Playful Identities

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Hurray for *Homo ludens 2.0*

In the introductory chapter of this volume we proclaimed a global “ludification of culture” and have argued that playful technologies, which have been embraced worldwide with great enthusiasm in the past decades, have profoundly affected our identities. We have demonstrated how our narrative identity, as part and parcel of a centuries-old book culture, has in the past decades been complemented, and even partly replaced by, more playful types of identities. The subsequent chapters in this volume have analyzed and interpreted *Homo ludens 2.0* by focusing on the different dimensions of our new state of play from a variety of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives.

However, as we have argued with Huizinga in Chapter 1, narrative and play are no real opposites, because narrative itself can also be understood as a particular form of play. For that reason the “ludification of identity” in contemporary digital culture should be regarded as an extension of the playful dimension of human life rather than as a radical change. Taking Caillois’ division once more in mind, we might say that whereas narrative, as it has been developed in writing culture, is predominantly bound to *mimicry*, the digital technologies that play an important role in the construction of playful identities complement this mimetic dimension with *agon*, *alea*, and *ilinx*. As playful identities, we play many different “games” in the various domains of our everyday lives. Unlike Huizinga, who considered play and technology as complete opposites, we have shown that technologies, although they may be partly developed for dealing with “the necessities and seriousness of everyday life”, nevertheless often spring from, and afford all kinds of, playful behavior. And if we look at the enthusiasm with which literally billions of people use their smartphones, tablets, and game consoles, it does not seem to be an exaggeration to assume that technology has even become one of the main domains of the ludification of our culture and identity.
Although several authors in this volume have made critical remarks about the ludification of our culture and identities, the book's primary objective was not an evaluation of this phenomenon from a normative point of view. Our main aim was to understand how the construction of playful identities through ludic media technologies takes place. Although we will not offer a detailed normative judgment in this “afterplay”, we will also not finish our adventurous journey through “Playland” without reflecting on some of the advantages and disadvantages of play for life.

So as not to disappoint the reader, let us make clear from the start that we do not intend to offer a univocal affirmation or rejection of the ludification of culture and identity. The choice to steer clear from such an absolute verdict is by no means primarily motivated by wanting to play our “scholarly game” according to the rules of academia, and for that reason aim at as balanced and nuanced an evaluation as possible. Instead the main reasons for this are related to the diverse character of the play phenomenon itself. Play is versatile and exists in an immense variety of types and forms, as well as appearing in an extensive variety of contexts. It is telling that Wittgenstein took the word “play” (Spiel) as his key example in his argument against essentialist definitions of words (1986, 31-2; cf. note 10 in Chapter 1).

Because of its immense variety, the play phenomenon is surrounded by a diversity of theoretical discourses. Brian Sutton-Smith distinguishes in his book The ambiguity of play no less than seven different “rhetorics”, which respectively approach play from the perspective of progress, fate, power, identity, imaginary, self and frivolity. In these rhetorics we recognize many of the characteristics of play that we came across in the theories of other play scholars like Huizinga and Caillois. Sutton-Smith emphasizes that “each rhetoric applies primarily to a distinct kind of play or playfulness [and to] a distinct kind of players” (Sutton-Smith 1997, 15). Discussions about the value of play are so often confusing because the participants depart from different rhetorics, and refer to different kinds of play and players.

Because of this book’s focus on identity, most of the contributions in this volume were situated in the rhetorics of self and identity, and as a result the authors have predominantly (though not exclusively) discussed kinds of play and players that are most relevant for these types of rhetorics. However, even this delineated focus does not lead to a more univocal judgment. In the introductory chapter we have pointed to the fact that play is not only characterized by immense variety, but by fundamental ambiguities as well. Considered from a normative point of view, these ambiguities are related to as fundamental ambivalences. In Chapter 1 we argued that playful identity construction in the digital domain is an activity in which
reality and appearance, freedom and force, determination and change, and individuality and collectivism are interconnected in complex, changeable, and often confusing ways. These ontological ambiguities and normative ambivalences often confuse our desire to get to grips with the ultimate value of the playful dimension of our lives. The same applies to ludic technologies, which are hardly ever exclusively good or bad for us. If this is simultaneously the case, ludic technologies can be called sublime (cf. de Mul 2012). Just as in the case of mountain climbing – the mother of romantic ilinx – ludic technologies have the power to lift us above the trivialities of everyday life, but this elevation is never without risk, and the higher we climb the greater the risks involved. Although most ludic technologies do not bring us in peril of death, they always carry the risk of aggression, alienation, addiction, commodification, and escapism, to mention just some of the possible negative effects. You simply cannot have the benefits without the costs.

