



**CONTEM
PORARY
CULTURE**

Edited by

Judith Thissen, Robert Zwijnenberg and Kitty Zijlmans

**New Directions
in Art and
Humanities Research**

Amsterdam University Press

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Chapter Five

Homo Ludens 2.0: **Play, Media and Identity**

Valerie Frissen, Jos de Mul and Joost Raessens

Immense est le domaine du jeu.

– Émile Benveniste

Foreplay

A spectre is haunting the world – the spectre of playfulness. We are witnessing a global “ludification of culture”. Since the 1960s, in which the word “ludic” became popular in Europe and the United States to designate playful behaviour and artefacts, playfulness has increasingly become a mainstream characteristic of our culture. Perhaps the first thing that comes to mind in this context is the immense popularity of computer games, which, as far as global sales are concerned, have already outstripped Hollywood. According to a recent study in the United States, 8 to 18 year olds play computer games on average for one hour and a half each day on their consoles, computers and handheld gaming devices (including mobile phones).¹ This is by no means only a Western phenomenon. In South Korea, for example, about two-thirds of the country’s total population frequently plays online games, turning computer gaming into one of the fastest-growing industries and “a key driver for the Korean economy”.²

Although perhaps most visible, computer game culture is only one manifestation of the process of ludification that is penetrating every cultural domain.³ In our present experience economy, for example, playfulness not only characterizes leisure time (fun shopping, game shows on television, amusement parks, playful computer and Internet use), but also domains that used to be serious, such as work (which should chiefly be fun nowadays), education (serious gaming), politics (ludic campaigning) and even warfare (video games like war simulators and

interfaces). According to Jeremy Rifkin, “play is becoming as important in the cultural economy as work was in the industrial economy”.⁴ In ludic culture, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues, playfulness is no longer restricted to childhood, but has become a lifelong attitude: “The mark of postmodern adulthood is the willingness to embrace the game whole-heartedly.”⁵ Bauman’s remark suggests that in postmodern culture identity has become a playful phenomenon too.

In this article we want to re-visit Johan Huizinga’s *Homo ludens* (1938) to reflect on the meaning of ludic technologies in contemporary culture. First we will analyze the concept of “play”. Next, we will discuss some problematic aspects of Huizinga’s theory, which are connected with the fundamental ambiguities that characterize play phenomena, and reformulate some of the basic ideas of Huizinga. On the basis of this reformulation we will analyze the ludic dimension of new media and sketch an outline of our theory of ludic identity construction.

***Homo ludens* 1.0**

Viewing man and world *sub specie ludi* is of course not a new phenomenon. Ludic accounts of man and world have been formulated at all times and in all cultures. In Western culture we can witness an important development during the past two centuries. Whereas the Enlightenment did not show a deep interest in play, the Romantic movement heralded a new fascination for this phenomenon. Friedrich Schiller – who can be regarded the founding father of contemporary ludology – even considered the play drive as the core of humanity, as it would enable man to reconcile necessity and freedom. As he famously phrased it: “Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word man, and *he is only wholly Man when he is playing*.”⁶ Alongside reasoning (*Homo sapiens*) and making (*Homo faber*), playing (*Homo ludens*) now advanced to the centre of attention. Philosophers such as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Gadamer, Marcuse, Deleuze and Derrida (most of them considered as forerunners or representatives of postmodern culture) followed the ludological footprints of Heraclites and Schiller in their attempts to transform modern, predominantly rationalistic and utilitarian ontology and anthropology.⁷ But in the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities, a strong interest in play – and the related phenomenon game – grew as well. One can think, for example, of the implementation of *game theory* in biology,⁸ economics⁹ and cultural anthropology.¹⁰ In addition to the interest in the phenomena of play and games in these already existing disciplines, in the last decades – motivated by the substantial growth of leisure time and the growth of ludo-industry and ludo-capitalism¹¹ – several new disciplines entirely devoted to the study of play and (computer) games have emerged.¹²

A foundational work in the contemporary study of play is Johan Huizinga’s

Homo ludens. Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur. This book, first published in Dutch in 1938 and translated in to many other languages in the subsequent decades, can be considered as “the key modernist statement on play”.¹³ “Richly suggestive and admirably broad in scope, it provides the first full-blown theory of ludics, and it remains moreover, seven decades after it first appeared, an inevitable point of reference for any ‘serious’ discussion of play”.¹⁴ In our *Playful Identities* project, too, *Homo ludens* has been an important source of inspiration.

