the quiz show: the Indian version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* At the beginning of the film we have an opening ritual that introduces protagonist Jamal Malik, which is followed by the actual game, the quiz, while the film ends with a closing ritual showing how the winner Jamal is congratulated by the presenter and handed a check with the amount of money he has won. Media scholar John Fiske calls this format of “ritual-game-ritual” (1987a, 265) an enactment of capitalist ideology. The suggestion is made that – no matter the differences – everyone would have the same opportunities. That differences in the standard of knowledge are often associated with differences in social backgrounds would thus be hidden from view. This is indeed how the film could be interpreted. The people in the film who in increasing numbers follow the show watch in amazement as Jamal correctly answers each new question yet again. But director Danny Boyle plays a double game. Ingeniously he interweaves the storyline of the quiz with the narrative of Jamal's life. By thus addressing Jamal's social background he manages to show the film's audiences how this ‘bum’ from the slums gleaned his superb knowledge from the streets to win the quiz show.<sup>2</sup>

These two examples highlight most of the features of the

play concept that I want to discuss today: the importance of rules, the idea that rules can be changed, the playful nature of cultural domains such as politics and media, the understanding that play is often less open than it looks (it is Mr. Wilders's playground), the international popularity of game shows, the cultural significance of play, and so on.

Since the 1960s, when the word 'ludic' became popular to denote playful behaviour and fun objects, playfulness has gradually become a central category of our culture. The popularity of computer games is a striking example in this respect. Everyone plays, young and old, male and female. The game industry plays an increasingly important role in the Netherlands too. The city of Utrecht is gradually changing into the gaming capital of Europe, hosting the Festival of Games, the Dutch Game Garden as a boost to the Dutch game industry, and the GATE research project.<sup>3</sup> Although computer games draw a lot of attention, they are not the only manifestation of this ludification process. Play is not only characteristic of leisure, but also turns up in those domains that once were considered the opposite of play, such as education (e.g. educational games), politics (playful forms of campaigning, using gaming principles to involve party members in decision making processes<sup>4</sup>) and even warfare (interfaces resembling computer games, the use of drones – unmanned remote-controlled planes – introducing war à la PlayStation). Such playfulness can also be witnessed in the surge of using mobile phones and the playful communication resulting from this – think of texting and twittering. As linguist Andrea Lunsford argues, "writing has become amazingly creative. It is playful and experimental" (Houtekamer 2009, 4).

I have described this development earlier as the "ludification of culture" (Raessens 2006). Also widely used in this context is the term "gamification" (Deterding et al. 2011): the integration of game elements in products and services with the aim to advance user involvement.<sup>5</sup> The economist Jeremy Rifkin refers to this development as follows: "Play is becoming as important in the cultural economy as work was in the industrial economy" (Rifkin 2000, 263). And the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that playfulness in our ludic culture is no longer confined to childhood, but has become a lifelong attitude: "*The mark of postmodern adulthood is the willingness to embrace the game whole-heartedly, as children do*" (Bauman 1995, 99).

## 2. The study of play

Considering man and his world as playful certainly is no recent phenomenon; it is of all times and all cultures. In 1795 Friedrich Schiller, for example, emphasized the importance of the play instinct for mankind. Well-known is the dictum from his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, one of the most important philosophical works of early German romanticism: “Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and *he is only fully a human being when he plays*” (Schiller 1967, 107). Schiller expects no salvation from politics; only play, especially the game of art, can be expected to humanise society. Next to reasoning (*homo sapiens*) and crafting (*homo faber*) it is playing (*homo ludens*) that takes up the centre of attention. Philosophers such as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Gadamer, Marcuse, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari – most of whom are considered as precursors or representatives of postmodern thought – follow Schiller in their appreciation for the notion of play.<sup>6</sup> Not only philosophy, however, but also the natural sciences, social sciences and the full width of the humanities have in recent years testified to an every growing interest in the notion of play.

Strikingly, the conceptual framework of play used to meet with little systematic research in media studies. Four developments at the end of the last century changed this, however: socio-cultural changes, changes in the media themselves, changes in media studies, and institutional changes in education and research. The first change made it *possible* to envisage research into the concept of play, the second made it *desirable*, and with the third and fourth it became a matter of *reality*.

Let us start with the socio-cultural changes. In his article ‘Play and (Post)Modern Culture’ Lourens Minnema offers an interesting explanation for the growing interest in play in nineteenth- and twentieth-century culture. Minnema points to the fact that, since modernity, Western culture has come to consist of many sub-domains – such as politics, economics, law, education, science, technology, and art – each possessing relative autonomy and a specific set of rules. We see our contemporary (post)modern culture “as a game without an overall aim, as play without a transcendent destination but not without the practical necessity of rules agreed upon and of (inter)

subjective imagination; as a complex of games each one having its own framework, its own rules, risks, chances, and charms” (Minnema 1998, 21). It is such a social-cultural change that made it *possible* to envisage research into the conceptual framework of play.