However, just as modern theories and interpretations of reality often tend to be dichotomist and one-sided (cf. Latour 1993, de Mul 2014), many discourses on the ludification of culture and identity exclusively focus on the positive or negative effects and functions of play. Whereas, for example, many play scholars have followed Schiller in his claim that human freedom finds its highest realization in play, others are inclined to focus exclusively on the childish, frivolous, or addictive dimensions of play and games. In the first case, ludification is welcomed as a panacea for all the illnesses and negativities of modern culture, while the latter perceives play as irrelevant or even as undermining our very hope and “pursuit of happiness”.

Curiously, we ever so often witness scholars of play oscillate from one extreme to the other at different stages of their development. Sherry Turkle is an illuminating example. In her book Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the Internet (1995), she appears to celebrate the unbridled possibilities of expression on the Internet and the freedom of online identity. Instead of being constrained by the responsibilities of real life, Turkle argues, people were using the web to play and experiment with their identity. However, in Turkle’s more recent book Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other (2010), this optimism is gone and all emphasis is placed on the alienation caused by the “social” media which are controlled by commercial corporations (cf. Lehrer 2011). Turkle certainly is not alone in her convictions. For instance, in their recent books, “reborn” new media critics Jaron Lanier (You are not a gadget: A manifesto, 2010) and Nicholas Carr (The shallows: What the Internet is doing to our brains, 2010) also cast a rather negative light on the playful behavior allured by
our digital technologies and gadgets. In Carr’s view, “deep reading and other forms of calm and attentive thought” have been replaced by “the permanent state of distractedness that defines the online life” (2010, 112). Our desire for “fast-moving, kaleidoscopic diversions” has transformed us into multitasking “window jugglers” (ibid. 112-4). And according to Lanier, “smart devices” such as search engines invite you in just “playing along, lowering your standards to make it seem clever” (Lanier 2010, 32). Without a doubt, one could argue that the commercialization of Playland and the negative (side) effects of ludic technologies, such as game addiction and the celebration of violence, have only become manifest in the last decade and that the publications of Turkle, Lanier, and Carr for that reason can only now reflect on the unfortunate sides of digital culture. However, as true as their recent critiques may in part be, they now seem to overlook the positive aspects and developments that they so much overestimated during the formative years of Playland.

As we have tried to show in this volume, practices of reflexive identity construction in the digital domain take place in constant tension, and indeed interplay, between the communicative actions of free actors and the forces of commercialization, between local belonging and ongoing globalization, and between the heterogeneity of goals and means and the danger of homogenization through technology. Such oscillations and tensions may not always be symmetrical (which makes the warnings of authors like Turkle, Lanier, and Carter valuable), but we should understand such imbalances as a challenge rather than as an inescapable destiny. If life is a game, we’d better learn to play it in a skillful and informed manner instead of leaving the playfield unchallenged!

The game of life: Knowing how to play, fair play & fun

Why would living a playful life be advantageous and which dangers can we expect from such an endeavor? Let’s try to sketch the most fundamental benefits and disadvantages that are at stake, with regard to the following three basic dimensions of human experience: knowing, acting, and feeling.

In order to be able to live our human lives in a meaningful way, we have to understand our world, our fellow men, and ourselves. Playing can help us to develop the necessary skills and insights to play “the game of life” successfully. This cognitive function of play has been studied since the 19th century by biologists and developmental psychologists (for a historical overview, see Smith 1982). Play can prepare human juveniles for adult life,
and different forms of play have different functions in developing disparate spheres of adult life, varying from practicing motor skills and competition to exercises in imagination. Moreover, play both helps us to acquire specific skills and insights, as well as enhancing the flexibility of behavior, as it helps us learn to switch between and improvise with all kinds of behaviors and prepares us to deal with the unexpected. Inspired by the work of biologist Stephen Jay Gould, Sutton-Smith approaches the amazing diversity and variability functions of play from the perspective of *adaptive variability*: “If play is to be seen as some kind of adaptive variability, Gould’s account provides evolutionary metaphors that certainly have some power. Ifquirkiness, redundancy, and flexibility are keys to evolution, then finding play to be itself quite quirky, redundant, and flexible certainly suggests that play may have a similar biological base” (Sutton-Smith 1997, 224).

