

# Order of play - disorder of the world

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## **Abstract**

In the course of the evolution of society from its ancient forms to today's functional differentiation, the way the distinction playful/serious relates to other social distinctions has deeply changed, and this also affects the scope and significance of play. 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 this function – confirming and contradicting Huizinga's thesis about its marginalization.

## ***Play as variable universal***

What has become of play in our "culture of loisir"<sup>1</sup>? Or rather: what has play become in the society of video games – of the Internet and of the presence of the virtual in every aspect of social life? Can we still rely on Huizinga's analysis or different tools are required?<sup>2</sup>

It seems to me that the core of the thesis of *Homo ludens* is still the claim declared by the author already in the first sentence of the book<sup>3</sup>: "play is older than culture" (3), therefore from a certain point of view more important. "Culture arises in ludic form, culture is first played" (55) - and then

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<sup>1</sup> Morin 1962, Ch.6.

<sup>2</sup> This way of asking the question of our conference goes beyond the thesis of an observer like Umberto Eco (1973), who examined the legacy of *Homo ludens* 40 years ago, hence nearly half of the time from Huizinga's work to today – in a world that was different from that of 1938 more or less as it is different from today's world. But our greatest 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": Eco 1973: XXVI) can in fact become today one of its most interesting aspects. It must be remembered that Huizinga, unlike Eco, was a sociologist and referred indirectly to the tradition of our discipline, 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 1973) 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 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).

<sup>3</sup> I follow here Huizinga 1938, 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 (Einaudi, Torino, 1973).

it is not only legitimate but required to "consider culture sub specie ludi" (8). Is this true? Is culture play? Wouldn't it be more appropriate to think, more traditionally, that play is culture – that it expresses the culture of a society and belongs to it? Or maybe can the entire issue be put differently?

The difference between the 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, that will always be different. Actually Huizinga does both things, and this is the main ambiguity of his book (and the reason why it can still be useful today): on the one hand it examines the characteristics of play as universal form, independent of other features of culture, on the other hand it observes how the relevance and the role of play changed in the course of social evolution, in all areas in which it is or was present, from politics to the law, from art to science – until its marginalization from the 19. century onwards (225ss). But then play is or is not fundamental? What remains of culture when it abandons its ludic component (and roots)? Is there still culture, is there still play, and in which sense?

Today's theory of society can ask the question in a more complex and constructive way. It talks of functional differentiation to indicate how modern society progressively distinguished autonomous forms of communication with their own rules and criteria, which belong to society but articulate it in specific and not necessarily coordinated ways (Luhmann 1997: 743ff). 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 distinctions<sup>4</sup> - different ways to observe the world and get information. One of these is the ludic way, based on the distinction playful/serious that Huizinga identified and examined with so much insight. In the course of the evolution of society from the older forms he first analyses to today's functional differentiation, the way in which the distinctions relate to each other has deeply changed, and this also affects the scope and significance of play. Play is still the same and is completely different, because the way it affects society (and culture) as a whole is different, as well as the way it takes it into account.

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<sup>4</sup> In the terminology of systems theory one speaks of codes: Luhmann 1997, p. 359ff.

In the course of the evolution of society from its ancient forms to today's functional differentiation, the way the distinction playful/serious relates to other social distinctions has deeply changed, and this also affects the scope and significance of play. 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 this function – confirming and contradicting Huizinga's thesis about its marginalization.

### ***Reality of play***

I will try to reconstruct Huizinga's analysis from this perspective of the theory of society. The distinction playful/serious has a number of characteristics that distinguish it from the other distinctions that belong to semantics (Huizinga would say of the culture). First it is an independent distinction, which cannot be traced back to the terms of the others (9). For example wisdom/folly: the one who plays is not crazy, although it has unusual behaviors and follows a logic different from everyday life. Play rather reveals and produces its specific form of wisdom and skill. And play is not located on only one side of the distinction truth/falsehood, which it indeed handles in a very complex way: play is neither true nor false, or 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 have nevertheless their own reality. The one who plays the king in the game isn't actually a king in real life, but doesn't lie and doesn't deceive. He expresses the 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 not more good or less good than those who participate.

