Introduction to the Special Issue: Game and Play: Literature as a Nexus among Disciplines

ALI-ASGHAR SEYED-GOHRAB

Utrecht University

With the support of the Dutch Research Council (NWO), a two-day conference on the notion of play was held January 22–23, 2019, at the Faculty of Humanities at Leiden University. Colleagues from the Centre for the Arts in Society (LUCAS) and Leiden University for Area Studies (LIAS) gave presentations and workshops on the notions of play and video games, with the aim of exchanging ideas between Persian and Iranian studies and media studies. The opening lecture by Sybille Lammes was an outstanding introduction in which she problematized the notion of play, listing a number of its general features. Johan Huizinga's (1872–1945) classical work, *Homo Ludens* (1950), elaborates on the notion of "play" as an indispensable quality of life, "even older than human culture."[1] This influential book has unleashed a large number of studies on the role of "play" in various cultures and settings (educational, games, etc.). Lammes elaborated on earlier definitions of the term, describing "play" as a "socio-cultural involvement in activities to which specific parameters apply that give participants pleasure and stimulate creative thinking and as a potential formative aspect of all cultural practices."[2] She emphasized that play is not merely an activity but also

a (multisensorial) materiality. Another central concept she intro-
duced, which recurred during the conference, was hybridity and
how the notion of play has changed in the digital age, assuming
different forms that are increasingly open to hybridization. Lammes
pointed to Brian Sutton-Smith's *The Ambiguity of Play* (2001), which
examines how play is essentially ambiguous in meaning and intent,
and not bound to a certain cultural domain or period but comprises
different states of mind. This ambiguity generates many questions
for scholars of game studies, also in relation to hybridization. For
instance, how do we want to combine different fields and diverse
approaches in the study of play? In our computer age, increasingly
computers invite or allow us to play.[3] Another question concerns
the production of play and how play and pleasure should be defined.
Although individuals may appropriate play and pleasure in certain
ways, the game industry nevertheless influences the behavior of the
player and how they are conceived. Another subject that Lammes
elaborated upon was the "movement from apparatus of control to
networks of control because since the advent of the digital culture,
audiences have become (inter)active users, and a shift has taken
place from representation to process.[4] Play refers increasingly to
interactions within fluid networks of media technologies in which
users are embedded participants and actors."

   The first day of the conference introduced various theoretical and
philosophical aspects of play and gaming while also paying attention
to the notion of play in the Iranian world in both medieval and mod-
ern times. The conference offered an opportunity to reflect on the
themes and concepts from a multidisciplinary perspective, discussing
how scholars from different disciplines can benefit from each other's
approaches and methodologies ranging from game studies, Iranian
studies, Islamic studies, arts and media studies, and philosophy.

   This special issue is devoted to the notions of play and game and
their concomitants, showing how they are used in various domains
of Persian culture from different vantage points. Not all of the arti-
cles, therefore, deal with the field of Persian literary studies in the
narrowest sense, but their scopes are diverse, showing how terms
such as *play* and *game* are operationalized in politics and interna-
tional relations, in philosophy, culture, arts, and literature.

   The contribution by Ali-Asghar Seyed-Gohrab, entitled "Gambling
in Taverns: Reflections on the Notion of Play in Persian Culture,"

starts with a linguistic approach, dwelling on the Persian word *bāzī*, which means *to move* and *to play*. The term comes from Old Persian and its meaning has changed little for a more than a millennium. While *bāzī* is a general term utilized for play and game, it is also used as a suffix to many compound words indicating an activity to make words such as *ʿishq-bāzī*, literally *love-play* or *love-game*, which means *making love* in the modern sense or *the game of love*, that is, many activities related to the state of being in love, such as flirtation, amorous talk, gallantry, etc. In addition to the Persian word, the theological Arabic terms are also used. These are *lahw* and *laʿib* (play and amusement), which appear in the Quran at least eight times. The Quran condemns activities related to play. Seyed-Gohrab examines how these terms are mainly associated with women and children. The Quran translators hesitate to translate these terms by game or play, preferring renderings such as *sport* and *entertainment*. What is conspicuous in theological texts such as the exegesis of the Quran is why and how several theologians condemn play, especially pre-Islamic Persian games. Despite this censure, many games, which are related to Persian rituals, have survived and are still played in the Iranian world.