Secondly, we are witnessing changes in the media themselves, for example in the areas of film, TV and new media. Since the 1990s, a new type of playful film narratives has enjoyed great popularity. Play is central to so-called puzzle films (Buckland 2009) such as *Lost Highway* (Lynch 1997), *Run Lola Run* (Tykwer, 1998) and *Memento* (Nolan 2000). The films feature plots of such intricacy that viewers feel they are solving a puzzle.<sup>7</sup> New developments in the field of TV such as the online video sharing website YouTube enable users to ‘play’ or mimic television, and to look like a professional (Feely 2006). Not only do YouTube users play the television game, but conversely the broadcasting companies play the YouTube game by launching websites such as *Uitzending Gemist*, an internet protocol based replay service which enables viewers to watch shows they have missed on television. As I will argue below, mimicry is an important feature of play. Another example of what could be called the ‘gamification’ of television is offered by the *Heineken Star Player* app (2011), which enables viewers of Champions League matches to gamble on the outcome of an attack on Facebook. New media appear to exemplify this process of ludification: think of both commercial and serious computer games, playful communication via mobile phones, or social media like Facebook where identities are constructed in a playful way. Creating and maintaining communities form the core of these sites, which offer users the possibility to playfully express who they think they are and, more importantly, how they can be seen as more attractive in the eyes of fellow users. Following the view that it is the rules that constitute game worlds, one could conclude that this process of ludic identity construction can only take place within the formats developed and controlled by Facebook: a kind of multiple-choice test with a limited number of possible responses, little free play or improvisation (*paidia*), despite the suggestion of otherwise, and, on closer inspection, a lot of rule-governed discipline (*ludus*).<sup>8</sup> All in all, these changes in media – in film, television, as well as new media – made it *desirable* to investigate the conceptual framework of play.

Thirdly, as I suggested above, play until recently occupied

only a modest position in media studies. This is changing, however, which has to do with the alterations in the way game and media studies relate to one another. That relation has three forms, which for the major part can be situated historically in terms of three stages. At its incipience, game studies emphatically sought a position outside media studies, clearly searching for an identity of its own. Any overtures from the part of film or literary studies were seen as an attempt to colonise this new domain. In 2001, Espen Aarseth in his editorial for the new online magazine *Game Studies* stated that computer games had an aesthetics of their own and could not be reduced to a type of film or literature; and that the “colonising attempts” of both film and literature studies at absorbing computer games would continue until game studies had established itself as an independent academic field (Aarseth 2001). And for its part, media studies merely tolerated the newcomer. In the second stage, game studies and media studies opened up to one another. Within the Digital Game Research Association (DiGRA), for example, the special interest group ‘Games and film’ was set up, creating a platform where game and film scholars could collaborate.<sup>9</sup> Leading publications such as *ScreenPlay. cinema/videogames/interfaces* (King & Krzywinska 2002) would have been unthinkable or merely marginal only a few years before: in this book the authors explore the ways in which film and computer games are related to one another. The third stage is the one we are in now and also the one that particularly is of interest to me here. Not only is game studies gradually becoming an integral part of media studies, but play is also increasingly seen “as a tool for the analysis of the media experience” (Silverstone 1999, 59). Play is increasingly regarded as a central notion for understanding media culture (Neitzel & Nohr 2006, Thimm 2010). In this third stage, research into the conceptual framework of play has become a matter of *reality*.

Fourthly, this is also reflected in the institutional changes in education and research. New disciplines, such as new media studies and computer game studies, are being established in art and media departments (academic as well as vocational education) which invest a lot of their research and teaching into the theory of play. Take for example the activities going on within GAP, the Centre for the Study of Digital Games and Play that is affiliated to Utrecht University.<sup>10</sup> And also knowledge institutions such as the Netherlands Organisation

for Scientific Research NWO, the independent research organisation TNO, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences KNAW, and the Netherlands Study Centre for Technology Trends STT are involved in either researching play or facilitating such research. Game studies thus have gradually become an integral part of the Dutch academic community.<sup>11</sup>

To sum up then, changes in culture and society, in media, in the relation between game studies and media studies, as well as in the educational and knowledge institutions have each in turn made it *possible* to envisage research into the conceptual framework of play, have made such research *desirable*, and have made it become a matter of *reality*.

