

# Intro to Game Studies:

- “Ludology”
- Intro to Game Studies as a discipline
- What is “play”?
- Why do we play?



“Le Bateleur,” or “The Magician,” the Marseilles and Rider-Waite Tarot cards

## IDEA 130: T/Th 9-11:30

Week 1: Introduction to Game Studies, from Johan Huizinga to Miguel Sicart and beyond

### Overview:

- Definitions of “Play,” by way of *Ludology*
- Why have a “Game Studies” in the first place? Why do we study play, and why should we make games?
- Does play have value? Why/how?
- Chapter 1 of *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga & *Play Matter*, Miguel Sicart

*This lecture/reading guide includes space for your own notes below:*

Gaming/play "... is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing." - Huizinga

Who "invented" dice?

An orthostat depicting people playing knucklebones from Carchemish (c. 8th century BC); European talus bones (Pieter Bruegel detail of children's games, 1560); Māori children playing kōruru (Gottfried Lindauer, 1907); Mongolian shagai pieces



Huizinga: Chapter 1 terms:

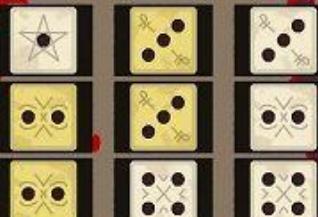
"Play"

"Play" as a function of culture (4)

Gaming/play "... is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing."

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"Games don't matter. Like in the old fable, we are the fools looking at the finger when someone points at the moon. Games are the finger; play is the moon." Sicart, 2



~ The Lamb ~  
52

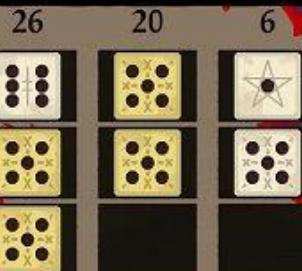


E Accept

THE LAMB WINS 52 - 34



~ Shrumy ~  
34



The basics of "Knucklebones" (an older form of dice games) in contemporary games: Cult of the Lamb (2022) calls the game "knucklebones," but represents the game with dice.

- What other modern games use ancient elements for game play?
- What ancient games are still played today?
- How do these games compare or contrast in their play? Their narratives?



## **Don't concentrate on the finger...**

Don't look too hard at the elements used in play—it's the function of the elements, the play that differentiates histories and cultures, and gives meaning to the forms.

- The materials used—whether bones, ivory, wood, or plastic—is dependent on the place and time.
- The function of the elements—dice to simulate chance, point systems, etc.—seem to form some kind of universal.
- We all play!



# Johann Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: The Play Element in Culture*, 1938

Chapter 1 Question:

What is PLAY?

Huizinga introduces certain elements/subjects that define play. Some of them include:

- "Play" as opposed to "seriousness"? (5)
- "Play" as aesthetic? (7)
- "Play" as a voluntary activity (or else it is not "play")
- "Play" as superfluous (not "urgent")
- "Play" is not "real-life"
- "Play" as a defined, liminal time and place
- "Play" as repeatable
- "Play" has rules
- "Play" has tension
- "Play" involves community
- "Play" involves some secrecy
- "Play" involves ritual

# **Ludic** (adj.) and **Ludology** (n.):

Of or pertaining to undirected and spontaneously playful behaviour.

1940-

- 1940** This excess-energy must be expended (without purpose) in some way, most usually in play-activity, called *ludic activity*.

L. E. Hinsie & J. Shatzky, *Psychiatric Dictionary* 323/2 ...

## **Summary**

A borrowing from French.

**Etymon:** French *ludique*.

< French *ludique*, < Latin *ludēre* to play.

“Game Studies” as “Ludology” = the study of play as an activity



Historical/Cultural analysis example:

Pieter Bruegel the Elder,  
*Children's Games*,  
1560

Pieter Bruegel the Elder was among the most significant artists of [Dutch and Flemish Renaissance painting](#), a painter and [printmaker](#), known for his [landscapes](#) and [peasant](#) scenes (so-called [genre painting](#)); he was a pioneer in presenting both types of subject as large paintings. He was a formative influence on [Dutch Golden Age painting](#) and later painting in general in his innovative choices of subject matter, as one of the first generation of artists to grow up when religious subjects had ceased to be the natural subject matter of painting. He also painted no portraits, the other mainstay of Netherlandish art.

*Children's Games*, 1560 is meant as a kind of didactic, encyclopedic showcase of children engaging in play that parallels the lives of adults. Each group engages in different kinds of play that either demonstrates or satirizes aspects of Dutch culture and society in the mid 1500s.



