

Introduction to Part I

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This part of the book sheds light on how play, as it was described in the introductory chapter, actually manifests itself in present-day culture. The authors in this section examine different contemporary expressions of playfulness, varying from people engaging with games, Do-It-Yourself (DIY) computer technologies, or social networks. The contributions in this section substantiate our earlier claims that play is also culturally determined and has different functions in different cultural settings. So we may speak of the current ludification of culture as evidence that play is mutable, and that what this transformation entails is versatile in scope and character. Together these chapters demonstrate that play has become part and parcel of today's media culture. They also underline Huizinga's point that play *is* culture, although this does not mean that play can be defined in universal terms.

Social psychologist Kenneth J. Gergen opens this part of the book with a contribution in which he seeks to define what the ludification of contemporary culture means for our social identities. In *Playland: Technology, self, and cultural transformation*, he argues that play has become omnipresent and far less 'hidden' in specific social spaces. He conceives of our present social landscape as a playland and examines what this playland means for our social identities. According to Gergen, culture has become play. This is an important alteration of Huizinga's adage that play is culture.

Cultural sociologist Stef Aupers is also interested in how the ludic shift has transformed our social identity, but he approaches his investigation from a spiritual angle. As a game scholar and sociologist he is interested in how role-playing games can generate new spaces to perform contemporary spirituality. In *Spiritual play: Encountering the sacred in World of Warcraft*, Aupers argues, based on interviews with players, that Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGs) offer a ritual space (a 'magic circle') for certain players to explore spirituality as part of their identity. The game *World of Warcraft* opens up possibilities for an alternative spiritual playground at a time when Western society is said to be thoroughly secularized. Aupers' chapter thus points to a connection between processes of secularization, re-enchantment, and contemporary play.

In his contribution, entitled *Playful computer interaction*, new media scholar Daniel Cermak-Sassenrath analyzes the connections between

ludification and the affordances of digital technologies. He looks at play in contemporary culture as intrinsically related to digital technology and argues that computer technology in itself invites playful interactive conduct.

Menno Deen, Ben Schouten, and Tilde Bekker view games in a similar way in *Playful identity in game design and open-ended play*. They argue that games can have a strong influence on shaping our identities in playful ways because of their interactive qualities. Although some designs have a greater potential for this than others, they maintain that games can trigger people to create their identities in new fluid and playful ways.

Game scholar René Glas takes us to the realm of social network services as a playful platform for identity construction. In *Breaking reality: Exploring pervasive cheating in Foursquare*, he argues that location-based apps like *Foursquare* show how game-like elements are permeating every nook and cranny of today's culture. He pushes the envelope a bit further when he argues that cheating should be included as an important dimension of play to understand contemporary ludic culture and the changeability of play. Cheating points to how the rules of playing are never pre-given and are always bent and broken in an ongoing process of negotiation between different stakeholders. This again supports our claim that play's influence in shaping our identities is far from universal. The practice of cheating demonstrates that meanings, including the rules of the game, are constantly renegotiated and modified.

The last chapter of this section also focuses on the relation between play and modification. In *Playing with bits and bytes: The savage mind in the digital age*, social communication scientist Valerie Frissen considers the relation between DIY culture and play. She asserts that playing with technologies has always been an important driving force for technological transformation, but that this is even more the case in the digital era. She argues that we have witnessed the rise of a bottom-up DIY movement that is crucial to the shaping of digital technologies. The playful mindset that drives this is similar to what Lévi-Strauss called the 'savage mind'. But while structural anthropologist Lévi-Strauss situated the savage mind as a mode of thinking firmly outside of Western culture, Frissen discerns a return to it. Tinkering with digital technologies should be seen as a specific dimension of our playful culture and be understood to drive technological transformation.