



Playful Identities

*The Ludification of
Digital Media Cultures*



EDITED BY VALERIE FRISSEN,
SYBILLE LAMMES, MICHIEL DE LANGE,
JOS DE MUL, JOOST RAESSENS

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1. Homo ludens 2.0: Play, media, and identity

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

Immense est le domaine du jeu.

Émile Benveniste

Foreplay

A playful specter is haunting the world. Since the 1960s, when the use of the word “ludic” became popular in both Europe and the US to designate playful behavior and artifacts, playfulness has become increasingly a mainstream characteristic of modern and postmodern culture. In the first decade of the 21st century we can even speak of the global “ludification of culture” (Raessens 2006; 2014). Perhaps the first thing that comes to mind in this context is the immense popularity of computer games, which, as far as global sales are concerned, have already outstripped Hollywood movies. In the US, 8- to 18-year-olds play on average an hour and a half daily on consoles, computers and handheld gaming devices, including mobile phones (Rideout et al. 2010, 2-3). This is by no means only a Western phenomenon. In South Korea, for example, about two-thirds of the country’s total population frequently plays online games, turning computer gaming into one of the fastest growing industries and a key driver for the Korean economy (Jin 2012).¹

Although perhaps most visible, computer game culture is only one manifestation of the process of ludification that seems to penetrate every cultural domain (Neitzel and Nohr 2006). In our present experience economy, for example, playfulness not only characterizes leisure time (fun shopping, game shows on television, amusement parks, playful computer, Internet, and smartphone use), but also those domains that used to be serious, such as work (which should above all be fun nowadays), education (serious gaming), politics (ludic campaigning), and even warfare (computer games like war simulators and interfaces). According to Jeremy Rifkin, “play is becoming as important in the cultural economy as work was in the industrial economy” (2000, 263).² Postmodern culture has been described as “a game without an overall aim, a play without a transcendent destination” (Minnema 1998, 21).

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman maintains that human identity has even become a playful phenomenon. In ludic culture, he argues, playfulness is no longer restricted to childhood, but has become a lifelong attitude: “The mark of postmodern adulthood is the willingness to embrace the game whole-heartedly, as children do” (Bauman 1995, 99).

The focus of this volume is on the complex relationship between play, media, and identity in contemporary culture. The chapters in this book investigate, from different perspectives, the role that digital information and communication technologies play in the ludification of personal and cultural identity. The focus on (new) media is not only motivated by the dominant role that digital media play in our present culture, but also by the intuition that “play is central [...] to media experience” (Silverstone 1999, 63; cf. Thimm 2010).

In this introductory chapter, we analyze these three interconnected phenomena that constitute the subject of this volume, offering a conceptual background that enables the reader to situate the contributions to this volume. This introductory chapter consists of three main sections, which correspond to the three parts of this volume, devoted to play, media, and identity.

With regard to the dimension of play in this triad, our starting point is the theory of play developed by Johan Huizinga in his famous 1938 book *Homo ludens*. It is not without reason that *Homo ludens* is regarded as a classic in the study of play. Although published more than seventy-five years ago, Huizinga’s central claim, that culture and civilization “arises *in* and *as* play, and never leaves it” (1955, 173), still offers a fruitful framework for the study of the ludification of human identity in our contemporary media landscape, or *playland* as Kenneth Gergen calls it in this book. This claim has found wide acclaim. Thanks to recently developed fields like game and leisure studies, we can even speak of a Huizinga-renaissance. However, we argue that in order to apply Huizinga’s theory of play to the world of digital technologies, *Homo ludens* needs a serious “update” because play and technology are almost complete opposites for Huizinga.

In this introductory chapter we will update *Homo ludens* to a “2.0” version that goes beyond the opposition between contemporary play and technologies. In the section on media, we will use the insights from leading scholars in the domains of New Media and Game Studies to substantiate this position further by focusing on the playful dimension of digital technologies. We argue here that both media explicitly designed for play, such as computer games, as well as digital technologies in general, have an inherent ludic dimension. This dimension is closely connected with medium-specific qualities like multimodality, virtuality, interactivity, and connectivity.

