Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, Media and Identity

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A very important topic of discussion nowadays is represented by the digital identity and how this theme is perceived by society and individuals alike. How we create, use, store and verify the identity in the digital playground context is a complex question, one that is often debated and argued from many angles. From philosophical point of view, but mostly from an ethical perspective, this subject is regarded as an ever-growing field of research bearing an important significance from an aesthetic, ontological, legal and social point of view.

*Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, a research that is funded by the Dutch Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and edited by Valerie Frissen, Jos de Mul (both from the Faculty of Philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands), Joost Raessens (holds the chair of Media Theory and is the scientific director of GAP: the Center for the Study of Digital Games and Play, Faculty of Humanities, Utrecht University), Sybille Lammes (associate professor at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies at the University of 

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Warwick) and Michiel de Lange (part-time Lecturer New Media Studies at Utrecht University) must be recognized as a consistent effort to familiarize researchers as well as the large audience with the concepts of *play, media* and *identity*.

In order to confirm the prominent concepts reminded above, the volume is split into three different parts: *Play, Media* and *Identity*, each part consisting of various articles written by professors, researchers in various domains like sociology, information and communication technology, philosophy, psychology, computer games, multimedia communication, new media and digital culture and so on. A good description of the book’s main focus related to digital identity is given by Jos de Mul in the final chapter: “most of the contributions in this volume were situated in the rhetoric 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 rhetoric” (de Mul 2005, 338). Due to its aim to capture the most important aspects related to *play, media* and *identity* and because all of the chapters of *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures* have analyzed, interpreted, criticized the first section of this book *Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, media, and identity*, I have chosen it for my review.

Going through the well-known references of Johan Huizinga’s ground-breaking book *Homo Ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*, Paul Ricoeur’s *Theory of narrative identity* and the critical elaboration of Roger Caillois *Les jeux et les homes* and analyzing the contradictions, differences and similarities between the ideas and concepts described, this first section brings an important benefit to the actual status-quo in this new field of research, *digital identity*. The article’s main purpose is to demonstrate how the “actual playful technologies, which have been embraced worldwide with great enthusiasm in the past decades, have profoundly affected out identities” (de Mul 2005, 337). This first chapter tries to put things into perspective, by highlighting its contribution to a bigger social and cultural trend - ludification.

*Ludification* should be treated, in this paper, as a major social and cultural phenomenon, a subset or as direct consequence of what was, in the 1990s, called “the postmodern turn” (Seidman 1994). Postmodernism
is useful in this context in order to understand the specific context of the cultural change that the word “ludification” translates.

The first part of *Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, media, and identity* is dedicated to the theory of play developed by Johan Huizinga in his famous book *Homo Ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*, and to his central claim “that culture and civilization arises in and as play and never leaves it” (Huizinga 1995, 173). The first section of Huizinga’s book contains a definition of the phenomenon of play, which includes the most important components of it that form the main topic of debate throughout this article:

a) Play is free, it is in fact freedom;  
b) Play is not “ordinary” or “real” life (13);  
c) Play is distinct from “ordinary” life with respect to both locality and duration;  
d) Play creates order, it is order. Play demands absolute and supreme order;  
e) Play is connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it.

Authors argue that in order to apply Huizinga’s theory of play to the current world of digital technologies, *Homo Ludens* needs an enhancement because in their opinion play and technology are both almost complete opposites for Huizinga. With respect to this fact, they introduce the concept of *Homo Ludens 2.0* as an upgrade to the initial work done by Huizinga, arguing that play and technology are very tightly connected to each other, and that both derive from the same ludic dimension. Another main aspect that is analysed here is the important connection between the ludic dimension and the medium specific qualities of media and digital technologies, for example multimediality, virtuality, interactivity and connectivity. Due to this approach and to the fact that they represent intrinsic characteristics of media and all that digital technology represents, because they all share the common purpose of being the representation and interaction of digital media in different social, economic, legal and philosophical implications, I agree with the argument.

The second part of the article describes and analyzes from the author’s own perspective, in parallel with Huizinga’s work, Roger
Cailliois *Les jeux et les homes* (1958) which represents a critical elaboration of Huizinga’s work. According to Cailliois, beside Huizinga’s “sacred performance” described as “mimicry” or role playing in Cailliois terminology and the “festal contest” or competition (*agon*), there are also other important categories like *chance* (*alea*) referring for example to aleatory games and *vertigo* (*ilinx*) in the sense of altering perception, for example rolling roller coasters, children spinning and so forth. Cailliois introduces two play attitudes: *paidia* and *ludus*, the former referring to unstructured and spontaneous activities (playfulness) and the latter to the structured and rule-governed activities with explicit rules of play (games). Cailliois’s definition of play has six elements in comparison with Huizinga’s definition:

1. *free* — (in such way that is non-obligatory);
2. *separate*;
3. *uncertain* — (in the sense that the results are not known beforehand);
4. *unproductive* — (that is, an event or interaction that does not create wealth or goods);
5. *rule bound*;
6. *fictive*.

