

# Order of play - disorder of the world

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## Abstract

In the course of society's evolution the way the distinction between *playful* and *serious* relates to other social distinctions has changed considerably, affecting the scope and significance of play as such. This paper analyses the relevance of play in modern society on the basis of its independence from other fields of life. Play's loss of relevance in modern society, we argue, is the condition to carry out its specific function – confirming and contradicting Huizinga's thesis about its marginalization.

## Play as variable universal

What has become of play in our “culture de loisir”<sup>1</sup>? Or rather: what has play become in a society of video games, the Internet, and virtuality present in almost every aspect of social life? Can we still rely on Johan Huizinga's analysis, or are updated tools required?<sup>2</sup>

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1 Edgar Morin, *Lesprit du temps 1* (Paris: Grasset, 1962), Chapter 6.

2 This way of asking the question goes beyond the thesis of an observer like Umberto Eco, who examined the legacy of *Homo ludens* 50 years ago – in a world that was different from that of 1938 more or less as it is different from today's world; see Umberto Eco, “‘Homo ludens’ oggi,” in *Homo ludens*, ed. Johan Huizinga (Torino: Einaudi, 1973), vii-xxvii. But our greater distance can maybe allow us to get closer to Huizinga's position than it was possible to Eco, in a time of prevailing structuralism and “engaged” theories. What for Eco is the main weakness of the book (which in Eco's opinion leads Huizinga to understand play reductively as “elegant and gentle sublimation”, *ibid.* XXVI) can in fact become today one of its most interesting aspects. It must be remembered that Huizinga, unlike Eco, referred indirectly to the discipline of sociology, which since Durkheim looks for social facts beyond the diversity of attitudes and motivations of individuals. It is not surprising then that a sociologist tends to deal (in the terms of Eco) more with *parole* than with *langue* (*ibid.*: XVII), more with behavior (that always changes) than with rules (which stay fixed) (*ibid.*: XIX). For this reason, in a time in which the Internet and the impact of digitization have profoundly changed the forms of play, in this perspective

Arguably lying at the argumentative core of *Homo Ludens*'s (1973 [1938]) main thesis, is a claim already uttered by Huizinga in the very first sentence of the book; that “play is older than culture” (3), and from certain perspectives might therefore even be more important thus.<sup>3</sup> Provided that culture, as Huizinga writes, “arises in ludic form, culture is first played” (55), is it not only possible but even necessary to “consider culture sub specie ludi” (8). But is this true? Is culture indeed play? Would it not be more appropriate to consider, more traditionally, that play is culture – that it rather expresses a society’s culture and belongs to it? Or could the entire issue also be approached differently?

The difference between these two approaches is very concrete. In the first case (culture is play), one tends to study the forms of play as such, its structures and its features, and then sees if and how different cultures realize them. In the second case (play is culture), one starts from cultures and looks for the ludic elements in them, which will inevitably differ. In truth, Huizinga mobilizes both perspectives, and this is the main ambiguity of his book (and perhaps the reason why it can still be useful today): on the one hand, Huizinga examines the characteristics of play as a universal form, independent of other features of culture; on the other hand, Huizinga observes how the relevance and the role of play have changed over the course of (social) evolution – until its marginalization from the 19th century onwards (225ss). And yet, the main question still stands: is play fundamental, or is it secondary? What remains of “culture” when it abandons its ludic components, and possible roots? Can we still speak of culture and of play, and in which sense?

Today’s theory of society can help us pose these questions in more complex and constructive ways. Niklas Luhmann introduced the influential notion of “functional differentiation” to indicate how modern society progressively distinguished autonomous forms of communication, each with their own rules and criteria, which belong to society, but articulate it in specific and not necessarily coordinated ways.<sup>4</sup> What changes with respect to previous society is not the separation of different fields (one and the same communication can belong simultaneously to science, law, economics, and so on), but the separation between different ways to observe the world and get information, each guided by a specific social distinction.<sup>5</sup> One of these is the ludic way, based on the distinction playful/serious that Huizinga identified and examined with much insight. Throughout the course of social evolution, from ancient pasts up to functional differentiation of the present, the relationship between these two notions - playful and serious - has changed substantially, affecting the scope and significance of play along the way. Play is still the same, and yet is also completely different, precisely because the way it affects society (and culture) as a whole is different, as well as the way society takes this differentiation into account.