The book is still so impressive because of its grand ambition and scope. Already the subtitle – “a study of the play element of culture”¹⁵ – and the foreword of *Homo ludens*, makes clear that Huizinga’s ambition is no less than to offer a genealogy that explains how “civilization arises and unfolds in and as play”.¹⁶ In the second-to-last chapter – “Western Civilization *Sub Specie Ludi*” – Huizinga summarizes his argument:

It has not been difficult to show that a certain play-factor was extremely active all through the cultural process and that it produces many of the fundamental forms of social life. The spirit of playful competition is, as a social impulse, older than culture itself and pervades all life like a veritable ferment. Ritual grew up in sacred play; poetry was born in play and nourished on play; music and dancing were pure play. Wisdom and philosophy found expression in words and forms derived from religious contests. The rules of warfare, the conventions of noble living were built up on play-patterns. We have to conclude, therefore, that civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come *from* play like a babe detaching itself from the womb: it arises *in* and *as* play, and never leaves it.¹⁷

This summary makes clear that *Homo ludens* is not primarily a study of play or games, but rather “an inquiry into the creative quality of the play principle in the domain of culture”.¹⁸ However, the first chapter of the book offers a definition of the play phenomenon, quoted in virtually every book on play and games published since then:

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not meant”,¹⁹ 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 which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.²⁰

Let us elucidate six elements of this definition. First, like Schiller and the Romantics before him, Huizinga defines play as *expression of human freedom* vis-à-vis both nature and morality.²¹ Play, like beauty in nature and art, to which it is closely related, is “disinterested”, “distinct from ‘ordinary life’”, “it contains its own course and meaning”, and presents itself as an “intermezzo, an *interlude* in our daily lives”.²² Playing is “non-serious”²³ in the sense that it is not characterized by our daily concern for food, shelter and everything else fragile beings like us need in order to survive. Play takes place “outside and above the necessities and seriousness of everyday life”.²⁴ It is beyond *profane seriousness*. However, this does not exclude the fact that the activity of playing requires total devotion from the player. Playing is no mere “fun”, but earnest, even “holy earnest”.²⁵ For Huizinga, this is no (mere) figurative expression: “In all its higher forms the latter [human play] at any rate always belongs to the sphere of the festival and ritual – the sacred sphere.”²⁶ In order to distinguish this kind of intrinsic, sacred earnestness from profane seriousness we might call it *sacred seriousness*.

Second, playing is “not meant”; it refers to an activity of “just pretending”. The thing represented in the play is not real. Playing is only doing *as if*. Huizinga calls this “the consciousness that it [play] is ‘different’ from ‘ordinary life’”.²⁷

Third, play is not only immersive in that it absorbs the player intensively; it is also “accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy”.²⁸ According to Huizinga, the “play-mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth and relaxation follow.”²⁹

Fourth, play is distinct from ordinary life both in terms of locality and duration. It is characterized by specific *limits of time and space*: The *magic circle* of play is not only a spatial circle, but a temporal one as well. It takes place *in* and *as* what we might call a *magic cycle*: “It can be repeated at any time, whether it be ‘child’s play’ or a game of chess, or at fixed intervals like a mystery. In this faculty of repetition lies one of the most essential qualities of play.”³⁰

Fifth, the *rules* that constitute the play-world are crucial to the concept: “All play has its rules. They determine what ‘holds’ in the temporary world circumscribed by play. The rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow no doubt.”³¹ “As soon as the rules are transgressed, the whole play-world collapses.”³² Whereas the cheater still pretends to play and in doing so still acknowledges the magic circle and cycle, “the player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a ‘spoil-sport’”.³³

Sixth, play “creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection”.³⁴ Play is “indispensable for the well-being of the community, fecund of cosmic insight and social development”.³⁵

As Huizinga considers play to be a fundamental “category of life”, the play-

definition presented in the first chapter of *Homo ludens* has a universal ring. Huizinga explicitly claims that “all peoples play, and play remarkably alike”³⁶, and he distinguishes two basic forms of play: “The two ever-recurrent forms in which civilization grow in and as play are sacred performance and festal contest.”³⁷ In *Les jeux et les hommes* (1958), a critical elaboration of Huizinga’s work, Roger Caillois presents a typology consisting of four categories. In addition to the two forms mentioned by Huizinga – which Caillois terms simulation (*mimicry*), ranging from children’s imitation play to theatre, and competition (*agôn*), free play, regulated sports, contests etc. – he distinguishes chance (*alea*), as we find it, for example, in counting-out rhymes and lotteries, and vertigo (*ilinx*), ranging from merry-go-round “whirling” to mountain climbing. Cross-cutting this classification of game types Caillois discerns two play attitudes: *paidia* and *ludus*. *Paidia* refers to “free play”, improvisation, carefree gaiety and laughter, spontaneous, impulsive, joyous, uncontrolled fantasy. *Ludus* on the other hand disciplines and enriches *paidia*, since it refers to “gaming”, more explicitly rule-governed forms of play, that often involve specific skills and mastery.³⁸ In each of the four categories, play phenomena are located somewhere between the poles of *paidia* and *ludus*. However, *agôn* and *alea* lean to the pole of *ludus*, while *ilinx* and *mimicry* tend towards *paidia*. Taken together, these two classifications are useful tools for the analysis of the ludification of contemporary culture.