As we can see, Cailliois’ special contribution is his attempt to include material considerations in the definition of play. He does this by claiming that play is distinctive because it leads to no increase in economic productivity, but instead it simply expends and redistributes resources.

Continuing the debate related to the controversial and contradicting aspects of Huizinga’s book, authors mention the four most important ambiguities:

1. *Reality versus appearance*. Analyzing the intrinsic relation between them, and the fact that when a subject plays, he is experiencing in a dramatic measure the media content, but at the same time the subject is also aware of is-as-if-ness.

2. *Freedom versus force*. Each time, the subject is perceived as the one who plays and who is played, by mean of relationship between the real self/virtual self-fulfilling both features simultaneously and being able to respect or modify the rules of the game according to his own wish.

3. *Determination versus change*. The correlation between games is regarded as determined from the beginning. The consciousness of risk,
for instance, presupposes that the player cannot confidently anticipate to the result of an action; this unpredictability largely determines the intensity of many games, particularly those involving chance and competition. To experience this sort of tension is to become invested in an outcome that has not yet been settled. It is always possible to ask in this context: How will the game come out?

4. Individual versus collective. Or as authors described it “the player is absorbed in his own private play-world, often before an audience.”² Nowadays, more and more often people are play games that are viewed as collective, there is a definitive tendency towards the collectiveness approach that I nevertheless fully understand and agree with. On the other hand with respect to the fact that a subject playing a solitary game is considered by some “as being played before an imagined audience” (Lawn 2006, 109), I consider that more discussion is in order. To understand the imagined audience, it is helpful first to consider the influence that the actual audience typically has on everyday face-to-face communication. According to theories of self-presentation and impression management, in order to help control the impressions that others form, individuals interact and adapt their behavior based on who is in the actual audience.³ The imagined audience is the mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating, our audience. With respect to determining behaviour, researchers have concluded that the mere imagined audience can be just as influential as the actual audience (Baldwin and Holmes 1987). For example, Alan J. Fridlund (1991) found that participants smiled more, regardless of their happiness, when they were either watching a movie with a friend or when they believed a friend was watching the same video in another room than when they were alone or when they thought their friend was partaking in a different activity. He concluded that “solitary faces occur for the same reasons as public ones, if only because when we are alone we create social interactions in our imaginations” (Fridlund 1991, 238).

³ To be consulted Goffman (1959); Schlenker (1980).
Last but not least, an important shifting point, analyzed in this chapter is Paul Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity. Ricoeur’s analysis of personal narrative identity yields four conclusions that are basic to his theory and these are the following:

1. Because my personal identity is a narrative identity, I can make sense of myself only in and through my involvement with others.

2. In my dealings with others, I do not simply enact a role or function that has been assigned to me. I can change myself through my own efforts and can reasonably encourage others to change as well.

3. Nonetheless, because I am an embodied existence and hence have inherited both biological and psychological constraints, I cannot change everything about myself. And because others are similarly constrained, I cannot sensibly call for comprehensive changes in them.

4. Though I can be evaluated in a number of ways, e.g., physical dexterity, verbal fluency, technical skill, the ethical evaluation in the light of my responsiveness to others, over time, is, on the whole, the most important evaluation.

_Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, media, and identity_ proposes 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” (Frissen 2005, 11). I find this idea quite compelling because the digital gaming experience requires a processing of personal identity between the need to be different and the meaning of our daily lives, through “voluntary” action anchored „in a well-defined space and time” (Huizinga). Thus, digital culture justifies the game as a context of empathically aesthetic rethinking, proposing a new meaning to the sense of aesthetic pleasure, which we can analyze from a psychoanalytic, social and physical perspective. Psychoanalytic, virtual identities express at a subconscious level the tendency towards perfection, towards complete freedom, autonomy, even an imaginary projection of an overall change which convey, in fact, a mark of a latent temperament, dominant, either masculine or feminine: this redefining power echoes even in a social medium where “self-persistence” of reality can be fulfilled or forgotten. Game manifested individually or in team as a “loss of self” through the
cultural materialization of a new, imaginary fictional discourse yet handled from reality itself reflects the aspiration for a better self, therefore towards a virtual identity, over which the user or the player has full control, both socially and physically. From this point of view, the game requires a digital speech of self representation depending on the type of aesthetic pleasure which it inspires.

Finally, we must admit that this social trend of ludification is powered by media, digital technology, play and by “us” represented by our identity. It reflects a new impact of these concepts in social structures and environments – the inclusion of playfulness in culture, society and everyday life. Moreover, it also applies a new direction of development that is renewing culture, society and business, and the most important aspect, that we should take into consideration when analyzing it, is the background that generated it, the actual impact that it has over our lives and on the future outcome of it.

REFERENCES