The distinction playful/serious has the peculiar ability to create its own field, distinct from the areas in which the other distinctions "normally" operate and presenting a specific reflexivity that Huizinga perfectly described: inside the distinction "'playful' is the positive term, 'serious' is the negative term" (54) - but not because play is good and seriousness bad, but because about seriousness there is nothing to say. The concept is defined only in negative terms by not being play. The side of play, on the other hand, is very much articulated: 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>5</sup>: you can play very seriously, indeed this is usually required (Gadamer 1960, p. 107f.). Who does not take play seriously is extremely annoying, even more than the ones cheating (15). Play has therefore a curious reflection capability: it requires from the participants the ability to move at the same time inside it (being serious) and outside it (knowing that it's a game) – an ability which, as we shall see, becomes very relevant in such a reflexive society as the modern one.

Also due to this reflexivity, play is able to build its own reality, with its own criteria and references, 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 (Luhmann 1996, ch. 8). 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 within the soccer field you can't touch the ball with your hands, and when you exit the field you exit the game – the game has a beginning and an end. You can play again later, but again 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.

These observations highlight a curious "metaphysic" feature of play, which requires the ability to distance oneself from the real world – without leaving the world. 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 is not at all playful), but rather much more rigid than the one of everyday life. "Play 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.

Who 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 intransparency of life and of the world (where not only the rules are more flexible, but usually you do not even really know what the rules are). Who 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

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<sup>5</sup> Using distinction theory one would say that the distinction playful/serious re-enters its serious side. For the concept of re-entry see Spencer Brown 1972, p. 69ff.

its rules and its boundaries and the real world that continues to exist and includes the game. When the game is over you go back to daily life. The 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", and with them also the relationship between the internal order of play and the order of society and the world. Therefore Huizinga says that in modern society play is marginalized – just when the industry of entertainment and of the spectacle ramps and seems to engulf the "serious" reality in the hypertrophy of "loisir" (with the words of Morin 1962; see also Debord 1967). In the cultures of the mythical kind, or to some extent in all pre-modern societies, the order of play retained a degree of correlation with the order of nature and the cosmos: as Huizinga observes (32- 25), in his magic dance the "savage" does not represent a kangaroo - in a sense he "is" a kangaroo. The distinction playful/serious was not entirely independent from the other distinctions of social life and culture, 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 " and they are all gathered in a single order in which the different perspectives mutually confirm each other. It was expected that the distinction true/false, if used correctly, led to results which harmonized with those of the distinction beautiful/ugly, or good/bad, or right/wrong – and they all ultimately confirmed a superior and unquestionable pre-existing order. This order, although fundamentally inaccessible to men, was the precondition of the rationality of the world and the meaningfulness of all distinctions. This was the order that was explored with divinatory procedures, which in this logic were not irrational, but allowed to test in specific areas and on the basis of codified practices an ultimate logic that men couldn't completely understand (Vernant 1974; Esposito 2012). Divination functioned as "ein in sich lernfähiges Zufallsmechanismus" (Luhmann 1997, p.237) which enabled to experimentally reveal the necessity that governs the world. Observing the flight of birds or the shape of the livers of sacrificial animals,

and knowing how to interpret them, you could take a look at the underlying order of things, which the world events would then comply with.

The distinction playful/serious belonged to this logic and was also coordinated with the other distinctions and subject to the ultimate order of things. From this point of view play was not free: oracles, puzzles, tests in ordeals or in other modes of divine judgment were the forms of play but 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 and that play had a fundamental role – a role however that has 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 take his decision, which was then coordinated with the ultimate principles of things. The same happened in politics (in a duel or a battle: ch. V), in science (riddles and puzzles: ch. VI), 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 contributed to articulate the other distinctions, which in turn supported and complemented each other. The ludic component of culture in Huizinga's sense was not marginal, but played a central role in all aspects of life. But you could also say, 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 in 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 (nor should) coordinate. Science, politics, art, religion, law, politics have each its own criteria and priorities, which influence each other but do not overlap – the distinctions are no longer coordinated. And from the nineteenth 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, economy on the prices of products – not primarily on the ability of participants to skilfully play their own moves: if the experiment fails, there is no game that takes.