Before directing our attention to the playful dimension of information and communication technologies, we have to return to Huizinga’s historical analysis for a moment. Although he emphasizes that all culture “arises and unfolds in and as play”, he does not claim that cultures always *keep* playing. Echoing the pessimistic tone of Spengler’s *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918-1923), Huizinga argues that cultures are most playful in their youth, and gradually become more serious and lose their playfulness as they grow more mature.³⁹ For Huizinga, Romanticism was the last stage in Western culture that still had a playful spirit. And in the dark-toned last chapter of the book, on the play-element in twentieth-century culture, Huizinga states the play element in culture is “on the wane”: “civilization to-day is no longer played”.⁴⁰

Huizinga acknowledges that this observation seems to be at odds with the fact that sports and popular culture have become a major industry in twentieth-century culture. However, he discerns two contradictory tendencies with regard to the relationship of play and seriousness that in his view both lead to a blurring of boundaries between play and (profane) seriousness. On the one hand, Huizinga, referring to professional sports, claims that play becomes more and more serious, resulting in a loss of playfulness.⁴¹ On the other hand, he claims that we witness a growing playfulness in the sphere of profane seriousness, for example, in commercial competition.⁴²

For Huizinga, these tendencies do not lead to a more playful culture, but rather are expressions of cheating – “false play” – and for that reason undermine (playful) culture as such.⁴³ He points at several “external factors independent of culture proper”⁴⁴ responsible for the decay of playful culture, particularly the *global commercialization of culture*⁴⁵ and the emergence of *puerilism* (a “blend of adolescence and barbarity”⁴⁶), both supported by the *technology of modern communication*.⁴⁷ This culture is characterized by an “insatiable thirst for trivial recreation and crude sensationalism, the delight of mass meetings”, and a complete lack of “humour, the very idea of decency and fair play”.⁴⁸

We should not forget that Huizinga wrote these bitter words in 1938, with the disconcerting memories of the First World War still in mind, and in terrifying anticipation of the no less outrageous barbarisms of the emerging fascist movements. However, in our view, Huizinga’s pessimism is not only motivated by the historical context, but points at real contradictions in his argument. If we want to use Huizinga’s penetrating insights into play as a fundamental category to understand the ludification of contemporary, strongly mediated culture, we first have to come to terms with these contradictions, which point at fundamental ambiguities of the play phenomenon itself.

Semi-serious interlude

Despite of its inspiring insights, *Homo ludens* still puzzles the reader because of its many contradictions and ambiguities. Let us mention the four most important of them. First, play is presented as being both *reality and appearance*. On the one hand, Huizinga presents play as a key dimension in human life and even maintains that culture is only possible in and as play; on the other hand, he argues that play entirely takes place outside everyday life and is nothing more than a disinterested “interlude”.⁴⁹ Play is “indispensable for the well-being of the community, fecund of cosmic insight and social development”, and simultaneously it is “only pretending” and, accordingly, inferior to real life.⁵⁰ Because of its reality, we play with “holy earnest”, yet it is completely non-serious. Second, play is both *freedom and force*. According to Huizinga, play is a celebration of human freedom, yet he believes that “it casts a spell over us”,⁵¹ because it demands complete absorption. Moreover, although the rules of the game are “absolutely binding”, players are constantly trespassing these rules. Third, games are both *determined and changing*. Huizinga emphasizes that the rules of a game are absolute, and simultaneously *Homo ludens* is principally a historical narrative about the never-ending transformation of play into various cultural forms. Fourth, as an activity play is both *individual and collective*. Although the player is absorbed in his own, private play-world, generally he plays with or against other players in a shared play-world, often before an audience.⁵² More-

over, in the case of mimicry the player is pretending to be someone else, creating a community of personae within himself.

Scholars such as Ehrmann (1968) and Motte (2009) also pointed out these ambiguities and criticized Huizinga for being entangled in contradictions. According to Ehrmann, the “hierarchical dichotomy”, in which play is understood as a *representation* of a reality existing prior to and independently from play, is very problematic, as “there is no ‘reality’ (ordinary or extraordinary!) outside of or prior to the manifestations of the culture that expresses it”.⁵³

Motte rightly argues that Huizinga shows a greater sensitivity towards the ambiguity of play than Ehrmann attributes to him. However, Huizinga is not able to explain *that* and *how* culture (sacred seriousness) and ordinary life (profane seriousness) can merge *in* and *as* play. Eugen Fink states that we cannot arrive at such an explanation as long as we stick to the modernist dichotomy of – on the level of attitude – play and seriousness, and – on the ontological level – play and reality.⁵⁴ What distinguishes playing from sheer serious modes of being on the one hand and sheer fantasy on the other, is that the player simultaneously is *both* in the ordinary world and in the play-world and that we all are *aware* of simultaneously being in both worlds.⁵⁵

Here again, the play-experience is very close to aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is characterized by a similar double experience. This ambiguous, double experience is connected with human reflexivity, the fact that human beings not only experience, but are also, and at the same time, able to experience their experience. In the language of Plessner’s philosophical anthropology: human experience is simultaneously centric and eccentric. Being (ec)centric implies that we can go beyond our immediate experience and imagine ourselves in another experience, though all the time we remain bound to our immediate experience.⁵⁶ As a consequence, when we engage into playful activities, we do not, as Huizinga and Caillois suggest, step outside the everyday world into the magic circle of the play-world, but we double our existence, as Eugen Fink maintains.⁵⁷

This double character of play has several important implications for a correct understanding of the phenomenon of play. In the first place, Huizinga’s remark that play creates order gains a deeper meaning. This order is not so much a temporary order completely outside or beyond everyday reality, but rather a layer of meaning that *during* play is superimposed on everyday reality. In the act of play profane reality is enriched by a layer of sacred seriousness. Augmented reality before technology!