### 3. Play

Having situated the state of affairs regarding research into the conceptual framework of play, there are three remaining questions to address today: what is play, which forms does play take up in contemporary media culture, and what do I mean to say when I refer to the ludic, playful turn in media theory? Let us begin with the concept of play.

To capture this concept, I want to focus on one of the most important books in the current debate about play: Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*. This book was first published in 1938 and since then has been translated into many languages. It is considered the most influential modernist exposition of play and continues to remain – mind you, seven decades after the first edition – the inevitable reference point for any ‘serious’ discussion of play. Undeniably, the book’s on-going impact has to do with its large ambition and scope. As the subtitle ‘A Study of the Play-Element of Culture’ makes clear, it was Huizinga’s ambition to demonstrate that the rise and evolution of culture occurs in and as play. In the first chapter Huizinga offers a definition of the phenomenon of play, which has since been quoted in almost any book on play. Play is “a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary life’ as being ‘not meant’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings” (Huizinga 1955, 13).

Let us examine the six elements of this definition. Play first of all expresses the freedom of humanity, because as a free act it is disinterested and has no practical utility. For Huizinga, play belongs to symbolic culture, which he refers to as “holy earnest” (1955, 23) and which in his view contrasts with ordinary life, the realm of what we as fragile beings need to survive: food, clothing, housing, et cetera. We could call the latter instances of ‘profane earnest’ in line with Huizinga’s reasoning; play is not meant and refers to an activity of make believe or “pretence” (ibid., 47). In play, you know that the game you play belongs to a different category from ordinary life; you can be immersed in play, be completely lost in it, experience excitement and joy; play is characterised by specific boundaries in space and time and the game you play can always be repeated; crucial to play are the rules that constitute the world of the game, which are absolutely binding and indisputable; finally, play creates order in an imperfect world and a confused life. Play is essential for community engagement.

Huizinga’s definition of play has met with three major types of critique. First, his definition would be universalist and essentialist in the sense that it claims to cover the immense variety in games and play. This could be countered however by understanding the six elements I have distinguished in Huizinga’s definition as a set of criteria that together constitute a family resemblance in the Wittgensteinian sense. An activity belongs to the family of play when it meets at least some of these characteristics, the number of which then determines the degree of ‘playfulness’ of that activity.

The second type of critique asserts that Huizinga discusses play merely in general terms. Roger Caillois (1958/2001) proposes to distinguish four different categories of play: (1) *mimicry* (make believe or pretence), which ranges from the imitation games of children or the above-mentioned ‘playing television’ on YouTube to the plays staged in the theatre; (2) *agôn* (competitive games), which covers competitive sports like football or the quiz show; (3) *alea* (games with a luck factor) referring to games like the lottery; and (4) *ilinx* (games in which vertigo is central), which includes entertainments like bungee jumping or the rollercoaster. Besides these four categories Caillois distinguishes the poles *paidia* and *ludus*, with in each of the four categories the specific types of games taking up a relative position between these poles: *Paidia* refers to free play, improvisation, spontaneity and impulsiveness, while

*ludus* enriches *paidia* by adding forms of discipline and refers to more explicit forms of rule-driven games.

While the first two points of critique can be read in supplement to Huizinga, the third is more fundamental. By defining play as he does, Huizinga upholds a distinction between play and non-play that is far too strict. This entails that playful activities share at least some of the characteristics which I outlined above, while non-play is exclusively situated in the opposite domain of reality, utility, coercion, seriousness, et cetera. As a consequence Huizinga fails to do justice to the ambiguity of play that according to play theorists such as Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) is precisely its defining characteristic. Huizinga's strict distinction can be understood in terms of his adherence to modernist dichotomies, which is why I explicitly referred to his *Homo Ludens* concept as the most important 'modernist' exposition of play. For modernist thought, including that of Huizinga, leaves no room for ambiguities and seeks to dispel them. As a result, however, Huizinga becomes entangled in insoluble conceptual tensions. He denotes play as reality at one moment, but as appearance at another; it constitutes a core dimension of human life (reality), yet stands outside it (appearance) because of its 'make believe' element; play is freedom and then again it is another form of coercion; play celebrates human freedom, but the player can be completely lost in his game; the rules of the game are absolutely binding, but players can also bend the rules; games lack utility yet are useful; play is a purposeless interlude, yet it also creates order and community, and so on.

