

Introduction to Part II

*Valerie Frissen, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange, Jos de Mul
& Joost Raessens*

The authors in this part of the book all look at how contemporary media technologies afford playful interactions. Underpinning all chapters are questions pertaining to power and agency. Do digital media mark a shift in how the user as player engages with and has agency in everyday life, and if so, do we need a new vocabulary to understand this engagement properly? The authors in this section of the book share a special interest in how specific digital technologies and genres can be approached as playful media. They interrogate how play can be defined in contemporary media cultures, be it from a cultural, philosophical, ideological, or theoretical perspective. Through this lens they want to come to a better understanding of how play and identity “work” in contemporary media cultures.

Some of authors tackle this question by looking at mobile playful media that are embedded in daily life. Media scholars Adriana de Souza e Silva and Jordan Frith concentrate on mobile interfaces as platforms for networked play in daily life. In their contribution *Location-based mobile games: Interfaces to urban spaces*, they discuss how mobile apps such as *Foursquare* and *Gowalla* invite “players” to make their location public via the mobile interface. They examine how such playful locative conduct pushes players to make aspects of their daily life public by checking in via their mobile interface, and what consequences this has for notions of privacy and power. Hence, as playful media technologies they change our conception of our visibility in urban spaces and our involvement in how we shape them as networks.

Similarly, sociologist Rich Ling approaches mobile phones as network technologies for ludic and networked interaction. In *The playful use of mobile phones and its link to social cohesion*, he shows how mobile telephones have become multipurpose media technologies and have gone far beyond sheer practical tools for communication. Instead they engage users in various playful activities. While de Souza e Silva and Frith look at mobile devices from an ethnographic and qualitative perspective, Ling uses empirical and quantitative data to support his claim that mobile phones have become playful media technologies. Together these chapters make a convincing argument that mobile interfaces are ludic tools that offer new possibilities for engaging with everyday life.

Mobility takes a different turn in the chapter *Digital cartographies as playful practices* by new media scholar Sybille Lammes. She discusses the relation between play, maps, and spatial stories. Using Google Maps, Google Street View, *Foursquare*, and *Layar* as her main cases, she shows how digital mapping interfaces enable users to construct stories about their movements in playful ways. “Who am I” has become “where am I” in contemporary media culture, so she suggests. Lammes maintains that interfaces enable us to construct ludic identities through navigation, but like de Souza e Silva and Frith, she stresses that what we can construct is still influenced by ideological values.

If these authors focus on mobility and its ludic affordances for the user, other authors in this part of the book focus more on the specificity of computer games in relation to play, power, and agency. In the chapter *Ludic identities and the magic circle* game scholar Gordon Calleja argues that the bounded nature of play as theorized by Huizinga needs reconsideration when we want to understand the contemporary player’s identity. This theoretical question is also pertinent to mobile media. Can we nowadays (and could we indeed ever) speak of a delineated arena where the player’s identity takes shape? Calleja questions this and argues that Huizinga’s modernist conception of the ludic is dated and does not suffice to understand the position of current computer game players. Situating himself in a current and important debate about the value of Huizinga’s magic circle for understanding digital play, he instead proposes a “logic of incorporation” to account for how players relate to the (game) world and shape their identity through this engagement.

While all contributions in this part are concerned with questions of power and agency of the media user as player, the last two contributions explicitly deal with the ideological-philosophical dimensions of play. In *Play (for) time*, media theorist Patrick Crogan argues that computer games are the most recent examples of Stieglerian “industrial temporal objects” and he shows how they, as postindustrial objects, differ from non-digital temporal objects. He argues that as examples of “transindividual culture” they show that we live in an era that permanently asks us to be involved in consumerist play, eroding a sense of reality and indeed the very conception that Huizinga had of play and identity.

The last chapter in this part of the book takes a different stance on the way that computer games involve us in reality by examining how games can be used in political ways to engage the player not so much as consumers, but more as critical citizens. In *Playful identity politics: How refugee games affect the player’s identity*, media theorist Joost Raessens analyzes refugee games to show that games can affect how players identify with others and the extent to which people become more politically involved.