A second implication of the double-character of play is that, just because the immersion in the play-world is always accompanied by the experience that “it’s just play”, the rules that guide play are necessarily experienced as being relative, flexible and changeable. Just because we are both inside and outside the magic

circle, we are able to reflect on the rules as “just play rules”. They are always open to modification. This is in sharp contrast with Huizinga’s emphasis on the absolute character of rules. Moreover, *playing with the rules* is inherent to many forms of play.

Connecting to the flexibility of play, Minnema gives an interesting explanation for the growing interest in play in nineteenth- and twentieth-century culture. Following Luhmann, he maintains that since the start of the modern age Western culture has transformed the hitherto hierarchically stratified structure of society into a differentiated structure, consisting of many substructures, such as politics, economy, law, education, science, technology and art, that each possess relative autonomy and have their own specific rules. This causes a much higher level of societal complexity and flexibility.⁵⁸ According to Minnema, the twentieth-century fascination with play and games is strongly connected with this societal development. Play becomes a rite de passage, a room for new (re)combinations of actions and thoughts, a database of alternative models for living.⁵⁹ However, unlike premodern and modern rites, postmodern rites no longer seem to have a clearly demarcated transformational (liminal) period, but have become a never-ending (liminoid) phenomenon, an integral part of the socio-economical, cultural and multimedial system.⁶⁰

When we talk about the ludification of culture we are confronted with the question whether this ludification consists of an increase of playful activities or rather a transformation of perspective, in which we use play as a metaphor to understand entities and domains that in themselves are not necessarily considered playful. We think both answers are correct. On the one hand, contrary to what Huizinga claims, the Romantic movement Western culture has witnessed a remarkable revival of the “ludic worldview” (Huizinga’s *Homo ludens* being one of the fruits of this developments!). On the other hand, this change in perspective has also generated the development of new ludic attitudes, practices and objects, which, in their turn, further stimulate the ludification of our worldview. In principle, no single “serious domain” within human life is expelled from “ludification”. This even counts for the “serious domain” that Huizinga considered embodying the very decay of playfulness: modern technology.

Ludic technologies

Huizinga’s claim that the ludic worldview has disappeared since the beginning of the nineteenth century is questionable; the same goes for his claim that play and technology are incompatible. According to Erkki Huhtamo, “the introduction of large-scale machine production [in the nineteenth century] was accompanied by an avalanche of different devices that provided amusement, including game-play”.⁶¹ Moreover, we assert that in our contemporary culture, deeply entrenched

with digital technologies, play is the key feature for understanding this culture and “playful technologies” are the very means by which we – as we will see in the next section – reflexively construct our identity.

When we talk about the medium-specific ludic characteristics of digital information and communication technologies, we by no means refer to a set of essentialist qualities. As we have argued above, playfulness does not reside in a single characteristic, but should rather be understood as a set of characteristics, which can appear in activities in a variety of more or less overlapping combinations. The question is what possibilities (and limitations) for play are being provided to users by digital media such as computer games, the Internet and mobile phones.⁶² A playful possibility is only “virtual” until it is actualized by the playful attitude of the user and experienced as such. This search for opportunities to play goes hand in hand with what we earlier called a transformation of perspective. Regarding digital media as ludic practices enables us to conceptualize them in specific terms (as we will discuss in more detail below).

The characteristics of digital media that we are focusing on here are multimediality, virtuality, interactivity and connectivity.⁶³ *Multimediality* refers to the multitude of means of expression, such as images (still or moving), sound (talk, music, and noises) and written text, but also, and foremost, to the fact that these elements share one common digital code, a characteristic with all kinds of economic and legal implications.⁶⁴ The second characteristic of digital media, *virtuality*, traditionally refers to immersive experiences provided by new forms of simulation technology (think of virtual reality), as well as to metaphorical spaces created by communication networks (think of the space which comes into being when you’re talking on the telephone). But, as Michiel de Lange rightly argues, these descriptions were mostly “founded on two ontologies that were mutually exclusive, the *real* and the *virtual*. Much current (mobile) media research questions this separation. Mobile phone ‘virtualities’ are embedded in ‘real life’. Inversely, ‘real life’ is encapsulated in ‘virtual’ communication practices.”⁶⁵ “Virtual reality” has increasingly become “real virtuality.”⁶⁶ Due to a third characteristic, *interactivity* or *participation*, digital media afford different levels of engagement in which users can “intervene in a meaningful way within the representation itself.”⁶⁷ According to Salen and Zimmerman, this intervention can assume two different forms. The first one they call “explicit interactivity: or participation with designed choices and procedures”. The second form is “beyond-the-object-interactivity: or participation within the culture of the object”.⁶⁸ We can think, for example, of the co-construction of online games in fan cultures or Web 2.0 applications which enable their users to co-shape websites. An example of the fourth characteristic, *connectivity*, is Facebook, which is the largest social network site in the world, with more than 500 million active subscribers.⁶⁹

The concept of play, as elaborated on by Huizinga, is a very useful starting

point for the analysis of the media experience. Our media and play experiences have many characteristics and ambiguities in common. Or, to put it differently: digital media afford users new opportunities to play. To show how digital media's medium-specificity opens up particular possibilities for play, we have to take into account the six elements of play we distinguished above.