The solution is to do justice to these ambiguities, because they are so typical for play. The player for example is both part of the ordinary world and immersed in the world of the game: this is where the ludic experience matches the aesthetic experience. When we play we plunge enthusiastically into the world of the game, while at the same time we maintain a certain distance in relation to our own behaviour in play; this is why we can call that behaviour 'playful'. This duality allows us to maintain less or more critical distance with respect to the rules; it allows us to see those rules as just the rules of the game which are always open to adaptation. Taken together, Huizinga's ideas about play together with the three amendments discussed here form a good starting point for the analysis of the ludification of contemporary media culture, as we shall see in the next section.

A final remark on *Homo Ludens*. Although Huizinga argues that all culture arises and evolves in and as play, he also claims that not every culture continues to play. According to Huizinga, the Romantic period was the last in our culture to exhibit a playful spirit. In the nineteenth century the play factor much recedes into the background. And in the dark final chapter – on the play element of the twentieth century – Huizinga proposes that the element of play has largely lost its meaning. There is hardly any play in modern culture. A major reason for the demise of play, he argues, is the rise of technology. Here I would defend the thesis – stepping up in time – that digital information and communication technologies have precisely enabled new forms of play.

The first of the three questions – what is play? – has now been answered. The remaining two – which forms does play take up in contemporary media culture, and what do I mean to say when I refer to the ludic, playful turn in media theory? – will be addressed presently. Let us begin with tracing play in contemporary media culture.

#### 4. Playful media culture

In our contemporary media culture, digital technologies and play are closely linked. In order to better understand the impact this has, we need to further specify the concept of play. It is important to emphasise the distinction between *play* and *game*. How do the two concepts relate to each other? *Play* is the overarching category. It refers to all activities of play, including both games and non-game activities such as playful communication. *Games* are the formalised parts of *play*. This distinction allows us to focus our attention not only on computer games, but also on the impact of play on media culture as such.

Huizinga's concept of play – to which I confine myself today – seems like a good starting point for the analysis of our media experience, because our experiences in media and play have a great deal of ambiguities and characteristics in common. Or, to put it differently, the media – each in their own medium-specific way – offer users new possibilities – 'affordances' – to play. Let us briefly consider the six elements of the play concept distinguished above, taking into account the associated ambiguities.<sup>12</sup> This discussion makes clear that the process of ludification is not necessarily a positive development:

freedom goes hand in hand with coercion, fun with annoyance.

To start with the first element, media use may initially look like harmless, disinterested fun. Think of all the creative adaptations of *Star Wars* on YouTube. It can also, however, become involved in political ends. Think of the Turkish court recently blocking access to YouTube because it allegedly hosted videos that attacked Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey; the element of make believe refers to the dual nature of media. Like play, our media culture consists of accepting the “as-if-ness of the world” (Silverstone 1999, 59). According to the philosopher Gianni Vattimo, it is becoming increasingly difficult to imagine a single reality, due to the current proliferation of digital media. He therefore reasons that if media cause us to lose our “sense of reality,” this is a liberation rather than a great loss (1992, 8). In line with this, he argues that media realities are just versions of how the world works, subject to the “game of interpretations” (1998, 19). The impact of this debate – is it possible that media show us an objective reality, or do they merely offer versions of this reality – can be witnessed when considering the current reorganisation of news shows within the Dutch public broadcasting system: some shows are assigned the role of broadcasting news from a specific angle or perspective, whereas others such as *Nieuwsuur* should maintain strict objectivity.

Considering the other elements, it is worth pointing out that digital media offer forms of pleasure and annoyance resulting from the interactive aspect: there is frustration when the computer does not perform what you want it to do, and pleasure involved in surrendering to the rules or conversely opposing them; the specific boundaries of space and time appear to be under heavy pressure when considering the culture of constant accessibility that arose with mobile phone usage. Yet, the boundaries become clear when we focus on the aspect of safety. On social media like Facebook, users can playfully construct identities that do not necessarily have any implications for real life; the element of order and community engagement returns in the formation of web-based social groups: green blogs like *World Changing* and *Sustainablog* unite users who are committed to a better environment and oppose the existing social order.

As for the rules of the game, I would like to discuss this sixth element of play a bit more in depth. Rules can be either accepted or transformed or bent, both at an individual level and at the media

system's macro level. In order to achieve a better understanding of the way we can deal with rules, we must consider the interaction between, on the one hand, levels of playability enabled by different media (Küchlich 2004) and, on the other hand, individual users' ludoliteracy or play competence (Zagal 2010). With respect to television, the aforementioned John Fiske addresses the playfulness that arises from the relationship between a medium and its user. Fiske makes a distinction between two types of play. Firstly, a text (e.g. a movie) "has 'play' in it, like a door whose hinges are loose" (Fiske 1987b, 230). Play here is free movement within a more rigid structure. Secondly, such 'play' enables viewers to play with the text, i.e. playfully develop an interpretation of their own. Think of the film I mentioned at the beginning of my lecture, *Slumdog Millionaire*. Is it a form of poverty porn (exploitation of poverty) or a critical reflection on Jamal's social background? What is distinct about new media is that they enable multiple forms of participation and thus playability, and that they therefore are not limited to the game of interpretations (Raessens 2005).

