

Introduction to Part III

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The contributions in the third part of the book look at how digital media technologies shape human identities in playful ways. A common thread that weaves through these chapters is that media technologies and practices mediate how people identify with others, the world, and themselves. When new media technologies rise to the fore the mediation of identity changes along with it, and play offers a range of fruitful perspectives to understand these changes. Another common thread in these chapters involves questioning the intricate connections between play and everyday life. From being a more or less separate space for experimenting with identities to being tightly integrated into everyday life in social role-playing, the boundaries of play feature as a central topic in these chapters.

Different argumentative strands can be identified in addition to these similarities. First, several authors make a media-theoretical argument by exploring how specific media that are widely used, like computer games, mobile phones, online social networks, and casual games, have playful qualities and therefore shape identities in playful ways. Second, a number of authors make the cultural-philosophical argument that play's conceptual ambiguity captures well the ambivalent attitudes many people have towards identity formation as a constant series of oscillations between engagement and disengagement, between pretense and seriousness, individualism and collectivity, and so on. Third, yet other authors make a socio-historical argument that games and play are no longer confined to a separate sphere but have become part and parcel of today's commodified cultural economy that shapes who we are and who we want to be.

In *Playing out identities and emotions*, professor of communication and media Jeroen Jansz argues from a psychological perspective that digital computer games allow people to experiment with their identities, both inside the game itself and in the social context in which the games are played. He pays particular attention to the gendered nature of identity construction. People explore aspects of themselves by playing, even those aspects that are impossible or forbidden outside of the game, in order to test out the reactions of others. Fantasies about who one is and wants to be are being put into practice yet without entirely the same consequences as

in everyday life. Games are identity laboratories, constituting safe spaces for playing with the boundaries of gender and self.

If computer games in Jansz' analysis are designated settings more or less separated from everyday life, media philosopher Jeroen Timmermans in *Playing with others: The identity paradoxes of the web as social network* looks at the playfulness of online social networking sites as intimately connected to everyday life. Timmermans observes that people more than ever are split between personal self-expression and growth, and the yearning for communication and community building. The playful self-presentation that people engage in on social networking sites is a way of coping with the very real and seriousness business of interacting, managing personal status, and forging group identities. According to this perspective, play is an intrinsic aspect of the presentation of self in everyday life.

The contribution *New media, play, and social identities* by sociologist Leopoldina Fortunati breaks away from medium-specific identity practices. Fortunati looks at the motivations behind the current relationship between new media, play, and social identities. Her analysis operates at the intersection of ludic culture, social control, and the construction of what she calls an "ir-responsible" identity. Despite many claims to freedom, contemporary ludic culture may just as well be understood as imposing new types of social control and forms of resistance. Today's playful media culture shapes the political economy of gender relations in this dialectical movement between institutional control and user-driven experiment with counter-powers. This contribution therefore serves as a healthy antidote to overly celebratory views of the liberating potential of play in the construction of identity. Furthermore, Marxist theory has taught us not to take the notion of "everyday life" as self-evident. Fortunati's contribution thus serves as a reminder that any inquiry into the relationship between play and everyday life means questioning how hidden structural forces beneath "the everyday" shape people's identities.

Most contributions in this volume situate their analysis in a Western context. Playful media practices can be observed elsewhere, as urban new media researcher Michiel de Lange shows in his chapter *Playing life in the metropolis: Mobile media and identity in Jakarta*. The mobile phone offers Indonesians many opportunities for identity construction and expression. Young people in particular base their identities on shared but contested ideas about what it means to live a "modern urban life". It is argued that play complements narrative identity by highlighting the conditions under which particular stories are told and how identifications come into being. Play acts as a heuristic lens through which focus is shifted from narrative

representations to situation-specific performances of the self, which fits better with the dynamics of city life and media culture.

The chapter *The conflicts within the casual: The culture and identity of casual online play* by game scholar Frans Mäyrä focuses on casual gameplay that takes place on online social networking platforms and location-based mobile phone applications. Casual play is typically characterized by short sessions of playful interaction with games that are not particularly challenging, complex, or extensive. This gives participants the chance to divide their attention among other activities and issues besides gameplay. Casual play is not deeply immersive or transformative of personal or social identities like, for instance, live action role-playing or Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) games. While the vocal parts of game cultures have mostly articulated the pleasures of highly immersive gameplay, the players of contemporary casual games have started to voice an alternative view of what constitutes “good gameplay” based on a slightly different aesthetics of play. This chapter aims to discuss the significance of casual games and highlight their contribution to game cultures. For Mäyrä casual play is the nexus between the two poles of commitment and non-engagement that is typical of today’s identities.

In the closing chapter of the book, *Afterplay*, Jos de Mul revisits some of the stakes and claims laid out in the introductory chapter. The argument is made that technologies have become the locus of contemporary ludification of culture and identity. Narrative and play are not opposites. They do not constitute mutually exclusive lenses for understanding the mediation of identity, but rather must be taken as complementary. Nonetheless the notion of play, with its ambiguities and ambivalences, offers a particularly poignant take on the ubiquity and importance of ludic digital media technologies.