Historical/Cultural analysis example:

Peter Bruegel the Elder,  
*Children's Games*,  
1560

Recognizable children's play: playing with dolls;  
tug-of-war, riding hobby-horses; playing with tops

"Play is superfluous. The need for it is only urgent to the extent that the enjoyment of it makes it a need. Play can be deferred or suspended at any time. It is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task. It is done at leisure, during "free time". Only when play is a recognized cultural function-a rite, a ceremony-is it bound up with notions of obligation and duty. Here, then, we have the first main characteristic of play: that it is free, is in fact freedom." (8)

"Play" is not real-life:

"A second characteristic is closely connected with this, namely, that play is not "ordinary" or "real" life. It is rather a stepping out of "real" life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own... Nevertheless, as we have already pointed out, the consciousness of play being "only a pretend" does not by any means prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture and, temporarily at least, completely abolishes that troublesome "only" feeling. Any game can at any time wholly run away with the players. The contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid." (8)

"Play" as a defined, liminal time:

"Play is distinct from "ordinary" life both as to locality and duration. This is the third main characteristic of play : its secludedness, its limitedness. It is "played out" within certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning. Play begins, and then at a certain moment it is "over". It plays

itself to an end. While it is in progress all is movement, change, alternation, succession, association, separation." (9)



Huizinga's ideas regarding "Play as ritual": mock wedding ceremonies and baptismal sacraments; mask play; liturgical play; mock processions



#### "Play" as repetition/able to be repeated:

"But immediately connected with its limitation as to time there is a further curious feature of play : it at once assumes fixed form as a cultural phenomenon. Once played, it endures as a new-found creation of the mind, a treasure to be retained by the memory. It is transmitted, it becomes tradition. 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. It holds good not only of play as a whole but also of its inner structure. In nearly all the higher forms of play the elements of repetition and alternation (as in the refrain) , are like the warp and woof of a fabric." (10)

#### "Play" as within a defined space:

"All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world,, dedicated to the performance of an act apart."(10)

"Play" as the aesthetics of order:

"Here we come across another, very positive feature of play : it creates order, is order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme. The least deviation from it "spoils the game", robs it of its character and makes it worthless. The profound affinity between play and order is perhaps the reason why play, as we noted in passing, seems to lie to such a large extent in the field of aesthetics. Play has a tendency to be beautiful. It may be that this aesthetic factor is identical with the impulse to create orderly form, which animates play in all its aspects. The words we use to denote the elements of play belong for the most part to aesthetics, terms with which we try to describe the effects of beauty: tension, poise, balance, contrast, variation, solution, resolution, etc. Play casts a spell over us ; it is "enchanting", "captivating". It is invested with the noblest qualities we are capable of perceiving in things: rhythm and harmony." (10)

"Play" and ritual, costume (14)

The relationship between play and ritual:

"We found that one of the most important characteristics of play was its spatial separation from ordinary life. A closed space is marked out for it, either materially or ideally, hedged off from the everyday surroundings. Inside this space the play proceeds, inside it the rules obtain. Now, the marking out of some sacred spot is also the primary characteristic of every sacred act. This requirement of isolation for ritual, including magic and law, is much... more than merely spatial and temporal. Nearly all rites of consecration and initiation entail a certain artificial seclusion for the performers and those to be initiated. Whenever it is a question of taking a vow or being received into an Order or confraternity, or of oaths and secret societies, in one way or another there is always such a delimitation of room for play. The magician, the augur, the sacrificer begins his work by circumscribing his sacred space. Sacrament and mystery presuppose a hallowed spot."



Other forms of play:  
"hunting" (shooting an owl with a water pistol); exploring your body (urinating); investigating nature (playing with excrement); "mumbly-peg" (knife games); rough-housing



#### "Play" and tension:

"Play is "tense", as we say. It is this element of tension and solution that governs all solitary games of skill and application such as puzzles, jig-saws, mosaic making, patience, target-shooting, and the more play bears the character of competition the more fervent it will be. In gambling and athletics it is at its height." (11)

#### "Play" has rules:

"These rules in their turn are a very important factor in the play-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. Paul Valery once in passing gave expression to a very cogent thought when he said: "No scepticism is possible where the rules of a game are concerned, for the principle underlying them is an unshakable truth..." Indeed, as soon as the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses. The game is over. The umpire's whistle breaks the spell and sets "real" life going again." (11)

The "spoil-sport" "breaks the magic of the rules" and ends the game

#### "Play" and community:

"A play-community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over. Of course, not every game of marbles or every bridge-party leads to the founding of a

club. But the feeling of being "apart together" in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game. The club pertains to play as the hat to the head." (12)



## Miguel Sicart, “Play Is,” in *Play Matters*, 2014

Chapter 1 Part 1 Question:

- What is PLAY?
- How is Sicart’s definition different from Huizinga’s?

How does Sicart's ideas of play differ from Huizinga? To Sicart, what can play be?