The first element, *expression of human freedom*, can be subdivided in three parts: freedom to play, freedom to make decisions while you are playing and freedom towards the world.⁷⁰ What is striking when we take a close look at how these kinds of freedom take shape in actual media use, is that freedom and force are not, as Huizinga claims, as diametrically opposed as we have argued above when discussing the ambiguities in his analysis. The freedom to play becomes visible in the player's decision to do so. But when you (are forced to) play to make a living, play and work, as well as freedom and force, become entangled in the most curious of ways.

The freedom to make meaningful decisions refers to the interactive or participatory nature of digital media. As Huizinga states, play is a "free *activity*" (our italics). An example of the rise of participatory culture is the transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. Instead of few producers of media content sending it out to the masses by limited television or radio channels, Web 2.0 turns anyone with access to the web into a potential content provider who can report on specific, idiosyncratic topics to a targeted audience. The fact that media users are only to a certain extent "in control" we will discuss further on in relation to the rules of play.

To play, finally, also means that you are free from the constraints of the outside world; it is beyond the "profane seriousness" we referred to earlier. The claim that play should have "its aim in itself"⁷¹ seems difficult to hold in today's gaming culture where items from massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) are being traded on online auction and shopping websites such as eBay, and where serious games seem to employ play for educational purposes. But, according to Hector Rodriguez, this is not necessarily the case.⁷² Playing serious games can not only be used "as a vehicle to maximize the 'effectiveness' of teaching" but also to illuminate "the fundamental nature of the subject being taught". This means that in serious games such as *Food Force* and *Darfur is Dying* profane and sacred seriousness are not beforehand mutually exclusive, as is claimed by some critics.⁷³

The second element, *pretending*, refers to (digital) media use and/or understanding as doing *as if*, or, the double character of media. Like play, "our media culture consists of the acceptance of the 'as-if-ness' of the world".⁷⁴ The reason for this is related to what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin call "the two logics of remediation". Even when (digital) media obey the logic of transparent immediacy – which means that it is the medium's purpose to disappear – think of "the promise of immediacy through the flexibility and liveness of the web's net-

worked communication”⁷⁵ – they, at the same time, obey the logic of hypermediacy. This means that a user is constantly reminded of or brought back into contact with (the constructedness of) the interface, in the case of the web the filling of the screen with windows, each with a variety of multimedia applications.⁷⁶ Media users are, in principle, in a position to realize that the reality they are facing “is just mediated”. It is the explicit goal of media education to make media users more aware of the ways in which media try to erase their own constructedness (for example, their own ideological presuppositions) in order to come across as spontaneous and transparent presentations of so-called “reality”.

To analyze *the pleasures* (and/or displeasures) of digital media use, the third element, we have to take into account the medium-specific relationships between production, media texts and reception. Consequently, we have to focus on the question of “how pleasure is generated in the relationship between the rules and scripts developed by producers and how they are experienced and engaged with by users”.⁷⁷ The suggestion of advertising and marketing campaigns that digital media would offer more fun and pleasure than traditional media seems untenable to us. We do claim that digital media offer a wide diversity of complex pleasures that – dependent of particular users and contexts – are partly the same (for example, the pleasure of narrative), partly more intensive (for example, the pleasure of immersion), as well as partly different than what traditional media have to offer. Specific to digital media are those displeasures and pleasures that are related to interactivity, such as computer game addiction and boredom or frustration (“World Wide Wait”) and the feeling of being in and out of control, the tension of winning or losing, succeeding or failing, and those pleasures that can be experienced, on the one hand, by submitting and confirming to the rules as well as, on the other hand, by negotiating or resisting them.⁷⁸

The fourth element, *specific limits of time and space*, seems to be subjected to great pressure in this time of ubiquitous computing. It is, on the contrary, the illimitability of the mobile phone, which seems to be the defining (and at the same time liberating and restraining) characteristic of today’s media culture.⁷⁹ This does not mean however that digital media would not have a separate time and place:

The media have the capacity, indeed they entirely depend upon that capacity, to engage an audience within spaces and times that are distinguished – marked off – from the otherwise relentless confusions of everyday life. There is a threshold to be crossed each time we participate in the process of mediation.⁸⁰

This shows, for example, when we focus on security issues. Digital media users can, as players do, try out or test or experiment with new identities, something

that does not need to have real-life consequences.⁸¹ The limits also come to the fore on moments when a user wants to continue (the magic cycle) but is forced, by external reasons, to stop using the medium.