Next to linguistic and theological treatment, Seyed-Gohrab pays attention to the treatment of play at Persian courts. He emphasizes the importance of play for medieval court culture. At Persian courts a distinction was made between mind games such as chess and backgammon, and physical games such as polo. The intriguing aspect of such treatments of games is that they are connected to pleasure and pastimes where a strong fear of gambling exists. The twelfth-century ruler of the Caspian Sea area, who wrote a "mirror for princes" book for his own son to instruct him on ideal conduct, warns the prince not to play for money. He says, "playing without money is playing for the mind, while playing for gold or silver is gambling." Afterwards, Seyed-Gohrab gives examples of the tensions between theological views on play and the popularity of various sorts of play at Persian courts such as chess, backgammon, literary riddles, and polo. While these are actual games in Persia, their poetic and aesthetic aspects are also discussed. For instance, many references are made to polo in an allegorical sense in which the polo ball becomes a metaphor for the head of the lover and the polo stick the hair of the beloved. Seyed-Gohrab concludes his article by dealing

with the notion of play in Islamic mysticism, especially in the works of the twelfth-century poet, Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār (d. 1220). In his works there are a wide range of compounds related to the word *bāzī* (play), which describe the lover's progress on the spiritual path. In Persian mysticism love is depicted as a game in which the tension between the esoteric and exoteric appreciations of faith is discussed. It is interesting to see how a Persian poet uses the notion of play in a wide range of contexts.

It is hard to understand the notion of game and its increasing popularity without a theoretical and philosophical framework. Moozhan Shakeri's contribution, entitled "Conviction or Evocation: On the Limits and Potentials of the Contemporary Concept of Values of Games," is a theoretical article about games and how they affect the way we think about reality. The increasing popularity of gaming in recent decades has given rise to many questions. For instance, is game a mere entertainment or does it fulfill a political purpose? Also, many games in the Iranian world are domesticated, relying on ancient Persian culture to inspire the game-inventing industry to create new games for political aims. Shakeri wonders whether this new function of game and play could be considered the "domestication, bastardization, and colonization of games and play." Do games and play in modern Iranian culture create a schism between the politics and functionality of gaming? Shakeri elaborates on the epistemic power relations in politics with regard to the position of game in Iran. Basing herself on medieval Persian philosophers such as Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, c. 980–1037) and Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (1201–74), who devoted their attention to the nature and working of imagination and materiality, introducing new notions to value art, she analyzes how such medieval works have added values for our understanding of the relationship between materiality and imagination, as well as how "narratives around instrumental and intrinsic values of art vis-à-vis science are shaped and evolved in Western and Persian philosophy." Is art inferior to science? What are instrumental values of art? How is art integrated in a culture beyond its aesthetic values? Shakeri postulates that this new notion of the value of art created a "middle ground between instrumental and intrinsic value of art as outlined by Greek philosophers. Instead of arguing for intrinsic value of art as individual aesthetic pleasure and

measuring the instrumental value of art against logic, these philosophers discussed how intrinsic values of art (the pleasure that the work of art would provide for its user) can have a spillover effect and be influential in shaping wider social impact by being an exercise in empathy and objectivity."

Games are enormously popular among Iranians. The reason for this huge popularity is a subject that deserves special attention, and I am hoping to devote attention to this in the coming years by launching new academic research. The large number of games going back to popular Persian literature such as Firdowsī's *Shāhnāma* is among the subjects to be examined. Such games are not only made to create a new identity for Persian speakers but are also sometimes used in a conflicting situation with foreign powers. The Islamic Republic of Iran creates its own games for a wide range of purposes. In her fascinating contribution, "Destruction Operation": Iranian-Made Digital Games of the Iran–Iraq war, Saeedeh Shahnahpur devotes her attention to the Iranian digital game industry, concentrating on the first encounter with Western-made games during the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88). She examines why the number of Iranian game players considerably increased between 1990 and 2000. The possible reasons for this burgeoning are diverse, ranging from the increase in personal computer ownership to the rise of internet and game cafés, the lack of copyright law in Iran, as Iran has never signed the Geneva convention, and the popularity of Western culture among Iranian youth. The popularity of Western games alarmed the Islamic Republic of Iran, which considered this a threat to Islamic revolutionary values. The strategy the government deployed was to start a *jang-e narm* or "soft war" to fight the erosion of the Islamic revolutionary identity, the Western cultural invasion, and the fight against the imperialist West. In 2002 the first Iranian-made digital game came on the market with the title *Driving in Tehran*, which was aimed at instructing its players how to drive a car in Iran. It was introduced and distributed by the Traffic Police or NAJA (a law enforcement agency in Iran). In 2006, the National Foundation of Computer Games started work. Shahnahpur gives a presentation on the Iran–Iraq war and how it was represented in Iran, stating that Ayatollah Khomeini (1900–1989) considered the war to be a battle between Islam and blasphemy, and that the war was called "Sacred Defence." Such