In the last section of this chapter, the emphasis lies on the role that these ludic technologies play in the construction of personal and cultural identities. Here the vantage point is Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity. According to this theory, narrative is not only an appropriate metaphor for human identity, but human beings actually construct their identity through stories, ranging from explicit biographies and autobiographies to fictional accounts of human life in novels. In light of the aforementioned ludification of digital culture, we propose to supplement Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity with a theory of *ludic identity construction* that explains how both play and games are currently appropriate metaphors for human identity, as well as the very means by which people reflexively construct their identity.

Phrases like “self-construction” and “construction of cultural identity” might suggest that this process is fully controlled by an autonomous subject. Evidently, this is not the case. The fact that “the self” is not something given, but a construction, does not necessarily imply that the self is the (main) constructor. Commercialization, globalization, and technological homogenization mold the subject's self-construction to the logic of an external system. As the chapters in this volume will demonstrate in more detail, practices of reflexive identity construction constantly take place in a tension between communicative action and commercialization, between localization and globalization, and between heterogenization and homogenization.³

Play

Viewing man and world *sub specie ludi* is of course not a new phenomenon. Already early in Western thought, Heraclitus speculated that “the course of the world is a playing child moving figures on a board – the child as absolute ruler of the universe” (Sprague 2001). Ludic accounts of man and the world have been formulated at all times and in all cultures. In Western culture we can witness an important development during the past two centuries. Whereas the Enlightenment did not show a deep interest in play, the Romantic movement heralded a new fascination for this phenomenon. Friedrich Schiller – who can be regarded as the founding father of contemporary ludology – even considered the play drive as the core of humanity since it enables man to reconcile necessity and freedom. As he famously phrased it in *On the aesthetic education of man*: “Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and *he is only wholly Man when he is playing*” (Schiller 2004, 80). Alongside reasoning (*Homo sapiens*) and making

(*Homo faber*), playing (*Homo ludens*) now advanced to the center of attention. Philosophers including Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Gadamer, Marcuse, Deleuze, and Derrida (most of them considered as forerunners or representatives of postmodern culture), followed the ludological footprints of Heraclites and Schiller in their attempts to transform the modern, predominantly rationalistic and utilitarian ontology and anthropology (Axelos 1964; cf. Minnema 1998). Moreover, play and games have gained strong attention in the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. One can think, for example, of the implementation of *game theory* in biology (Sigmund 1993), economics (Neumann and Morgenstern 1944; Leonard 2010), and cultural anthropology (Bateson 1955; 1977). In addition to the increased interest in play and games in these already existing disciplines, in the last decades – motivated by the substantial growth of leisure time and the growth of ludo-industry and ludo-capitalism (Dibbell 2008) – several new fields entirely devoted to the study of play and (computer) games have emerged (cf. Mitchell et al. 1934; Avedon and Sutton-Smith 1971; Raessens and Goldstein 2005; Mäyrä 2008; Ritterfeld, Cody and Vorderer 2009; Fuchs et al. 2014).

As mentioned above, one of the most foundational works in the contemporary study of play is Johan Huizinga's *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. This book, first published in Dutch in 1938 and later translated into many other languages, can even be considered as “the key modernist statement on play” (Motte 2009, 26). “Richly suggestive and admirably broad in scope, it provides the first full-blown theory of ludics, and it remains moreover, seven decades after it first appeared, an inevitable point of reference for any ‘serious’ discussion of play” (ibid., 26).

The book is still so impressive because of its grand ambition and scope. Already the book's subtitle – “a study of the play-element of culture”²⁴ – and foreword make it clear that Huizinga's ambition is no less than to offer a genealogy that explains how “civilization arises and unfolds in and as play” (Huizinga 1955, foreword). In the second to the last chapter – “Western Civilization *Sub Specie Ludi*” – Huizinga summarizes his argument:

It has not been difficult to show that a certain play-factor was extremely active all through the cultural process and that it produces many of the fundamental forms of social life. The spirit of playful competition is, as a social impulse, older than culture itself and pervades all life like a veritable ferment. Ritual grew up in sacred play; poetry was born in play and nourished on play; music and dancing were pure play. Wisdom and philosophy found expression in words and forms derived from religious

contests. The rules of warfare, the conventions of noble living were built up on play-patterns. We have to conclude, therefore, that civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come *from* play like a babe detaching itself from the womb: it arises *in* and *as* play, and never leaves it (ibid., 173).