- 
1. Play is *not* opposed to reality.
  2. Play is *not* necessarily fun. It may be pleasurable, but it may not lead to positivity.
  3. Play can be dangerous, and can harm.
  4. Play is “carnivalesque.”

#### On play vs. reality:

"I am not going to oppose play to reality, to work, to ritual or sports because it exists in all of them. It is a way of being in the world, like languages, thought, faith, reason, and myth."



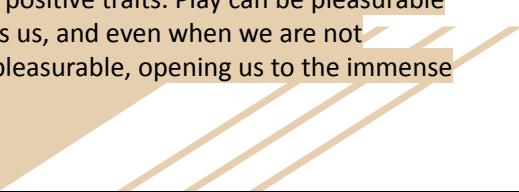
#### Discussion questions:

- How does/can thing we consider “play” infringe on, or constitute part of, reality?
- What elements in the world are usually regarded as “serious” that include play elements?
- When thinking of these elements as “play,” how does that change how we interpret them? (Think: the stock market, insurance perks, etc.)

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**On play and fun:**

"And play is not necessarily fun. It is pleasurable, but the pleasures it creates are not always submissive to enjoyment, happiness, or positive traits. Play can be pleasurable when it hurts, offends, challenges us and teases us, and even when we are not playing. Let's not talk about play as fun but as pleasurable, opening us to the immense variations of pleasure in this world."



**Discussion questions:**

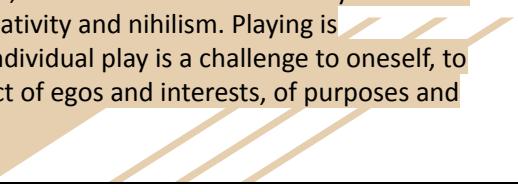
What kinds of play are not fun, but pleasurable?

What kinds of play are not fun and not pleasurable, but common nonetheless?

- 
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**On play and danger:**

"Play can be dangerous too: it can be addicting and destructive and may lead to different types of harm—physical injuries, lost friendships, emotional breakdowns. Play is a dance between creation and destruction, between creativity and nihilism. Playing is a fragile, tense activity, prone to breakdowns. Individual play is a challenge to oneself, to keep on playing. Collective play is a balancing act of egos and interests, of purposes and intentions."



What kinds of play are dangerous? What kinds of play are pleasurable, but are not positive? Who is at risk for harm?



Other forms of play:  
“hunting” (shooting an owl with a water pistol); exploring your body (urinating); investigating nature (playing with excrement); “mumbly-peg” (knife games); rough-housing



Consider how play can harm, but can also serve of role of testing boundaries and creating order through disorder (playing between chaos and order.)

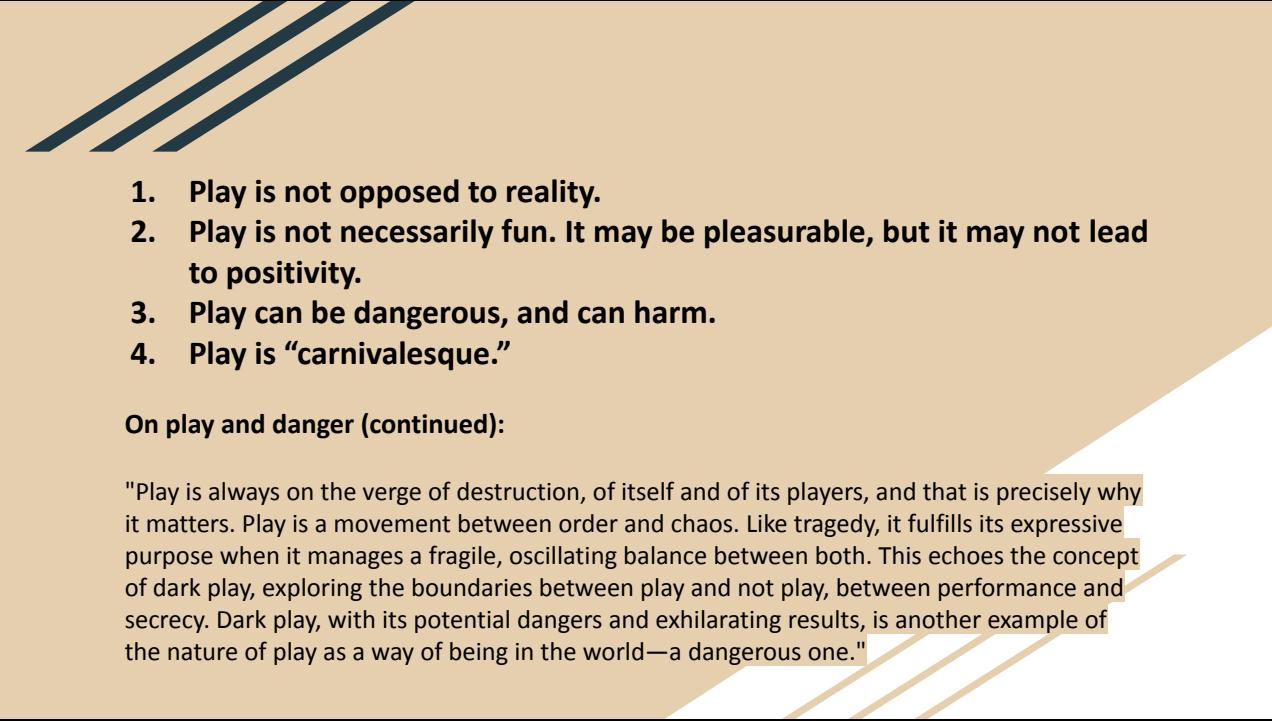
Some examples of “play” often outside the realm of most “play” discourse:

“Swordplay”?

“Playing” doctor?

“Foreplay”?

“\_\_\_\_\_ -play” to describe certain sexual kinks?

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**On play and danger (continued):**

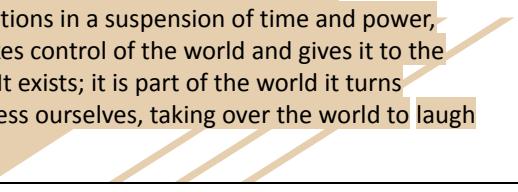
"Play is always on the verge of destruction, of itself and of its players, and that is precisely why it matters. Play is a movement between order and chaos. Like tragedy, it fulfills its expressive purpose when it manages a fragile, oscillating balance between both. This echoes the concept of dark play, exploring the boundaries between play and not play, between performance and secrecy. Dark play, with its potential dangers and exhilarating results, is another example of the nature of play as a way of being in the world—a dangerous one."

What is “dark play”?

- 
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#### **“Carnivalesque”?:**

"Play is carnivalesque too. Play appropriates events, structures, and institutions to mock them and trivialize them, or make them deadly serious. The carnival of the Middle Ages, with its capacity to subvert conventions and institutions in a suspension of time and power, was a symptom of freedom. Carnivalesque play takes control of the world and gives it to the players for them to explore, challenge, or subvert. It exists; it is part of the world it turns upside down. Through carnivalesque play, we express ourselves, taking over the world to laugh at it and make sense of it too."



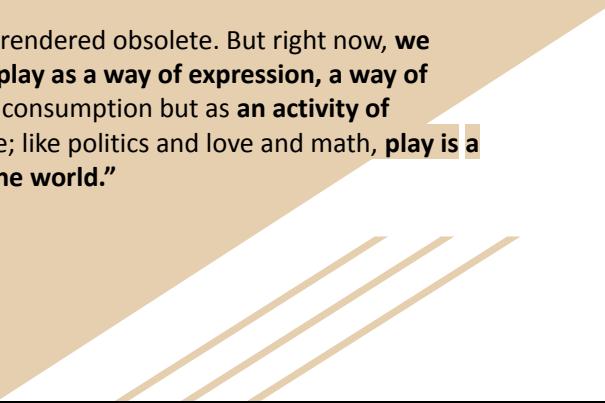
What is “carnivalesque”? Can we think of examples of “carnivalesque” qualities of games?



Huizinga's ideas regarding  
"Play as ritual," but also  
Sicart's concepts of the  
"carnivalesque" in games



**"I write this theory of play as a reaction to the instrumentalized, mechanistic thinking on play championed by postmodern culture industries. This is a theory that acts as a call to playful arms, an invocation of play as a struggle against efficiency, seriousness, and technical determinism."**



**"If and when this era passes, my theory will be rendered obsolete. But right now, we need to think about play matters and reclaim play as a way of expression, a way of engaging with the world—not as an activity of consumption but as an activity of production. Like literature, art, song, and dance; like politics and love and math, play is a way of engaging and expressing our being in the world."**

Why redefine play? What is at stake for Sicart?



**"In fact, play is a fundamental part of our moral well-being, of the healthy and mature and complete human life. Through play we experience the world, we construct it and we destroy it, and we explore who we are and what we can say. Play frees us from moral conventions but makes them still present, so we are aware of their weight, presence, and importance.**



**"We need play precisely because we need occasional freedom and distance from our conventional understanding of the moral fabric of society. Play is important because we need to see values and practice them and challenge them so they become more than mindless habits."**

How can play be an act of resistance? How can play be “radical”?



**"We play because we are human, and we need to understand what makes us human, not in an evolutionary or cognitive way but in a humanistic way. Play is the force that pulls us together. It is a way of explaining the world, others, and ourselves. Play is expressing ourselves—who we want to be, or who we don't want to be. Play is what we do when we are human."**

(Sicart, 5-6)