Though adaptive variability may have been characteristic for (human) life and play from the very beginning, the need for it seems all the more urgent in our present age, characterized by an increasing complexity and reflective uncertainty. Exercising “world openness” and developing playful identities – and to keep playing as an adult – seem to be more crucial now than ever.

We want to clarify this a bit further by referring to Heidegger’s analysis of human existence in *Being and time*. For Heidegger, existing as a human being means that, while living in the present, we are always oriented toward our future possibilities, while at the same time always being constrained by the possibilities we have realized in the past. In a concise formula, Heidegger calls man a *geworfene Möglichkeit*, a “thrown possibility” (1996, 135). However, our attitudes toward our past and our future possibilities are not the same. We narrate and interpret our past and we play with, and act upon, our future projects. Of course these dimensions are not completely separate. Our past is not simply behind us, but continuously effective in our present actions, and in our interpretations we continuously revise our past. Moreover, the choices we make during our actions are always grounded in our past. This is the reason that narratives and other (interactive) forms of play are often so entangled. Although situated in the past, stories can often inspire new future possibilities, and though oriented towards the future, games can often repeat possibilities from the past. Typically, human beings tend to identify themselves with the choices made in the past and for that reason become less playful as they grow older.

Yet this does not mean that the shares of thrownness and possibility are always of equal weight. Since the beginning of modernity in Western culture there seems to be a growing dominance of the projective dimension of our
existence above our thrownness. In the modern era, man understands itself predominantly as an autonomous, free acting subject. *Homo sapiens* has increasingly become *Homo volens*. Modern technology has given this autonomous subject powerful extensive means to increase the power to imagine and realize new possibilities. Interactive technologies can be regarded as derivatives of this modern ideology of autonomy. It is no coincidence that *interactivity* is one of the key concepts in the study of digital media and culture. No less in the computer game than in the "game of life", modern subjects continuously have to make choices. Whereas in premodern cultures most choices – life partner, occupation, religion – were usually made for us, in (post)modern times we continually have to choose. Whether it concerns the simple choice between taking the left or right door in a computer game and choosing a partner, profession, or lifestyle, every time the emphasis is on the *volitional* dimension of our personality. For that reason, the need for the flexibilization of ourselves is greater than it has ever been in human history. As Turkle puts it: "Not so long ago, stability was socially valued and culturally reinforced. Rigid gender roles, repetitive labor, the expectation of being in one kind of job or remaining in one town over a lifetime, all of these made consistency central to definitions of health. But these stable social worlds have broken down. In our time, health is described in terms of fluidity rather than stability. What matters most now is the ability to adapt and change – to new jobs, new career directions, new gender roles, new technologies" (1995, 255).

Of course, ludic technologies have not caused this change in identity. This transformation of the modern self is a complex process in which, among many other things, social, political, economic, and technological developments play a role. However, the massive dissemination of ludic technologies in Western and Westernized cultures is without a doubt also part of this complex process. It demonstrates that in postmodern culture there has been a major shift from representations to actions, and from interpretation of narrative meaning to reflective feedback on playful action.

Moreover, next to the cognitive and volative dimension, play also has a strong emotional dimension as it is connected with deep feelings of fear, fun, and doubt. On an existential level, play offers us a safe area to express feelings about and deal with a world which is often confusing and threatening: “All creatures, animal and human, live with some degree of existential angst, and most of them spend some portion of their existence attempting to secure themselves from this angst by controlling their circumstances. All creatures live in a world of strong feelings and are dominated by those feelings. We constantly seek to manage the variable contingencies of our
lives for success over failure, for life over death. Play itself may be a model of just this everyday existentialism” (Sutton-Smith 1997, 228).

In a rapidly globalizing and increasingly multicultural world, in which different cultures and values constantly interact and not seldom clash, playing may help us to deal with such conflicting interests, attitudes, norms, and rules. As a particular kind of animal play, human play might also help us to practice conflicts in a peaceful way in order to avoid real conflicts and create new ways of cooperation. Not only by playful simulations of conflicts and reconciliation, as we find them for example in multicultural comedies and funny virals, but also by acting them out in competitive virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft*.