This summary explicates that *Homo ludens* is not primarily a study of play or games, but rather “an inquiry into the creative quality of the play principle in the domain of culture” (Caillois 2001, 4). The first chapter of Huizinga’s book offers a definition of the phenomenon of play, which has been quoted in almost every book on play and games that has been published since.⁵

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not meant”⁶, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means (Huizinga 1955, 13).

Let us elucidate the six elements of this definition. First, like Schiller and the Romantics before him, Huizinga defines play as an *expression of human freedom* vis-à-vis both nature and morality (ibid., 7-8). Play, like beauty in nature and art, to which it is closely related, is *disinterested*, distinct from ordinary life, “it contains its own course and meaning” and presents itself as an “intermezzo, an *interlude* in our daily lives” (ibid., 9). Playing is “non-serious”⁷ in the sense that it is not characterized by our daily concern for food, shelter, and everything else fragile beings like us need in order to survive. Play takes place “outside and above the necessities and seriousness of everyday life” (ibid., 26). We could also say that play is beyond *profane* seriousness. However, this does not exclude the fact that the activity of playing requires total devotion from the player. Playing is not merely “fun”, but earnest, even “holy earnest” (ibid., 23). For Huizinga, this is not (merely) a figurative expression: “In all its higher forms the latter [human play] at any rate always belongs to the sphere of festival and ritual – the sacred sphere” (ibid., 9). In order to distinguish this kind of intrinsic, sacred earnestness from profane seriousness we might call it *sacred seriousness* (on the relation between spirituality and play, see Stef Aupers’ chapter in this volume).

Second, playing is “not meant”, it refers to an activity of “just pretending”. The thing represented in play is not real. Playing is only acting *as if*, pretending. Huizinga calls this “the consciousness that it [play] is ‘different’ from ‘ordinary life’” (ibid., 28).

Third, play is not only immersive in the sense that it is absorbing the player intensely; this state of mind is also “accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy” (ibid.). According to Huizinga, the “play-mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth and relaxation follow” (ibid., 132).

Fourth, play is distinct from ordinary life both in terms of locality and duration. It is characterized by specific *limits of time and space*: The *magic circle* (“tovercirkel”) of play is not only a spatial circle, but a temporal one as well.⁸ It also takes place *in* and *as* what we might call a *magic cycle*: “It can be repeated at any time, whether it be ‘child’s play’ or a game of chess, or at fixed intervals like a mystery. In this faculty of repetition lies one of the most essential qualities of play” (Huizinga 1955, 10).

Fifth, the *rules* that constitute the play-world are crucial to the concept: “All play has its rules. They determine what ‘holds’ in the temporary world circumscribed by play. The rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow no doubt” (ibid., 11).⁹ “As soon as the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses” (ibid.). Whereas the cheater still pretends to play and in doing so still acknowledges the magic circle and cycle, “the player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a ‘spoil-sport’” (ibid.).

Sixth, play “creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection” (ibid., 10). Play is “indispensable for the well-being of the community, fecund of cosmic insight and social development” (ibid., 25).