Playability can have four different levels. First, there is the player who accepts that "the rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow no doubt" (Huizinga 1955, 11). Such a player voluntarily submits himself to the rules that govern the world of the game. The cheater who "pretends to be playing the game" (ibid.) operates at the second level. This player – for example the one who uses cheat codes in computer games – is aware of the explicit and implicit rules of the game and tries to deploy them (against the rules) to his own gain. At the third level we have the spoilsport, "the player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them" (ibid.). An example is the so-called 'modder', the player who modifies the computer game if the system allows for it. The fourth and final level is that of "the *outlaw*, the revolutionary" (ibid., 12) who in digital culture takes the shape of the programmer. Where the player (level 1), the cheater (level 2) and the spoilsport (level 3) still operate within the boundaries of the game or oppose these, the programmer (level 4) creates "a new community with rules of its own" (ibid., 12), his own game world, in other words, thus driving a system's playability over the edge to discover new forms (Rushkoff 2010 and 2012).<sup>13</sup>

I will offer three examples to show that such an approach to play can be fruitful for the analysis of contemporary media culture. The first example concerns the study of serious games, the second example expands on this, approaching digital media and digital media experience as something playful, and the third addresses the debate surrounding the concept of media literacy.

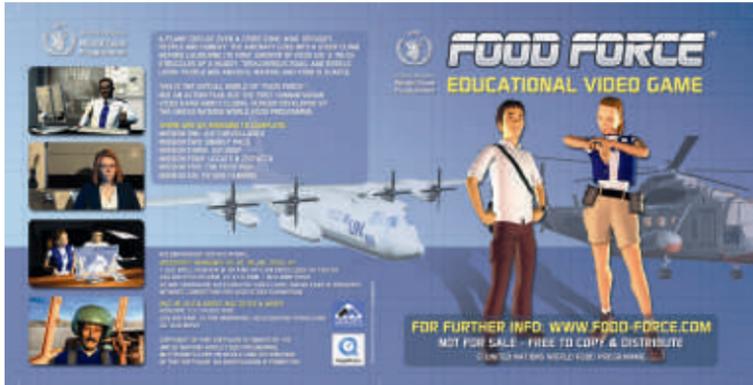
Serious games are computer games which are not only played for entertainment but also for educational purposes. These games are often designed as ideological spaces, as worlds that aim to convince players of certain ideas. Think for instance of *Food Force* (2005) developed by the World Food Programme (United Nations) which sets out to convince players that humanitarian aid, possibly involving military intervention – preferably by the UN – is of great importance to solve conflicts worldwide (see Figure 3). At first sight a purely noble cause. But closer inspection yields that such games are built on the metaphor of the West as the helping parent, on the premise that emergencies, conflicts, or local wars, all originate from within while the conflict can only be defined or solved by external forces. From this perspective, these games are not really that much different from commercial war games like *Call of Duty* (2010) or *Medal of Honor* (2010) which are based on a similar analysis of the nature of conflicts, suggesting that their solution is possible only through external military intervention. In other words, serious games that appeal to our sympathy are by no means innocent, because they shape the paradigms of guilt and responsibility in a very particular way. This raises the ethical-political question of what game developers, game researchers, and game players should do. Trying to make games more effective by allowing players to become completely immersed in the game world is an option, although allowing for a measure of critical distance in the design of the game is quite recommendable, as I have argued elsewhere using the term ‘gaming apparatus’. If that condition is met, serious games incorporate “a moment of disavowal – of distancing (...). We [i.e. players] perform actions in the full knowledge that we are doing this within the constraints set by someone else” (Raessens 2009b, 26). This distinction between immersion and critical distance – which I previously described as a game ambiguity – is based on the above-mentioned forms of playability. Within such serious games, players will normally subject themselves to the prevailing ideological lines of the game world,



1. Puppeteer Wilders, 2010.



2. Playground Wilders, 2010.



3. *Food Force*, 2005.



4. *McDonald's Video Game*, 2006.



5. *September 12th: A Toy World*, 2003.



6. Cover brochure MA New Media and Digital Culture, 1998



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7. Center for the Study of Digital Games and Play, 2010.