The *rules of play*, the fifth element, can either be accepted or played with, on an individual (micro-)level as well as on the (macro-)level of the media system. On the one hand, digital media submit users to their rules. Within specific limits, there is freedom for the user to play. Individual users give what Stuart Hall called “preferred readings” of a media text⁸² and/or select one of the many pre-programmed system-internal possibilities of a digital media system. In both cases users play according to the rules. On the other hand, users can play with these rules in – more or less – subversive ways. Here, users are involved in “oppositional readings” of media texts, and/or on a macro-level try to change the relationship between media producers, distributors and consumers. Yet we need to be careful. The concept of participatory culture is in danger of overstating the importance of do-it-yourself counterculture.⁸³ Media also impose their logics on us in a dialectic between freedom and force.⁸⁴

The sixth element, *order*, is related to the formation of social groupings. A good example of a Web 2.0 application that creates a community-based temporary order is the so-called green blog. This is in line with Félix Guattari’s analysis of a *post-media age* “in which the media will be re-appropriated by a multitude of subject-groups capable of directing its resingularisation”.⁸⁵

Approaching digital media as playful practices enables us to conceptualize them in terms of the four ambiguities we discerned earlier on.⁸⁶ The first ambiguity refers to the “as-if-ness” character of media: *reality and appearance* are not strictly separated but are interrelated in meaningful ways. Digital media, how real they may seem, enable users to become (more or less) aware of the constructedness of their media experiences. This implies a second ambiguity, that of *freedom versus force*. As is the case with play, we are able to reflect on the rules as “just play rules” and always open for modification, both on a basic, micro-level (the individual user that interacts with a media text and/or technology) and on a macro-level (changes in the relationships between media producers, distributors and consumers). There is a dialectic relationship between freedom and force: we can play and are “being played” at the same time. The third ambiguity is that of *determination versus change*. Each medium pretends to be the final phase of a long-lasting development – think of the web’s claim for immediacy based on its flexible and live networked communication possibilities, and the mobile phone’s claim to realize the desire for ideal communication.⁸⁷ But, as history shows, many if not most of these claims are being outdated by the arrival and claims of newer media. The liveness of the web, for example, is “a refashioned version of the liveness of broadcast television”.⁸⁸ The fourth ambiguity, *individuality versus collectivity*, deals with the identity of individual media in today’s media land-

scape. This landscape can be characterized by the concepts of “convergence” (“an ongoing process or series of intersections between different media systems”)⁸⁹ or “remediation” (“the representation of one medium in another”).⁹⁰ Think of the web’s claim to represent or absorb all other media. Because all today’s media – consoles, computers, mobile phones – have play applications and, thus, can be used as play devices, they lose a bit of their presumed individual identity and become part of and play their role in a collective playful media landscape. The mobile phone, to take one example, has developed over time from a strict communication tool into a multimedia computer you can play on, with, and through. Moreover, the converging multimedia landscape also provides extremely fruitful soil for cross-media games and virals, as well for the creation of online game worlds that combine, in various (re)combinations, *agôn*, *mimicry*, *alea*, and *ilinx*, such as *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life*.

Playful identities

In this article we have critically examined Huizinga’s and Caillois’ insights into play to understand the ludification of contemporary culture. Depending on the dominant category of play, as theorized by Caillois, postmodern identity displays four basic dimensions. The *competitive identity* dimension transforms everything – from economical production and consumption to education, scientific research and even love relationships, into a game with winners and losers. The *simulational identity* dimension expresses itself in theatrical performance rather than in (romantic) inwardness. This postmodern identity dimension finds its expression predominantly in the society of the spectacle.⁹¹ The *aleatory dimension* highlights how people are “thrown” into certain conditions by birth or during life by act of fate, in what Giddens calls “fateful moments”.⁹² At the same time it underlines how people may embrace a profound openness to the – happy or fateful – contingencies of life. For this type of identity the risk society is the “natural habitat”. The *vertigo identity* dimension is characterized by thrill-seeking. Here, we could think of the kind of fatalistic, Dionysian behaviour regarding the use of drugs or risky sexual behaviour that characterizes many youth cultures.⁹³

Just as in the case of the different types of games and media, the four identity dimensions that characterize postmodern society often overlap and connect in various playful ways. For example, in order to deal with life as aleatory gamble, people may adopt strategies that correspond with one of the other play types. People may try to regain mastery over life’s unpredictability by dragging *alea* into the domain of *agôn*; they may try to conceal certain conditions by living a life of mimicry pretence; or they may attempt to run away from it by escaping in *ilinx* thrill-seeking. And the body builder in the school of martial arts often is not

only engaged in competition with his peers, but also likes to show off his muscles in the public space, and/or likes to take a chance by using steroids.

In each of these intertwined dimensions playful personae are confronted with ambiguities we described with Huizinga in our analysis of play (section 2) and playful media (section 3). First, these playful personae are constantly oscillating between *reality and appearance*. They play their roles, just pretending that they are identical to them, but at the same time their role-playing is of the utmost seriousness and as such becomes a reality *sui generis*. Moreover, the competitions they engage in are not “just play”, but have real-life consequences. Second, playful identities constantly oscillate between *freedom and force*. They play with their contingency, but at the same time they cannot escape the factuality of these contingencies. They express themselves in freedom, constantly experience the constraints exercised upon them by media that themselves are subjected to the homogeneous global forces of the market economy. And in a more radical sense than experienced by previous generations, playful identities oscillate between *determinedness and change*. Although as playful personae they enjoy the possibility to continuously changing masks, they still feel the everlasting longing for rest in the hard core of their subjectivity. Finally, playful identities constantly oscillate between their *individuality and the collective*. In our playing they express their inmost subjectivity, but in doing so they constantly follow their mimetic desire to be someone else.⁹⁴ And above all, they embrace the game as wholeheartedly as the game embraces them.

