
Homo Ludens: A Renewed Reading



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The author discusses Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* and the animating mood that it calls the "play spirit." He argues that these styles of playfulness represent a major practical and theoretical contribution Huizinga offers contemporary studies of play, and he considers Huizinga's methodology in a reading that runs counter to formal definitions of play. Drawing on phenomenological, linguistic, and hermeneutic elements in the text, he presents an alternative understanding of play's form and what resists formalization. By attending to Huizinga's hesitations and rhetorical excess in key moments of explanation, the article unveils the development of play spirit in *Homo Ludens* and its significance for the study of play and games. **Key words:** formalism; Johan Huizinga; interpretations of *Homo Ludens*; phenomenology

TODAY'S READERS OFTEN FAIL to grasp Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1949) as the new and strange work it was intended to be. For many students of play, this is a text they have read in excerpts and seen through accumulated layers of commentary and interpretation. Readers find it hard to capture the daring character of Huizinga's theses on play and to make those ideas opaque and question worthy again. In this article, I offer a fresh engagement with the aims and methods of *Homo Ludens*, one that seeks to correct an overly formalist misreading. My claims are primarily textual and about how Huizinga should be read, rather than a new theory about play and games per se. Nonetheless, *Homo Ludens* does conceal some provocative possibilities for game studies, in particular an account of how players inflect play with a style. Huizinga calls this concept "play spirit" and it is an idea that can enrich the formal study of games. More modestly, I hope to focus new attention on a book that richly deserves it.

My strategy for renewing interest in *Homo Ludens* is to peel back some of the layers of familiar interpretation and reopen its ambiguities. My antagonist

is the reading of Huizinga predominant in video game studies today, which takes his signal contribution to be a formal definition of play. This interpretation has not always been so self-evident, and I begin by reviewing the history of *Homo Ludens*'s reception to spark an alternate trajectory. As a second step to overturning the formalist paradigm, I argue that Huizinga's own formalism has been misunderstood. Rather than basing his work on empirical generalizations about play, Huizinga makes use of evidence closer to the practice of phenomenology. By reframing the definition of play, the resolutely nonformalist parts of Huizinga's work come into view. In the later part of my reading, I show that Huizinga offers an ephemeral and affective element called "play spirit" as a supplement to play form. Although it might seem difficult to capture the spirit of play, this is exactly what Huizinga sets out to do through his grand thesis that "civilization arises and unfolds in and as play" (ix). If we read closely, *Homo Ludens* develops a subtle typology of styles in which play unfolds in specific cultural and historical contexts.

The History of *Homo Ludens*'s Reception

It would be hard to overestimate the influence of *Homo Ludens* on the contemporary understanding of play and games. Whether in adulation or in frustration, play theorists still wrestle with this germinal work and measure their contributions against it. The book owes its current prominence to the opening chapter, "The Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon." This chapter has been widely included in anthologies—thirteen different publications to my knowledge—with the goal of introducing students to the study of play and shaping disciplinary practice. Three brief definitions of play from the early pages of *Homo Ludens* have done the bulk of its conceptual work. These quotes are portable, they summarize several traits that belong to play, and they do so by an enumeration that makes it easy to isolate new distinctions and criticisms. The most concise definition explains play as "a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'" (28). The separate elements, six in this quotation, have been taken by subsequent readers as a generic form for deciding what should count as play.

The genealogy of treating play as a form is well known. Roger Caillois (1961) and Émile Benveniste (1947) both responded to Huizinga and developed

new theories about the relation between play and culture, and these three authors were summarized and critiqued by Jacques Ehrmann (1968) in an influential issue of *Yale French Studies* on play and games. From here the disciplines of literary criticism, performance studies, and anthropology took up Huizinga's work, alongside its English republication in 1970, and integrated it with poststructuralist themes of free play, readerly texts, and the carnivalesque (Spariosu 1982; Motte 1995). When video game studies developed as an academic discipline in the 1990s, it sought to differentiate itself from this poststructuralist aesthetics of play in hypertext and new media and to recenter a literal sense of play as action. Huizinga survived this sea change through the amenability of his definition to video games, and his work gained a new prominence alongside other formalist approaches such as ludology and procedural rhetoric (Salen-Tekinbaş and Zimmerman 2003; Rodriguez 2006). His work continues to provoke new and varied responses from game designers as well as academics.

Form and formalism are slippery concepts. Form's meaning can change even among games scholars coming from different disciplines. What I mean by form here is quite specific, and—to differentiate it from other kinds of formalism—I will sometimes call it empirical. In empirical formalism, play's qualities are understood as generalizations abstracted from many examples. Play is seen from the vantage point of an external observer who arbitrates over what counts as play based on visible traits. It is a concept that aims at scientific respectability and objectivity. There are several signs by which a formalist reading of Huizinga can be recognized. First, the formalist critic defines play by a set of necessary and sufficient conditions; lacking these conditions an event is never play, and when they are met the event is always play. Second, these traits are conceptually independent, such that they can easily be separated, altered, or replaced when evidence points to that need (Juul 2005). Third, they might need to be altered because the formalist critic ultimately derives the definition from empirical observations that could be falsified by additional evidence. Fourth, these traits more accurately describe games than play, because games are objective and shared while play depends on subjective feeling (Malaby 2007). Taken together or individually, these presuppositions turn Huizinga's conception of play into a historical footnote, which should be revised in light of new evidence. All of these claims are also, I believe, contradicted by Huizinga's text.