But in this apparent marginalisation, play finds its autonomy and its own specific identity: only in modern society does the "ludic world" become fully independent from other areas of society and

free to experiment its own criteria and rules. Play becomes free and no longer has a general social responsibility – and can then build its specific reality, its own order truly autonomous from the 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 becomes an independent reality which "adds" to the world with its references and its objects. In this form, however, 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, 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 free time. But the meaning of free time has itself much changed in modern society. As Huizinga remarks (174), in ancient Greece free time, the time not required by public activities, was the one of the highest quality, 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 (Luhmann 1996, p. 71). The important things happen elsewhere, and in our free time we play. If you look at the role of play in the fundamental structures of society, our attitude cannot appear other than "childish" (240 ff.), because it loses the sense of priorities which guided the ancient practice. On the one hand we take play seriously<sup>6</sup>, as the growing professionalization of many ludic areas, from sports to entertainment, shows – but then it is no longer really fun. On the other hand seriousness tends to get playful (235), in the sense that we introduce playful elements in serious contexts such as politics. So one perverts the nature of the distinction playful/serious, because one tends to confuse the two sides: the boundary between what is serious and what is play is not clear any longer. Therefore one slides in childishness, which means that one cannot manage the distinction: one plays without a sense of humor, is ready to get angry and to argue for a word or a light remark, one mistrusts the other players, gets offended and exalted.

Is this the end of play? The distinction playful/serious, as we said above, it is by its nature reflexive. It requires the ability to look at it from the outside, to move at the same time outside and inside the ludic order - to know that it is not the "real" reality, but know at the same time that

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<sup>6</sup> Which is different than playing seriously, that as we have seen is always required.

it has its consistency and its rules that must be respected. Who confuses the two sides of the distinction (taking play seriously or "ludicizing" serious things) abandons this distance and loses the sense of the distinction – for example when one complains that play is not important or is not important to the great questions of life any more (or symmetrically when one claims that life altogether is nothing else than play)<sup>7</sup>. Authentic play should not care for its importance, because if one does one cannot keep the distinction between the two sides of the difference playful/serious any more: one can and must play seriously, but the distinction as such can be neither playful nor serious<sup>8</sup>.

Play must be 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 deeply misunderstand their meaning). Play is not used for anything – but today this is precisely its use. Only in modern society play possesses "the permanence of the insignificant" ("la permanence de l'insignifiant": Caillois 1958, p.125) and can carry out the great function of "Einübung in Kontingenz "(Haug 1998, p. 167).

Who plays must understand what's 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 passed, the ball must not fall and the eyes must be kept closed. Who plays perceives real data as a gateway into another field in which different rules apply, and in this area can experience possibilities that would not be otherwise accessible. For example in the large field of 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 make experiences that one will never make oneself and can empathize with the most different characters. The reader/viewer knows that the world of fiction is not true, and therefore he falls in love and is frightened, cries and laughs. If he remained at the level of first-order reality

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<sup>7</sup> Morin's "ludic conception of life" (1962, p. 98. ed.), in which play becomes "the orientation and the meaning of existence" (p. 105 It.ed.).

<sup>8</sup> "Nicht der aus dem Spiel herausweisende Bezug auf den Ernst, sondern nur der Ernst beim Spiel läßt das Spiel ganz Spiel sein": Gadamer 1960, p.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".



there would be nothing interesting: why should one be concerned with invented stories of people who don't exist?

That the reality of play is independent of any other field of real life, and 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 access 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: dealing 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 based on complexity and indeterminacy, without a univocal order but with a multiplicity of concurring criteria. Play has a rigid and uncompromising order, that you must accept even and precisely because it is not the ultimate order of things – experiencing thereby that contingency is not the loss of any criterium, even if the criteria are provisional and local<sup>9</sup>. Play's loss of function in modern society is the condition to carry out this function – confirming and contradicting Huizinga's thesis on its marginalization.

Our society is increasingly a society of leisure and entertainment, because it 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 more finds its constraints in ethics (as Huizinga still thought, 250s.) and not even in the world. 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 shows<sup>10</sup>, which are explicitly located in an increasingly complex and articulated virtual reality. Virtual reality is not just "fake": inside it people act, fight, contribute to build the world they will have to face. It is not a reality invented by someone, but a

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<sup>9</sup> In another game different rules apply, as Wittgenstein (1953, § 66) very effectively showed.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

field of possibilities available to users, a field of "interactivity" that depends on their behavior – 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 still reveals very much about the society's confrontation with itself.

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