The paper analyses the relevance of play in modern society on the basis of its independence from other fields of life. Play’s loss of function in modern society is the condition to carry out its function – confirming and contradicting Huizinga’s thesis about play’s increased marginalization.

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Huizinga’s theses have surprisingly little aged, and can still serve us to observe the practice of play in our society – performance rather than competence (ibid.: XVII).

3 I follow here Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens*, to which I am referring all the times in which I indicate a page number without further specifications. Page numbers refer to the Italian translation (Torino: Einaudi, 1973).

4 Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 743ff.

5 In the terminology of systems theory one speaks of codes; see Luhmann, *Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, 359ff.

## Reality of play

I will try to reconstruct Huizinga's analysis from the perspective of Niklas Luhmann's theory of society. The playful/serious-distinction has a number of characteristics that distinguishes it from other distinctions belonging to semantics (Huizinga would say to culture). First, it is an independent distinction, which cannot be traced back to other ones (9). For example wisdom/folly: the one who plays is not crazy, although he has unusual behaviors and follows a logic different from everyday life. Play instead reveals and produces its own specific skills and forms of wisdom. Play is also not located on only one side of the distinction between truth and falsehood, but rather relates to it in a somewhat complex way: either play is neither true nor false, or play is true and false at the same time. Within play, one deals with objects that do not exist in the "outside world" (pawns, roles, borders) but nevertheless have their own reality. The one who plays the king in the game is not actually a king in real life, but she does not lie or deceive anyone when she proclaims to be a king in this particular setting, because she expresses a specific truth in the reality of the game. Play is also independent from the distinction between good and evil: in the game, you can hit and kill without doing anything bad, and the ones who do not play are no better or worse than those who participate.

The playful/serious-distinction has the peculiar ability to create its own field, distinct from the areas in which other distinctions "normally" operate and as such presents a specific reflexivity that Huizinga perfectly described: within the distinction, "'playful' is the positive term, 'serious' is the negative term" (54), but not because play is good and seriousness bad, but because there is not much to say about seriousness. The concept is defined only antithetically as not-play. The side of play, on the other hand, is very diversified: there are many different plays and many different ways to play. The side of play, moreover, "is of a higher order than seriousness. Because 'seriousness' tries to exclude 'play', but 'play' can very well include seriousness" (54)<sup>6</sup>; you can play very seriously and, indeed, this is usually required.<sup>7</sup> Whoever does not take play seriously, is extremely annoying, even more than the ones cheating (15). Play, therefore, has a curious reflection capacity: it simultaneously requires from participants the ability to move "inside" (being serious) and "outside" it (knowing that it's a game), an ability which, as we shall soon see, becomes very relevant in such a reflexive society as the modern one.

Due to this reflexivity, play is also able to construct its own reality, with its own criteria and references, one that does not negate the "real" reality but, in a sense, adds to it as a different field, making the relationship with things and with the others more complex and multi-faceted.<sup>8</sup> Those who are not able to grasp this duplication are not able to play. It is a definite reality, delimited by clear borders in space and time (13): only on the soccer field can you not touch the ball with your hands. When you exit the field, you exit the game; the game has a beginning and an end. You can play again later, but still within the specific temporality of the game, separate from the normal time of life: what happens in real life between one match and another has no relevance. The time of play is suspended between the matches.

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6 Using distinction theory one would say that the distinction playful/serious re-enters its serious side. For the concept of re-entry see George Spencer-Brown, *Laws of Form* (New York: Julian Press, 1972), 69ff.

7 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1960, ed. 2010), 107f.

8 Niklas Luhmann, *Die Realität der Massenmedien* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), chapter 8.

These observations highlight a curious “metaphysical” dimension of play, which requires the ability to distance oneself from the real world without actually leaving it. Play is part of “real” reality as a particular field that is real in a different way and with different criteria. Indeed, within its borders play produces its own order, which is anything but flexible and approximate. From this point of view, play is not at all playful, but instead much more rigid than everyday life. As Huizinga argues, “[p]lay demands an order absolute and supreme” (14 - 10) and its rules are “absolutely binding and allow no doubts” (15 - 11). Here, the exception does not prove the rule but destroys the game (in soccer you do not touch the ball with your hands “once in a while” or “as a joke”). Participation in the game is free (you cannot be forced to play), but once you are inside, you give up every freedom and every distance.