Notes

1. V.J. Rideout, U.G. Foehr and D.F. Roberts, “Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds” (Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010), 2-3.
2. Victoria Jen, “South Korea Aims to Make Online Games a Key Driver for Economy”, *Channel NewsAsia*, 2 June 2010, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/eastasia/view/1060450/1/.html>, accessed 10 December 2012. A drawback to this development, however, is that a small minority of players suffer from online gaming addiction, see “[S]outh Korean Dies after Games Session”, BBC News, 10 August 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4137782.stm>, accessed 10 December 2012.
3. Britta Neitzel and Rolf F. Nohr, eds, *Das Spiel Mit Dem Medium. Partizipation-Immersion-Interaktion* (Marburg: Schüren, 2006), 9.
4. Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism, Where All of Life Is a Paid-for Experience* (New York: J.P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), 263. Cf. Julian Dibbell, *Play Money: Or, How I Quit My Day Job and Made Millions Trading Virtual Loot* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).
5. Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 99.

6. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004), 80.
7. Kostas Axelos, *Vers la pensée planétaire; Le devenir-pensée du monde et le devenir-monde de la pensée* (Paris: Editions du Minuit, 1964). Cf. Lourens Minnema, "Play and (Post)Modern Culture: An Essay on Changes in the Scientific Interest in the Phenomenon of Play", *Cultural Dynamics* 10.1 (1998): 21.
8. Karl Sigmund, *Games of Life: Explorations in Ecology, Evolution, and Behaviour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
9. John Von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944); cf. Robert Leonard, *Von Neumann, Morgenstern, and the Creation of Game Theory: From Chess to Social Science, 1900-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
10. Gregory Bateson, "A Theory of Play and Phantasy", in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, ed. Gregory Bateson (New York: Ballantine, 1955). Gregory Bateson, "Play and Paradigm", in *Play: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. M.A. Salter (New York: Ballantine, 1977).
11. Julian Dibbell, "The Chinese Game Room: Play, Productivity, and Computing at Their Limits", *Artifact* 2.3 (2008): 1-6.
12. Elmer Dayton Mitchell, Bernard Sterling Mason and Wilbur Pardon Bowen, *The Theory of Play* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1934); Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*; Elliott M. Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Study of Games* (Huntington, NY: R.E. Krieger, 1979); J. Raessens and J. Goldstein, eds, *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).
13. Warren Motte, "Playing in Earnest", *New Literary History* 40 (2009): 26.
14. Motte, "Playing in Earnest".
15. In the following, we will quote from the English edition, but in cases where the English translation is incorrect or incomplete, we offer our own translations of the Dutch original (as reprinted in 1950 in J. Huizinga. *Verzamelde Werken* (Haarlem: H.D. Tjeenk Willink & Zoon N.V., 1950), volume 5.
16. J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), ix.
17. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 173.
18. Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 4.
19. We do not follow the English translation here because the Dutch phrase "niet gemeend" has been incorrectly translated as "not serious".
20. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 13; see also the variations of this definition on the pages 28 and 132.
21. *Ibid.*, 6-8.
22. *Ibid.*, 9.
23. *Ibid.*, 5.
24. *Ibid.*, 26.
25. *Ibid.*, 23.

26. Ibid., 9.
27. Ibid., 28.
28. Ibid., 28.
29. Ibid., 132.
30. Ibid., 10.
31. Ibid., 11.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 10.
35. Ibid., 25.
36. Ibid., 75.
37. Ibid.
38. Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 11-36.
39. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 75.
40. Ibid., 206.
41. Ibid., 199.
42. Ibid., 199.
43. Ibid., 206.
44. Ibid., 199.
45. Ibid., 199-200.
46. Ibid., 205.
47. Ibid.
48. In the Dutch edition, Huizinga explains the emergence of puerilism as follows: "Het betrof voor een groot deel gewoonten die hetzij veroorzaakt of in de hand gewerkt worden door de techniek van het moderne geestelijk verkeer. Daaronder valt bijvoorbeeld de gemakkelijk bevredigde maar nooit verzadigde behoefte aan banale verstrooiing, de zucht tot grove sensatie, de lust aan massavertoon". Huizinga, *Homo ludens. Proeve eener bepaling van het spelelement der cultuur*, in Huizinga, *Verzamelde werken* (Amsterdam: H.D. Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, 1950), 226.
49. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 9.
50. Ibid., 25.
51. Ibid., 10. Cf. Gadamer's analysis of play, in which it is emphasized that "Alles Spielen ist ein Gespieltwerden" (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grunzüge einer Philosophischen Hermeneutik*, in *Gesammelte Werke I* [Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1986], 112).
52. Ibid., 114.
53. Jacques Ehrmann, "Homo Ludens Revisited", *Yale French Studies* 41 (1968): 33.
54. Eugen Fink, "The Oasis of Happiness: Toward an Ontology of Play", *Yale French Studies* 41 (1968): 19.
55. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 18.
56. Helmut Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975), 288ff.; cf. Jos de Mul, "Digitally Mediated