8. GAP: Games and Play, 2010.

while from an ethical-political perspective the awareness of (and where necessary resistance against) these rules is important. This is where the programmer involved in the creation of activist computer games – such as independently produced ‘critical computer games’ or ‘games of multitude’<sup>14</sup> – attempts to do something different (Flanagan 2009, Dyer-Witford & De Peuter 2009).

The second example concerns the playability of digital media in general. At first glance, it seems that these media increase users’ room for play. That is, all software-based products can be modified and adapted to users’ personal needs (level 3 of playability). Think of the hacking and further development of Sony’s robot dog Aibo. When Sony launched this dog in 1999, users soon wanted it to have more functionalities. One of them, hacker Aibopet, designed a program to make the dog dance and made it available on his own web site. As media scholar Mirko Schäfer shows, Sony initially did not appreciate these forms of “play beyond the manual” (Schäfer 2006) and threatened with lawsuits, but soon changed tack. Sony realized that these hacks could also be integrated into new versions of Aibo. Such playful forms of product modification are characteristic of the major changes taking place in contemporary cultural industries. This example demonstrates – note: within certain limits – the disintegration of the traditional distinction between consumer and producer. In today’s “bastard culture” (Schäfer 2011), media users can become active participants in the process of the creation and evolution of media products. On the other hand, present-day WEB 2.0-optimism suggests that we – the consumers – are the ones who are in power. This optimism “urgently begs for deconstruction” (Van Dijck & Nieborg 2009, 855). For example, *Time Magazine* elected as person of the year 2007: “You. Yes you. You control the information age. Welcome to your world.” Yet research into the online game *World of Warcraft* shows for example that although negotiations take place between players and Blizzard Entertainment, the game company (game scholar René Glass calls these negotiations very appropriately “games of stake,” 2010), the extent to which players can claim room for play to do their own thing is mainly determined by Blizzard. Here too, the principle remains unaltered that one should buy the game, pay monthly subscription fees, and thus remain part of a system that you could designate as ludo-capitalism.

The third example concerns media literacy. How to behave

in this media culture, which appears to be characterised on the one hand by autonomy and emancipation and on the other hand by being determined by media (technology)? The ability to be immersed in, yet at the same time maintain critical distance to media, as well as the ability to address the arbitrary nature and mutability of rules (two of the afore-mentioned ambiguities), are components of what I would call ludoliteracy or play competence, which is in fact a specific form of what is called media literacy (Zagal 2010). Where media literacy in general terms is defined as “*the totality of knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to operate as critically aware and active citizens in a complex, changing and fundamentally mediated world*” (Raad voor Cultuur [Arts Council] 2005, 2), the distinction between game and play and between different forms of playability facilitate a more precise definition of civic participation. Game competence relates in particular to playing computer games and involves skills and knowledge related to using games, critically interpret them and produce them. Ludoliteracy, however, is applicable across the full spectrum of media. It involves playing by the rules, bending and adjusting the rules in order to move easily through the system, or where necessary and possible, adjusting the system or playing the system. Or as Deleuze once put it: trace and where necessary create lines of flight, allow for leaks in the system (Rabinow & Gandall 1986). Considered as such, the term ‘play’ is not only suitable for characterising our contemporary media culture (playful) but also for defining the knowledge and skills (ludoliteracy or play competence) required to function in media culture.

## 5. The ludic turn in media theory

This leaves us with the question whether we could speak of a ludic turn in media theory. Let us put things in perspective. In recent years the claims of yet another turn followed each other in rapid succession. We already had the linguistic turn, and then supposedly a digital turn, a material turn, a visual turn, a pictorial turn, an experiential turn, a spatial turn, a cultural turn, a mediamatic turn, and so on. Is this a clear case of concept inflation, or are these changes really all taking place? Speaking in terms of turns could also stem from the human, all too human tendency to overestimate the significance of their own times,

perhaps even from the irresistible need of professors delivering inaugural lectures to accentuate the significance of their own research.

Considering the above, I do indeed claim we are witnessing a ludic turn and that this turn in the field of media studies combines two elements. On the one hand, the notion that media are playful opens up new objects of study: computer games (including serious games), playful aspects of media use (such as product modifications) and the competence to deal playfully with the systems you are part of (ludoliteracy). On the other hand, there is a ludic turn in media theory itself, a turn to which this lecture hopes to contribute. This allows for considering these media objects in a particular way. A new interpretative framework arises from using new concepts and conceptual dichotomies from game and play studies, a specific focus to deploy in the theoretical study of media and their use. Think of concepts such as playability, gaming apparatus, play competence or ludoliteracy, games of stake, and casual games-casual politicking, and of conceptual dichotomies or ambiguities such as: rules (constitutive, limiting, closure) and variability thereof (openness, freedom); immersion (surrender) and critical distance (monitoring); disinterestedness versus social criticism; depicting reality or only versions thereof; the pleasure of being either in control or not. I believe that these concepts and conceptual dichotomies are useful to bring to light the important characteristics of and issues in the field of digital media culture and to prepare the ground for new perspectives and action plans. Think for example of the power game fought between producers, distributors, and consumers, with the industry trying to set the rules of the game while certain user groups aim to maintain a degree of openness by transforming these rules.