representations form the basis for the games made in Iran about the Iran–Iraq war. Several of these games depict military operations during the war. Ideal revolutionary heroes are fighting the invading Iraqi soldiers. In many of these games a revolutionary Shiite message is conveyed. The theme of martyrdom is central and visible in various kinds of symbolism. For instance, on the cover of a game the text is written in green and red, the colors of Islam and martyrdom. These are combined with national symbols such as the Iranian flag. The article also generates questions about why Iranian war games are popular in a country that has deep national traumas concerning war. Who are the players? How popular are the games made to fight Israel or the United States?

In his thought-provoking article, Siavash Rafiee Rad examines the role of language of identity politics in video games in Iran and how games are used not merely as pastimes but as a means to soft power. Rafiee Rad investigates the purposes of including historical events in games. A case study he analyzes is a game, made in the West, in which the 1979 Revolution is depicted. The game allows users to participate in a series of decision-making processes. He demonstrates how these games become sites of politics, with oppositional and even adversarial discourses on a wide range of subjects related to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Rafiee Rad argues that the language used is a discourse of a third space. The game pushes the player in a particular direction and there is only one right answer in this game. The game and the language are very ideological as they force the player to engage in their discourse. Foregrounded subjects are related to nostalgia, emotions, and political identity. Rafiee Rad maintains that gaming is intrinsic in the nature of individuals, reflecting the way one perceives the world. An interesting point he makes is that the development of video games has offered a smoother transition between the real and the virtual worlds through language, experience, and agency. The interactive structure of video games leads to social constructions in which certain political ideologies are generated in a third space. Here a hybridity of identities and discourses is created that may be regarded as "other(s)" and an identity as "us," reinforcing political ideologies. The article contributes to debates about the way history is depicted and how and whether a game is indeed openly conveying a political message to manipulate its players.

In his article entitled "Iranian Strategic Culture and 'Ways of War': The Role of Local Concepts and Narratives of 'Game' and 'Play'" Mohammadbagher Forough examines the role of concepts of game and play and their related terminology as metaphors for the "construction of the Iranian strategic culture," exploring how concepts deriving from Persian culture and literature are employed in political strategies of the Islamic Republic of Iran in her international relations. Forough identifies three sets of concepts, i.e., "(1) 'victorious underdog,' (2) the two concepts of 'stoic resistance' and 'heroic flexibility,' and (3) the three interrelated concepts of *sar-bāz* (soldier [lit. gambling with one's head]), *jān-bāz* (being a disabled war veteran [lit. gambling with one's life/soul]), and *shahādat* (martyrdom)." Forough demonstrates why understanding such cultural and literary concepts is indispensable to contextualizing Iranian strategic culture.

It is my honor and pleasure to express my gratitude to all those who participated in the conference, both colleagues who gave inspiring lectures and those who actively participated in discussions. Next to Sybille Lammes, whom I would like to thank profusely for her enthusiasm, collegiality, and intellectual vigor, I would like to thank Amin Ghodratzadeh for his infectious passion for this project. I hope that this special issue will be a first step toward a series of articles, chapters, and monographs on the role of play in Persian culture. I would like to warmly thank the editor, Dr. Alireza Korangy, for his ceaseless efforts, the reviewing rounds, and the splendid copy editing of these articles.

NOTES

1. J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949); first published 1944, repr. 1980), 1.

2. William H. Starbuck and Jane Webster, "When Is Play Productive?," *Accounting, Management and Information Technologies* 1, no. 1 (1991): 71–90; B. Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

3. Miquel Sicart, *Play Matters* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

4. Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004); Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (London: Routledge, 2008).