- (Dis)Embodiment: Plessner's Concept of Eccentric Positionality Explained for Cyborgs", *Information, Communication & Society* 6.2 (2003): 247-266.
57. Fink, "The Oasis of Happiness", 23.
 58. Lourens Minnema, "Play and (Post)Modern Culture: An Essay on Changes in the Scientific Interest in the Phenomenon of Play", *Cultural Dynamics* 10.1 (1998): 25.
 59. Victor Witter Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1969). Cf.: J. Kücklich, "Play and Playability as Key Concepts in New Media Studies", <http://www.playability.de/Play.pdf>, accessed 1 October 2010. See also Minnema, "Play and (Post)Modern Culture", and De Mul, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Recombination', in *Digital Material: Anchoring New Media in Daily Life and Technology*, ed. J. Raessens, M. Schäfer, M. v. d. Boomen, Lehmann and S. A.-S. & Lammes (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 95-106.
 60. Cf. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960); Victor Witter Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).
 61. Erkki Huhtamo, "Slots of Fun, Slots of Trouble: An Archaeology of Arcade Gaming", in *Handbook of Computer Games Studies*, ed. J. Raessens and J. Goldstein (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 3.
 62. Donald A. Norman, *The Psychology of Everyday Things* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 9.
 63. We do not claim that these principles can exclusively be traced back to digital media, cf. Joost Raessens, "Computer Games as Participatory Media Culture", in *Handbook of Computer Games Studies*, ed. J. Raessens and J. Goldstein (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 373-374.
 64. The focus on (the interpretation of) computer code is part of the emerging field of "critical code studies" in the humanities. Lev Manovich, on the other hand, prefers the more general term "software studies" (Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command* [2008], 14, [www.softwarestudies.com/softbook](http://www.softwarestudies.com/softwarestudies.com/softwarestudies.com/softbook)).
 65. De Lange, *Moving Circles: Mobile Media and Playful Identities* (Rotterdam: Erasmus University, 2010) 165.
 66. Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture. Volume I: The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 373-375.
 67. A. Cameron, "The Future of an Illusion: Interactive Cinema", 33, <http://mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ28/ACINTRO.HTML>, accessed 10 December 2012.
 68. Cf. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 60.
 69. Cf. Jeroen Hugo Timmermans, *Playing with Paradoxes: Identity in the Web Era* (Rotterdam: Erasmus University, 2010), 189.
 70. Cf. Daniel Cermak-Sassenrath, *Interaktivität als Spiel. Neue Perspektiven auf den Alltag mit dem Computer* (Bielefeld: [transcript] Kultur- und Medientheorie, 2010), 129-153.
 71. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 28.
 72. Cf. Hector Rodriguez, "The Playful and the Serious: An Approximation to Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*", *The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 6.1 (2006).

73. Cf. Joost Raessens, "A Taste of Life as a Refugee: How Serious Games Frame Refugee Issues", in *Changes in Museum Practice: New Media, Refugees and Participation*, ed. K. Goodnow and H.-L. Skartveit (Geneva, UNHCR, 2010). The term "serious games" "may easily be criticized for its literal meaning, which is an oxymoron: Games are inherently fun and not serious" (U. Ritterfeld, M. Cody and P. Vorderer, "Introduction", in *Serious Games: Mechanisms and Effects*, ed. U. Ritterfeld, M. Cody and P. Vorderer (New York: Routledge, 2009), 3.
74. Roger Silverstone, *Why Study the Media?* (London: Sage, 1999), 59.
75. J. David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 197.
76. Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 196-210.
77. Aphra Kerr, Julian Küchlich and Pat Brereton, "New Media – New Pleasures?", *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 9.1 (2006): 64.
78. Kerr, Küchlich and Brereton, "New Media – New Pleasures?", 69-70.
79. Timmermans, *Playing with Paradoxes*, 134.
80. Roger Silverstone, *Why Study the Media?* (London: Sage, 1999), 61.
81. Silverstone, *Why Study the Media?*, 61.
82. Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding", in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, ed. S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe and P. Willis (London: Hutchinson, 1996), 128-138.
83. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 133. Cf. José van Dijck and David Nieborg, "Wikinomics and Its Discontents: A Critical Analysis of Web 2.0 Business Manifestos", *New Media & Society* 11.5 (2009): 871.
84. Michiel de Lange, *Moving Circles: Mobile Media and Playful Identities* (Rotterdam: Erasmus University, 2010), 215.
55. Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), 61.
86. Cf. Julian Küchlich, "Play and Playability as Key Concepts in New Media Studies", <http://www.playability.de/Play.pdf>, accessed 10 December 2012.
87. Cf. Imar de Vries, "Tantalisingly Close: An Archaeology of Communication Desires in Discourses of Mobile Wireless Media", Ph.D. dissertation, Utrecht University, 2008.
88. Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 197.
89. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 282.
90. Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 45.
91. Guy Debord, *La Société Du Spectacle* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1967).
92. Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 131. Cf. Jos de Mul, *Toeval. Inaugurale Rede* (Rotterdam: Rotterdamse Filosofische Studies, 1994).
93. Michel Maffesoli, "The Return of the Tragic in Postmodern Societies", *New Literary History* 35.1 (2004): 133-149; Michel Maffesoli, *L'instant éternel: Le retour du tragique dans les sociétés postmodernes* (Paris: Denoël, 2000).
94. René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1961).