Whoever accepts the game, must accept its rules without discussion and without skepticism, because the meaning of play lies in building a perfect order that opposes the imperfection and the intransparency of life and of the world (where the rules are not only more flexible, also you usually you do not even really know what the rules are). Whoever participates in the game knows it, and must be able to move at the same time in two different (but non-competing) orders: the ludic order, with its rules and its boundaries, and the real world, which continues to exist and includes the game. When the game is over, you go back to daily life. These two orders do not compete, because without real life, play could not exist, and the world does not become less real because you can also play. On the contrary: only if play exists, does the ordinary reality become “serious”, with all the consequences arising therefrom. Play makes the world more complex. It forces the world to produce an alternative order within itself and to observe itself from a different perspective.

## The order of the world and the game of distinctions

All this applies to play in any society and under any circumstances. What changes with the evolution of society are the meaning and the scope of the idea of “order”, as well as the relationship between the internal order of play and the order of society and the world. Huizinga therefore says that in modern society play is marginalized, just when the industry of entertainment and of the spectacle actually ramps up and seems to engulf the “serious” reality in the hypertrophy of “loisir”.<sup>9</sup> In pre-modern societies the order of play retained a degree of correlation with the order of nature and the cosmos: as Huizinga observes, in his magic dance the “savage” does not represent a kangaroo; in a sense he “is” a kangaroo (32-25). The distinction playful/serious was not yet entirely separate from other socio-cultural distinctions, and this held also for the relationships of the distinctions to one another.

In traditional societies, according to the scholastic maxim “iustum, bonum, verum et pulchrum convertuntur”- all these criteria were gathered in a single order in which the different perspectives mutually confirmed each other. It was expected that the distinction true/false, if used correctly, led to results that harmonized with those of the distinctions between beautiful/ugly, good/bad, or right/wrong – and they all, ultimately, confirmed a superior and unquestionable, pre-existing order. This order, although fundamentally inaccessible to humans, was the precondition for rationality of the world, and the meaningfulness of all distinctions. This was the order that was explored with divinatory procedures

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9 With the words of Morin, *L'esprit du temps*. See also Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1967).

which, according to this logic, were not irrational, but probed in specific areas and on the basis of codified practices an ultimate logic that humans could not fully understand.<sup>10</sup> Divination functioned as “ein in sich lernfähiger Zufallsmechanismus,”<sup>11</sup> which experimentally revealed the “necessity” that governed the world. By observing the flight of birds, or the shape of the livers of sacrificial animals, and by knowing how to interpret them, one could catch a glimpse of the underlying order of things, which the world events would then comply with.

The playful/serious-distinction belonged to this logic and also corresponded with the other distinctions, being subject to this ultimate order of things. From this point of view, play was not free: oracles, puzzles, tests in ordeals or other modes of divine judgment, were forms of play which had the extremely serious purpose of coordinating human affairs with the order of the cosmos. Therefore, they could be found in similar form in all areas of human activity. Play had a fundamental role, but one that had little to do with the gratuity we ascribe to it. As Huizinga describes, play was fundamental in law (ch. IV), not only because of its agonistic components (there are ones who win and ones who lose), but also for the use of oracles, gambling and various kinds of trials - from which the judge drew the elements that allowed him to make his decision, according to the ultimate principles of things.

The same happened in politics (in duels or battles: ch. V), in science (riddles and puzzles: ch. VI), and in art (mythical aspects of poetry and of visual arts: ch. VII and X). In the ordered world of traditional societies, the distinction playful/serious helped to articulating the other distinctions, which in turn supported and complemented one another. The ludic component of culture in Huizinga’s sense was not marginal, but actually played a central role in all aspects of life. One could also say, however, upon observing the same phenomena, that play itself did not have its own space and its autonomy – at least not in the form of free play which we tend to refer to. Play was everywhere, but not its playful nature.