As Huizinga considers play to be a “primary category of life” (ibid., 3), the play-definition presented in the first chapter of *Homo ludens* has a universal ring. Huizinga explicitly claims that “all peoples play, and play remarkably alike” (ibid., 28)¹⁰, and he distinguishes two basic forms of play: “The two ever-recurrent forms in which civilization grows in and as play are the sacred performance and the festal contest” (Huizinga 1955, 48). In *Les jeux et les hommes* (1958), a critical elaboration of Huizinga’s work, Roger Caillois presents a typology consisting of four categories. In addition to the two forms mentioned by Huizinga, including “sacred performance”, which Caillois terms simulation (*mimicry*), ranging from children’s imitation play to theater, and “festal contest”, or competition (*agôn*), referring to free play, regulated sports, contests, and so on, Caillois also distinguishes chance

(*alea*), as we find it, for example, in counting-out rhymes and lotteries, and vertigo (*ilinx*), ranging from merry-go-round “whirling” to mountain climbing. Crosscutting this classification of game types Caillois discerns two play attitudes: *paidia* and *ludus*. *Paidia* refers to “free play”, improvisation, carefree gaiety and laughter, and spontaneous, impulsive, joyous, and uncontrolled fantasy. *Ludus* on the other hand disciplines and enriches *paidia*, since it refers to “gaming”, more explicitly rule-governed forms of play that often involve specific skills and mastery.¹¹ In each of the four categories, play phenomena are located somewhere between the poles of *paidia* and *ludus*. However, *agôn* and *alea* lean towards the pole of *ludus*, while *ilinx* and *mimicry* tend to lean more towards *paidia*. Taken together, these two classifications are useful tools for the analysis of the ludification of contemporary culture.¹²

Before directing our attention to the playful dimension of contemporary information and communication technologies, we have to return to Huizinga’s historical analysis for a moment. Although he emphasizes that all culture “arises and unfolds in and as play”, he does not claim that cultures always *keep* playing. Echoing the pessimistic tone of Spengler’s *The decline of the West* (1991)[1918-1923], Huizinga argues that cultures are most playful in their youth, and gradually become more serious and lose their playfulness as they grow more mature (Huizinga 1955, 75). For Huizinga, Romanticism was the last period in Western culture that exhibited a playful spirit, while in the 19th century, society “seems to leave little room for play” (*ibid.*, 191). And in the dark-toned last chapter of the book, on the play element in 20th century culture, Huizinga states that the play element in culture is “on the wane”: “civilization to-day is no longer played” (*ibid.*, 206).

Huizinga acknowledges that this observation seems to be at odds with the fact that sports and popular culture have become major industries in 20th century culture. However, he discerns two contradictory tendencies with regard to the relationship of play and seriousness that in his view lead to a blurring of boundaries between both play and (profane) seriousness. On the one hand, when referring to professional sports, Huizinga claims play has become more and more serious thereby resulting in a loss of playfulness (*ibid.*, 199; cf. Raessens 2009, 86). On the other hand, he claims that we are witnessing a growing playfulness in the sphere of profane seriousness. For example, he points out in commercial competition: “Sport and athletics showed us play stiffening into seriousness but still being felt as play; now we come to serious business degenerating into play but still being called serious” (*ibid.*, 199).

These developments do not lead so much to a more playful culture, but are instead expressions of cheating – “false play” – and for that reason are undermining (playful) culture as such (ibid., 206). This assertion is actually debated by René Glas later in this volume. According to Huizinga, there are several “external factors independent of culture proper” (ibid., 199) that are responsible for the decay of playful culture. He especially refers to the *global commercialization of culture*¹³ and the emergence of *puerilism*: a “blend of adolescence and barbarity which has been rampant all over the world for the last two or three decades” (ibid., 205) that have been “caused or supported by the technology of modern communication” [“veroorzaakt of in de hand gewerkt door de techniek van het moderne geestelijk verkeer”] (Huizinga 1950, 237).¹⁴ In this culture, characterized by an “insatiable thirst for trivial recreation and crude sensationalism, the delight in mass meetings, mass-demonstrations, parades etc.” he finds a “[complete lack of] humour, the very idea of decency and fair play” (Huizinga 1955, 205).

We should not forget that Huizinga wrote these bitter words in 1938, with the disconcerting memories of the First World War still fresh, and in terrifying anticipation of the no less outrageous barbarisms of the emerging fascist movements. However, in our view, Huizinga’s pessimism is not only motivated by the historical context, but points at real contradictions in his argument. If we want to use Huizinga’s penetrating insights into play as a fundamental category of life to gain a deeper understanding of the ludification of contemporary, strongly mediated culture, we first have to come to terms with these contradictions, which point at the fundamental ambiguities of the play phenomenon itself.