Three perspectives should be united in this: the political analysis of media, paying attention to the struggle for power between producers and consumers and the impact of ludo-capitalism; the analysis of the 'digital material' aspects of media such as they are studied in critical code studies and software studies; and the philosophical analysis of play and media, the lines of flight and leaks in the system. I count myself very lucky that so much expertise in this field is present in our department. My exposition today builds on the book *Digital Material. Tracing New Media in Everyday Life and Technology* (Boomen e.a. 2009) that we published last year to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the

Master of New Media and Digital Culture (1998–2008, see Figure 6). The ludic turn in media theory expounded here seems exceptionally fruitful, not only within my section at the Department of Media and Culture Studies but also beyond. Now I do not just want to study the ludic turn but actually bring it about, as an example of what Henry Jenkins once called “intervention analysis” (Tulloch & Jenkins 1995, 238). Intervention analysis is not just interested in describing and explaining the existing orders of knowledge, but wishes to change these. For this we are busy – with Sybille Lammes, René Glas, Michiel de Lange, Teun Dubbelman and myself as facilitators – with bringing together our research and teaching activities in this area to set up a collaborative community of researchers and students (from inside and outside our university). We recently baptised this community as the Centre for the Study of Digital Games and Play, abbreviated GAP (see Figures 7 and 8). If we do our work well, you will soon associate GAP no longer with what Huizinga would call the ‘profane earnest’ of GAP clothing, but with the ‘holy earnest’ of Games and Play.

### Words of Gratitude

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Rector Magnificus of Utrecht University, Professor Hans Stoof, the members of the Utrecht University Executive Board, and the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, Professor Wiljan van den Akker, for honouring me with the appointment to the position of Chair of Media Theory.

At my workplace, I know to be surrounded by a group of colleagues (in the section of Media Theory and beyond) who have become dear to me and who have made it a privilege to work in this department. The quality of working conditions has strongly to do with the way our school is led, and I am grateful to Rosemarie Buikema (Head of Department) and Emile Wennekes (Head of School) for their contributions in this respect. My special thanks go to my colleague and good friend Chiel Kattenbelt and to my new media colleagues: together we formed the best possible team during the last few years. Thanks to coordinator Ann-Sophie Lehmann this will certainly remain so in the future.

Ladies and gentlemen students, your critical questions have always been much appreciated and I am happy that in the meantime many of you have become colleagues, either within or outside academia. I am looking forward to our future collaboration.

I further thank Marinka Copier and Mark Overmars (along with his colleagues at GATE), without whom Utrecht would not have taken up such a prominent international position in the field of game studies. I thank Ann Rigney and Martina Roepke who made a success of the research line 'changing literacies' within the focus area Cultures and Identities. And I thank Rosi Braidotti, whose tireless enthusiasm (not only for Deleuze) ensures that the university truly is a sanctuary for thought.

It is impossible here to thank the many individuals who contributed to my professional development. Two persons, however, I want to name, Frank Kessler and Jos de Mul, not only because under their direction I finally completed my PhD dissertation in 2001, but also for the friendship and collegiality that came to flourish during their supervision and beyond, and that since then have only been reinforced.

That I live my life as I do is first of all of course thanks to my parents. After my father died in 1968 – much too early, he was forty, I was eight – my mother managed to combine a busy job as social worker with raising me and my two brothers George and Boudewijn. Mother, I am sure that I am speaking on their behalf too when I say that we owe everything to you.

Sandra, Oliver and Nicholas, my last words are for you. Oliver and Nicholas, we consider your being with us a great miracle that enriches our lives every day. Sandra, that you crossed my path is the best thing that ever happened to me. Your sharp mind and warm heart are a source of love every day and I look forward to what awaits us.

I have spoken.