The world of modern society, on the other hand, no longer has a single order but a multiplicity of orders which cannot (and should not) coordinate. Science, politics, art, religion, law, and politics each have their own criteria and priorities which influence each other but do not overlap because these distinctions are no longer coordinated. From the 19th century onwards, ludic criteria have become marginal in almost all spheres of social life (225-228). Not in the sense that they do not appear (a hearing in court still has a competitive component, as a scientific debate or an economic competition), but in the sense that they do not have consequences for subsequent developments. Science is based on the results of experiments, the law on codes, and the economy on the prices of products, rather than on the ability of participants to play skillfully.

And yet, in this apparent marginalization, play finds autonomy and its own identity: only in modern society does the “ludic world” become fully independent from other areas of society and free to experiment with its own criteria and rules. Play becomes free and no longer has a general social purpose – from which it can build its specific reality, its own order, truly autonomous from orders (now in the plural) that hold in other areas of society. The reality of play is no longer a part of the overall reality of the world (and no longer needs to be coordinated with it) but instead becomes an independent reality which “adds” to the world with

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10 Jean-Pierre Vernant, Léon Vandermeersch, Jacques Gernet et al., *Divination et Rationalité* (Paris: Seuil, 1974). Cf. Elena Esposito, “A Time of Divination and A Time of Risk: Social Preconditions for Prophecy and Prediction,” In *Selected Lectures of ‘Fate, Freedom and Prognostication’* (Käte Hamburger Center, Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg, 2011).

11 Luhmann, *Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, 237.

its references and its objects. In this sense, it can perform a specific function, the one we refer to when we observe the great (and often disturbing) relevance of entertainment in modern society.

## The importance of gratuitous play

Play, as we saw previously, must be free, in the sense that you cannot be forced to play without play losing its playful nature, and in the sense that play takes place in our “free” time. But the very meaning of “free time” has changed too. As Huizinga remarks (174), in ancient Greece “free time” - the time not required by public activities - was time of the highest quality, best dedicated to science and wisdom – or to play. Today’s free time is gratuitous (and basically irrelevant) time that we tend to neutralize with the big apparatus of entertainment.<sup>12</sup> Important things happen elsewhere, and in our free time, we play.

If you look at the role of play within the fundamental structures of society, our attitude cannot appear other than “childish” (240 ff.). On the one hand, we take play seriously<sup>13</sup>, as the growing professionalization of many ludic areas, from sports to entertainment, illustrates. On the other hand, seriousness tends to get playful (235), in the sense that we introduce playful elements into serious contexts, such as politics. These two developments seem to actuate a tricky situation, in which the distinction playful/serious can be perverted and the two sides of the dichotomy get confused. The boundary between what is serious and what is play becomes unclear. If this happens, one slides back into childishness, which means that a subject cannot manage the distinction anymore: one plays without a sense of humor, is ready to get angry and to argue because of a word or a small remark, mistrusting other players, getting offended, and feeling exalted.

So, is this the end of play? The distinction playful/serious, as we said above, is by its very nature reflexive. It requires the ability to look at it from the outside, to move simultaneously outside and inside the ludic order - to know that it is not the “real” reality, but to know at the same time that it has consistency and that its rules must be respected. Whoever confuses the two sides of the distinction (taking play seriously or “ludicizing” serious things) abandons this distance and loses the significance of the distinction. For example, when one complains that play is not important or that it is no longer relevant to the solving of life’s greatest questions (or vice versa, when one claims that life altogether is nothing but play)<sup>14</sup>. In authentic play one must play seriously, but the distinction as such can be neither playful nor serious.<sup>15</sup>

Play is gratuitous, and this is the basis of its function in modern society. It no longer has anything to do with the ultimate order of things, and does not serve to direct the operations of other fields - neither law nor science, nor politics, nor art, and not even religion (understanding sacraments as play would be to misconstrue their meaning). Play is not used for anything – but today this is precisely its function.

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12 Luhmann, *Die Realität der Massenmedien*, 71.

13 Which is different than playing seriously, that as we have seen is always required.

14 Edgar Morin’s “ludic conception of life”, in which play becomes “the orientation and the meaning of existence” (translated by the author), see Morin, *Lo spirito del tempo* (Roma: Meltemi, 2002), 98 and 105.