Despite its inspiring insights, *Homo ludens* still puzzles the reader because of its many contradictions and ambiguities. Let us mention the four most important ones. First, Huizinga presents play as being both *reality and appearance*. On the one hand, he sees play as a key dimension in human life and even maintains that culture is only possible in and as play. On the other hand, he argues that play entirely takes place outside everyday life and is nothing more than a disinterested “*interlude*” (ibid., 9). While play is “indispensable for the well-being of the community, fecund of cosmic insight and social development”, it is at the same time only pretending, “make-believe” (ibid., 25) – and for that reason is inconsequential to real life. Because of its reality, we play “holy earnest”, yet our play is completely non-serious. Second, play is both *freedom and force*. According to Huizinga, play is a celebration of human freedom, yet he is of the opinion that it “casts a spell over us” because it demands our complete maddening absorption (ibid., 10).¹⁵ For a critique of this idea, see Gordon Calleja’s chapter in this

volume. Conversely, although the rules of the game are “absolutely binding”, players are also constantly breaking these rules. Third, games are both *determined and changing*. Huizinga emphasizes that the rules of a game are absolute, and at the same time *Homo ludens* is above all a historical narrative about the never-ending transformation of play into various cultural forms. Fourth, play is both an *individual and collective* activity. Although the player is absorbed in his own private play-world, in most cases he plays with or against other players in a shared play-world, often before an audience. Even when one plays a solitary game, it is played before an imagined audience.¹⁶ Moreover, in the case of *mimicry*, the player is pretending to be someone else by creating a community of personae within himself.¹⁷

Scholars such as Jacques Ehrmann (1968) and Warren Motte (2009) have also pointed out these ambiguities. They have criticized Huizinga for being entangled in contradictions. According to Ehrmann, the “hierarchical dichotomy”, in which play is understood as a *representation* of a reality existing prior to and independent from play, is highly problematic, as “there is no ‘reality’ (ordinary or extraordinary!) outside of or prior to the manifestations of the culture that expresses it” (Ehrmann 1968, 33). However, Ehrmann’s alternative – “Play, reality, culture are synonymous and interchangeable” (ibid., 56) – is equally problematic since in this case these concepts completely lose their distinctive meaning. And, as Huizinga rightly observes, in our lives we constantly use distinctions as the one between play and non-play. Every culture is based on fundamental distinctions, such as those between nature and culture, profane and sacred, life and death, male and female, good and evil, freedom and constraint (Oudemans and Lardinois 1987, 31). Although these distinctions have a natural basis, they are not simply a given, they are (at least partly) historically and culturally variable constructions (de Mul 2004, 146-52). And often we find ourselves in the uncanny, and sometimes tragic, situation in which we cannot distinguish sharply between these opposites, because things are fundamentally ambiguous or because both opposites turn out to be the case (de Mul 2009).

Moreover, we are often confronted in the case of play with fundamental ambiguities. Sometimes, in case of dangerous sports or war, it is difficult to distinguish between play and seriousness. Or, in the case of game or gambling addiction, between freedom and force. However, within the “separative cosmology” that characterizes modern thinking, including Huizinga’s analysis, in the last analysis these ambiguities have no place and have to be exorcized. But in his constant, almost ritual opposing of play and non-play (reality, utility, seriousness, etc.), Huizinga cannot avoid

becoming entangled in the insoluble conceptual tensions that we have pointed out above (cf. Motte 2009, 25-6).