If Huizinga is right that “civilization arises and unfolds in and as play” (1955, foreword), it is difficult to overestimate the importance of play. By playing we both create civilization as well as foster our humanity, because humanity is deeply connected with world-openness, i.e. the ability to see the world and ourselves from a multitude of perspectives. Because of its *adaptive variability* human play constantly discloses new possibilities within the world we inhabit, but it also inexhaustibly creates new worlds, new meaningful relationships (Heidegger 1975, 42) that offer us new existential shelters and homes.

Perhaps just because play offers us all kinds of safe havens against the harshness of life, it also has such addictive qualities. Just because we play so enthusiastically, we are easily carried away by the games we play. We no longer play, but are being played, by the very rules we have party created ourselves. This is not that strange when we realize that even acts of violence and war, which we desperately try to avoid in our daily lives, often become attractive and even meaningful events in Playland, as they can be experienced without the physical risks they bring in real life. Play can help us realize goals, whereas in our offline life these goals and their realization are often denied (cf. McGonigal 2011).

When there is a danger connected to the affordances of ludic technologies, with which we create and foster ourselves and our world, it does not so much lie in the depiction of violence or other undesired behavior, or in the addictive qualities of these games, but rather in the negative impact they might have on our world openness. With Heidegger, we might describe a “world” as the all-governing expanse of an *open* relational context (1975, 42). That means that even within a strictly finite world, an infinite number of relations can be disclosed.

However, in many “digital worlds”, especially those that are sheer exploratory instead of constructive, the freedom to move is rather restricted, as the
field of possibilities itself is preprogrammed and finite. When we identify ourselves with these impoverished expressions, we impoverish ourselves. Although written more than twenty years ago – a long time, given the short history of digital Playland – the following warning by Provenzo is still topical:

Bettelheim has pointed to the fact that children, as well as adults, need plenty of what in German is called Spielraum. Now, Spielraum is not primarily “a room to play in”. While the word also means that, its primary meaning is “free scope, plenty of room” to move not only one’s elbows but also one’s mind, to experiment with things and ideas at one’s leisure, or, to put it colloquially, to toy with ideas. Video games such as Nintendo, with their preprogrammed characters and their media-saturated images, present almost no opportunity to experiment or toy with ideas [...] Compared to the worlds of imagination provided by play with dolls and blocks, games such as reviewed in this chapter [meant are a series of Nintendo games] ultimately represent impoverished cultural and sensory environments for the child (1991, 93-5).

In The republic, Plato banned narrative because in his view artists have a bad influence on their audiences (1974, 421ff.). If he had lived now, Plato would probably draw the same conclusion about ludic technologies. However, both with regard to narratives and ludic technologies such an argument overlooks that we derive our very identity from these playful expressions. Our humanity is closely linked to the gift of play and digital technologies offer us exciting new ways of disclosing worlds and dimensions of the self. Therefore, it would be precarious to condemn them as such. However, that does not mean that we should close our eyes to the dangers that are related to play. Playland is both ambiguous and ambivalent. It is the highest expression of human freedom, and at the same time, we are under its spell. In our acts of playing, we just act “as if” and at the same time are driven by deep earnestness. Playing satisfies our profoundest desires, but it can also be dangerous and even lethal. As life is itself.

Notes

1. For an example of this mimetic approach to narrative, see Motte 1995.
2. See the contribution by Gergen in this volume.
3. In *The ambiguity of play*, Sutton-Smith, referring to William Empson’s classic *Seven types of ambiguity* (1955), even distinguishes seven types of ambiguity with regard to play, which he summarizes as follows:  “1. the ambiguity of reference (is that a pretend gun shot, or are you choking?); 2. the ambiguity of the referent (is that an object or a toy?); 3. the ambiguity of intent (do you mean it, or is it pretend?); 4. the ambiguity of sense (is this serious, or is it nonsense?); 5. the ambiguity of transition (you said you were only playing); 6. the ambiguity of contradiction (a man playing at being a woman); 7. the ambiguity of meaning (is it play or playfighting?)” (1997, 2).

4. The following exposition on Heidegger is adapted from de Mul (2005).

References