## Notes

1. The quotations are from *de Volkskrant*, September 9, 2010 and *NRC Next*, September 10, 2010; Jos Collignon's drawings were published in *de Volkskrant*, September 9, 2010 and October 7, 2010. I am grateful to Jos Collignon for providing both drawings. Collignon had foresight; as on April 21, 2012 the government fell because Wilders withdrew his support. See Figures 1 and 2 on the photo pages.
2. For a fuller analysis of *Slumdog Millionaire*, see Raessens (2009a).
3. For more information, see these websites: [www.festivalofgames.nl](http://www.festivalofgames.nl), [www.dutchgamegarden.nl](http://www.dutchgamegarden.nl), and [gate.gameresearch.nl](http://gate.gameresearch.nl).
4. The German Pirate Party is an example. For an analysis see the German blog Carta ([carta.info](http://carta.info)), in particular the contributions of Bieber (2009) and Lange (2012).
5. We have known this phenomenon since 1959, when the amusement park De Efteling introduced the figure of Holle Bolle Gijs that rewards children for cleaning up their waste. Supermarket chain Albert Heijn mines the 2012 European football championships to create a 'men against women' pool on Facebook. Participants can predict the results of matches. Winners will receive a discount on AH products.
6. See the special issue 'Gaming and Theory' of the journal *symplokē*, volume 17, numbers 1-2. The issue contains contributions that "engage the various intersections of the idea and practice of digital gaming and critical theory" (5). The work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari is particularly alluded to.
7. In their analysis of contemporary film, Simons (2007) and Leschke & Venus (2007) similarly employ the concept of play.
8. The terms and *paidia* and *ludus* are further explained below. The idea that Facebook as a sort of Big Brother closely monitors our purchasing behaviour (data mining) so as to enable advertisers to target users specifically is perhaps balanced by the fact that the very formats Facebook uses enable user groups to lie more convincingly about the selves they present, making it harder to figure out what individual users really, actually like. This seems to me the paradox of Facebook.
9. See [www.digra.org](http://www.digra.org). In 2003 Utrecht University hosted 'Level Up,' the first DiGRA conference (Copier & Raessens 2003).
10. See [www.gamesandplay.nl](http://www.gamesandplay.nl).
11. See for example two studies investigating so-called serious games: the TNO report *Serious Gaming* (Kranenburg 2006) and the explorative *Serious gaming: Vergezichten op de mogelijkheden* (Uden 2011) by the Netherlands Study Centre for Technology Trends STT. The impact of playful media on the construction of identities was central to the NWO-funded research *Playful Identities* (2005-2010, led by Valerie Frissen, Jos de Mul and Joost Raessens). This inaugural lecture builds on the results of this project. Also see note 12.

12. For a detailed analysis, see Cermak-Sassenrath (2010) and the book resulting from the Playful Identities project: Frissen et al. (forthcoming). Also see note 11.
13. The fact remains that programmers are bound by certain codes and protocols which by definition preclude absolute freedom. This is an important theme in critical software studies. See Galloway (2004; 2006). The rules of ludo-capitalism provide additional limitations (Dibbell, 2006, 2008).
14. Think of more casual games like *McDonald's Video Game* (2006) by the Milanese collective of media activists Molleindustria ([www.molleindustria.org](http://www.molleindustria.org)) and *September 12th: A Toy World* (2003) and *Madrid* (2004) by newsgaming.com. On the basis of Jesper Juul's notion of casual games (2010) new media scholar Alex Gekker labels such forms of playful activism as 'casual politicking' (Gekker 2012). See Figures 4 and 5.

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## Curriculum vitae

Joost Raessens (Eindhoven 1960) graduated in Philosophy and Film and Performance Arts (both cum laude) and also studied French Language and Literature at the University of Nijmegen. He then enrolled in Film Studies at the Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris (DEA, cum laude). In 2001 he defended his PhD dissertation *Filosofie & film. Viv@e la différence: Deleuze en de cinematografische moderniteit* (Budel: Damon) at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Since 1998 he has worked at Utrecht University, Department of Media and Culture Studies. In 2004–2005 he was guest lecturer in ‘Film and Visual Culture’ at the University of California, Riverside and in 2006 he was guest lecturer in ‘Game Studies’ at the University of California, Los Angeles. He chaired the opening conference ‘Level Up’ of the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) in 2003. From 1998 until 2008 he was the coordinator of the MA New Media and Digital Culture, see [www.newmediastudies.nl](http://www.newmediastudies.nl). He is a member of the Council for the Humanities (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences KNAW), member of the editorial board of *Games and Culture. A Journal of Interactive Media* (SAGE) and takes part in several research programs such as Playful Identities, GATE, and Mobile Learning–Citizen Science. His publications are in the field of media theory, new media and digital culture, and game studies. He is one of the founding members of GAP: the Centre for the Study of Digital Games and Play ([www.gamesandplay.nl](http://www.gamesandplay.nl)). For more information, please see [www.raessens.nl](http://www.raessens.nl).

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