Yet, Motte points to the fact that Huizinga, at several places in *Homo ludens*, shows a greater sensitivity towards the “ambiguity of play” (cf. Sutton-Smith 1997, and Jos de Mul’s contribution to this volume) than Ehrmann attributes to him. For example, in the last chapter of *Homo ludens*, Huizinga acknowledges that “play can be cruel and bloody and, in addition, can often be false play. [...] War and everything to do with it remains fast in the daemonic and magical bonds of play” (Huizinga 1955, 208-9). And in the same chapter of his book, Huizinga even – reluctantly – acknowledges the blurring of play and profane seriousness in modern culture. However, just because of the aforementioned “separative drive”, Huizinga is not able to explain *that* and *how* culture (sacred seriousness) and ordinary life (profane seriousness) can merge *in* and *as* play. Eugen Fink offers an intriguing ontology of play in *Spiel als Weltsymbol* (1960). He maintains that we cannot arrive at such an explanation as long as we stick to the modernist dichotomy of – on the level of attitude – play and seriousness, and – on the ontological level – play and reality (Fink 1968, 19). If we want to grasp this ontological meaning, we should realize that human play never really occurs outside everyday reality. Huizinga is right that the world of play has its own kind of reality. However, the building blocks of the play-world – the playing field, the other players, play objects – are at the same time part of our everyday reality. What distinguishes playing from more serious modes of being on the one hand, and sheer fantasy on the other hand, is that the player is *simultaneously* in the ordinary world and in the play-world. Moreover, as Huizinga acknowledges explicitly, in the playful experience the child, sportsman, and actor are all *aware* of being in both worlds simultaneously (Huizinga 1955, 18).

Here again, the play-experience is very close to aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is characterized by a similar double experience. When we watch a horror movie, and are fully immersed in the narrative, we may experience intense fear. At the same time, however, we know that what we are seeing is “just a movie”, “only as if”. In psychoanalytical terms we can say that the aesthetic experience requires an ego-split that enables us to have two contradictory experiences at once, e.g. the vampire in the movie is experienced as both real and non-real.¹⁸ This ambiguous, double experience is connected with human reflexivity, the fact that human beings not only experience, but are also, and at the same time, able to experience their experience. In the terminology of Plessner’s philosophical anthropology: human experience is simultaneously centric and eccentric, in one word:

(*ec*)centric. Being (ec)centric not only implies that we can go beyond our private experience and imagine ourselves in someone else's experience, but also that we can mask ourselves and play different roles in social life. However, at the same time we also remain immersed in our own experiences (Plessner 1975, 288ff.; cf. de Mul 2003, 247-66). As a consequence, when we engage into playful activities, we do not, as Huizinga and Caillois suggest, step outside the everyday world into the magic circle of the play-world, but we intentionally and explicitly play with the double existence that characterize human life. As Eugen Fink explains:

The player who participates in a game executes in the real world an action of a familiar type. Within the context of the internal meaning of play, however, he is taking over a role. Here we must distinguish between the real man who "plays" and the man created by the role within the play. The player hides his real self behind his role and is submerged in it. He lives *in* his role with a singular intensity, and yet not like the schizophrenic, who is unable to distinguish between "reality" and "illusion". The player can recall himself from his role; while playing, man retains a knowledge of his double existence, however greatly reduced this knowledge may be. Man exists in two spheres simultaneously, not for lack of concentration or out of forgetfulness, but because this double personality is essential to play (Fink 1968, 23).

We might further elucidate this double experience of play by referring to Gregory Bateson's analysis of play. According to Bateson, play combines communication and meta-communication (Bateson 1955). Play is always accompanied by the signal "it's just play" or "it's only a game". We already witness this in higher animals, for example, when two dogs are playfully biting each other. When we play, we can enthusiastically immerse ourselves in the play-world, while at the same time keeping an ironic distance towards our playful behavior, which just for that reason can be termed "playful".

This double character of play has several important implications for a correct understanding of the phenomenon of play. In the first place, Huizinga's remark that play creates order acquires a deeper meaning. The order created by play is not so much a temporary order completely outside or beyond everyday reality, but rather a layer of meaning that *during* play is superimposed on everyday reality. That is why we can call the act of playing a "medium" between us and the world outside us in which lived experience is organized as a meaningful whole (cf. Rodriquez 2006). In the act of play, profane reality is enriched by a layer of sacred seriousness.

Augmented reality before technology! But it is just because it is part of our condition to add new layers to our experiences that human experience is so susceptible to all kinds of technological add-ons.