15 “Nicht der aus dem Spiel herausweisende Bezug auf den Ernst, sondern nur der Ernst beim Spiel läßt das Spiel ganz Spiel sein”: Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 108. But then play is serious and playful at the same time: one of the typical paradoxes generated in all cases in which a distinction applies to itself. The utterance “I am not serious” annihilates itself as much as the utterance “I am lying”.

Only in modern society does play possess “the permanence of the insignificant” (“la permanence de l’insignifiant”)<sup>16</sup> and can it carry out the great function of “Einübung in Kontingenz”.<sup>17</sup>

He who plays, must understand what is going on and *therefore* must respond on another level. The field’s border is only a line on the ground, the ball is only a rubber sphere that may very well fall on the ground, closed eyes can be opened at any time. But in play the border cannot be crossed, the ball must not fall, and eyes must be kept shut. Whoever plays, perceives real data as a gateway into another field in which different rules apply, and in this area she can experience possibilities that would not be available otherwise.

For example, in (literary) fiction (which can be accessed only if one agrees to “forget” that the characters do not exist and were invented by the author) one can have experiences that one will never have oneself and can empathize with the most different characters. The reader/viewer knows that the world of fiction is not true, and therefore falls in love and is frightened, cries, and laughs. If she remained at the level of first-order reality, there would not be anything interesting about it: why should one be concerned with invented stories of people who do not exist?

That the reality of play is independent of any other field of real life, and that it is therefore not directly relevant to science, politics, or the economy (today one does not marry the daughter of the king if one solves a riddle) allows the game to be the portal to a world of alternative possibilities, where individuals live roles and experiences that are not normally part of their lives – and are interesting precisely because they are not real and do not have real consequences. Individuals practice (einüben) contingency: they learn how to deal with things and situations that do not exist but could exist – knowing at the same time that real things and situations could be different, or are different for other people.

This confrontation with the openness of the possible is essential in a society filled with complexity and indeterminacy, one without a univocal order but with a multiplicity of concurring criteria. Play has a rigid and uncompromising order that one must accept precisely because it is not the ultimate order of things, experiencing that contingency is not the loss of any criterium, even if the criteria are provisional and local.<sup>18</sup> Play’s loss of function in modern society is the condition to carry out this function – confirming and contradicting Huizinga’s thesis on the marginalization of play.

Our society is increasingly a society of leisure and entertainment, because it has removed the serious connotation of play (which appears, when it appears, only as childishness). The seriousness of play has taken now the form of a paradox (“I’m not serious”: an assertion that needs to be taken seriously), i.e. of the confrontation with contingency and indeterminacy – a form as frivolous as (increasingly) irreducible. The sociological study of play is by no means exhausted, although it no longer finds its constraints in ethics (as Huizinga still thought, 250s.). Play is relevant not because it is part of the world, but precisely because it is not part of it, as in the enormous popularity of videogames, explicitly located in an

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16 Roger Caillois, *Les jeux et les hommes. Le masque et le vertige* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), 125.

17 Walter Haug, “Kontingenz als Spiel und das Spiel mit der Kontingenz. Zufall, literarisch, im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit”, in *Kontingenz. Poetik und Hermeneutik XVII*, ed. Gerhart von Graevenitz and Odo Marquard (München: Fink, 1998), 151-172, quote: 167.

18 In another game different rules apply, as Wittgenstein very effectively showed. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. Gertrude Elisabeth Margaret Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), German edition: *Philosophische Untersuchungen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), § 66.

increasingly complex and articulated virtual reality, shows<sup>19</sup>. Virtual reality is not just “fake”: inside it, people act, fight, and contribute to building a world they will have to face. It is not a reality invented by someone, but a field of possibilities available to users, a field of “interactivity” that depends on their behavior, just like “real” reality, even if it remains gratuitous. The study of culture “sub specie ludi” becomes the study of experimentation with contingency as such, which continues to reveal a lot about society’s confrontation with itself.

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19 It is difficult to overestimate the importance of play in the digital world: PCs started initially with machines to play like Commodore and Atari, and the spread of the web was driven from participation in videogames. Competition with or through a machine, however, has peculiar features that require a specific study.