A second implication of the double character of play is that, just because the immersion in the play-world is always accompanied by the experience that “it’s just play”, the rules that guide the play are necessarily experienced as being contingent, flexible, and changeable. Just because we are both inside and outside the magic circle, we are able to reflect on the rules as “just play rules” and can modify them if we want to. This is in sharp contrast with Huizinga’s emphasis on the absolute character of rules. Moreover, playing *with* the rules is inherent to many forms of play. We already see in child’s play that playing with the rules – “Now I’m policeman and you are the naughty boy” – is an important part of the fun.

In addition, in children’s play the boundaries of the magical circle (and magical cycle) are rather fuzzy. Where exactly are the spatial boundaries located for children’s play-world? When exactly does children’s play begin or end? And this also counts for many other playful situations, like playing with your pen while making a telephone call, flirting with someone on a train, or joining a pervasive game (Montola 2005; de Lange 2009). The flexibility and changeability of games cannot only be discerned at the micro level (e.g. small changes in the rules of soccer), but also on the macro level. Entirely new domains of playfulness may be disclosed, for example funshopping or serious gaming.

Connecting to the flexibility of play, Lourens Minnema provides an interesting explanation for the growing interest in play in 19th and 20th century culture. Following Luhmann, Minnema points to the fact that since the Modern Age Western culture has transformed the so far hierarchically stratified structure of society into a functionally differentiated structure, consisting of many substructures, such as politics, economy, law, education, science, technology, and art, which each possess relative autonomy and have their own specific roles and rules. This causes a much higher level of societal complexity and flexibility. According to Minnema, the 20th century fascination for play and games is strongly connected with this societal development. We see our postmodern culture “as a complex of games each one having its own framework, its own rules, risks, chances, and charms” (Minnema 1998, 21). Play becomes a *rite de passage*, a room for new (re) combinations of actions and thoughts, a database of alternative models for living (Turner 1969).¹⁹ However, unlike premodern and modern rites, postmodern rites no longer seem to have a clearly demarcated transformational (liminal) period, but have become a never-ending (liminoid) phenomenon,

an integral part of the socio-economic, cultural and multimedial systems (cf. Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1982).

When we speak about the ludification of culture we are confronted with the question whether this ludification consists in an increase in playful activities or rather a transformation in perspective, in which we use play as a metaphor to understand entities and domains that in themselves are not necessarily considered playful. We think both answers are correct. On the one hand, and contrary to what Huizinga claims, Western culture has witnessed a remarkable revival of the “ludic worldview” since the Romantic movement, with Huizinga’s *Homo ludens* being one of the fruits of this development. On the other hand, this change in perspective has also generated the development of all kinds of new ludic attitudes, practices, and objects, which in turn stimulate the ludification of our worldview. In principle, no single “serious domain” within human life is exempt from “ludification”. This even applies to the “serious domain” that Huizinga considered to embody the very decay of playfulness: modern technology.

Ludic media technologies

Not only Huizinga’s claim that the ludic worldview has disappeared since the beginning of the 19th century is debatable, the same goes for his claim that play and technology are incompatible. Media archaeologist Erkki Huhtamo provides a telling example of the interconnectedness of play and technology. According to Huhtamo, “the introduction of large-scale machine production [in the 19th century] was accompanied by an avalanche of different devices that provided amusement, including game-play” (2005, 3). These so-called “slot machines” prepared the ground for the introduction of computer games in the early 1960s. Moreover, we assert that in our contemporary culture, deeply entrenched with digital technologies, play is the key feature for understanding this culture and “playful technologies” are the very means by which we – as we will see in the next section – reflexively construct our identity.

When we talk about the medium-specific ludic characteristics of digital information and communication technologies, we by no means refer to a set of essentialist qualities (see the chapter by Daniel Cermak-Sassenrath in this volume). As we argued above, playfulness does not reside in a single characteristic, but should rather be understood as a set of characteristics that can appear in activities in various more or less overlapping combinations.²⁰ The question is what affordances (and limitations) for play are being