That the precision of Huizinga's definition of play became the central issue of his work would come as a surprise to the first readers of *Homo Ludens*. Early reviews of the book, which was quickly translated into several languages in the

1940s and early 1950s, were primarily concerned with the magisterial scope of his argument. Critics found the idea that culture arises “in and as play” captivating and provoking in equal measure, and they debated the individual merits of his wide-ranging chapters on law, war, philosophy, poetry, myth, and art as forms of play (Huizinga 1949). Individual reviewers each had his or her own peculiar bone to pick with Huizinga’s division between the utilitarian or serious side of life and its exuberant counterpart. The incorporation of religion and sacramental attitudes into play was a particular sticking point. Some reviewers dismissed Huizinga’s arguments; others engaged in sifting and weighing them; still others used their reviews as opportunities to promote their own pet theories. However, an engagement with Huizinga’s broad connection between play and culture unites them all (Andersen 1942; Bruyne 1947). These reviewers correctly saw that his definition of play opens up a perspective on activities not commonly recognized as games. Eric Voegelin’s (1948) insightful review is characteristic of this group. He attributes to Huizinga the definition of play “as a *superabundans*, as an overflow of the spirit beyond the level of necessity” (183). Voegelin used this definition, so much looser than the one that eventually predominated, to extend the concept of play all the way to inert matter.

A second wave of criticism, written primarily by historians in the 1960s and 1970s, tracks *Homo Ludens* in light of Huizinga’s autobiography and his roles as historian and cultural commentator (Gombrich 1973; Otterspeer 2010; Hanssen 2016). Some of these readers consider *Homo Ludens* either as a continuation of Huizinga’s lambasting of European art and politics as childish and puerile throughout *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* (1935) and *Geschonden wereld* (1946) (Romein 1947; Geyl 1963). Other readers see it as a continuation of his historical writings and an exploration of the methodological questions of historical hermeneutics he outlined in “My Path to History” (1969). This latter persona is the Huizinga who wonders about the role of dreams, mistakes, and illusions in relation to material causes; who wonders about the historian’s double task of imaginative reconstruction and fidelity to evidence; who wonders about discovering within culture the forms that transcend and synthesize the sides of intellectual, artistic, and social life; and who wonders how the historian’s questions shape the answers that an archive gives (Huizinga 1957; Anchor 1978, Weintraub 1957, 1966; Jardine 2015). Rosalie Collie (1964) discusses Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* and his earlier *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1924) as his two great attempts to practice cultural history in a way that responds to all these demands.

Cultural history's proximity to anthropology, and its appropriation of anthropological facts provoked another strand of response in the 1980s and 1990s (Norbeck 1976; Harris 1981; Henricks 2002). Dominant in these readings were various forms of ideology critique that attended to the language and rhetorical structure of *Homo Ludens*. Some of these readings took issue with a kind of distancing and infantilizing of native peoples characteristic of the sources Huizinga drew from (Nagel 1998; Lugones 1987). Others saw in Huizinga's emphasis on agonism an idealization of machismo, an aristocratic longing, or an apology for violence (Duncan 1988; Gruneau 1999; Sutton-Smith 1997). These readings pay attention to the texture of Huizinga's language in a new way and revealed many of the rhetorical strategies he uses. Such close readings of *Homo Ludens* by Mechthild Nagel and Margaret Duncan still stand as high watermarks of textual analysis.

The reception of Huizinga's work highlights the importance of interpreting play over defining it. For his first reviewers, interpretation is a provocation; for historians, interpretation is a methodological question; for anthropologists, it is a question that Huizinga had not yet sufficiently posed. In contrast, the reading dominant in video game studies limits the discussion of play's interpretive relation to culture and dwells on the minutiae of formalization. Nothing is inherently wrong with empirical formalism, and this focus could be chalked up to differing disciplinary norms and interests. Emphasizing form to this extent, however, occludes and supplants an important antiformalist strain of thought in *Homo Ludens*. Some of Huizinga's most probing and radical insights take place outside of play's form, and it is this obscured line of thought that can energize and challenge contemporary video game studies.

Preliminary Clarification about the Nature of Huizinga's Formalism

Before going beyond formalism, however, we need a better grasp of what exactly Huizinga himself meant by form. Against the model of empirical generalization, I purpose the idea that Huizinga practiced a phenomenology of play, albeit without the rigor of its philosophical terminology. I am using phenomenology here to describe an approach attentive to the way things appear and to the mode of their appearance. An account of play that grasps it as a phenomenal structure would still be a formal one, but it differs markedly in the kind of evidence it

uses and the kind of work it does. Reading Huizinga as a phenomenologist also unifies the changeable set of traits he attributes to play. So, while I prepare a new approach to Huizinga's antiformalism, I also mean to correct the definition of play in its own right.

In 1935 Huizinga published a foreword to *Antithesen: Vier Studies*, by his friend Reiner Beerling, in which he comments on Martin Heidegger's ontological phenomenology. Although it is unclear how much Huizinga understood or agreed with Heidegger, Beerling's commentary gave him the outlines of the methodology developed by both Edmund Husserl, the founding figure of phenomenology, and the hermeneutic radicalization of that method undertaken by Heidegger. Huizinga was also broadly in sympathy with the idealist legacy that informed phenomenology. He read and defended the historical methods of Wilhelm Dilthey, who in his later work incorporated the ideas of Husserl (Ricoeur 1981). Several other critics have also noticed Huizinga's debt to phenomenology in the kinds of language and approach he employs (Liu 1983; Nagel 1998). These thematic resonances attest to a different and nonempirical formalism at work in his definition of play.

At its heart, *Homo Ludens* takes play as a phenomenon. Huizinga orients his whole investigation around the question of "what play is *in itself*" (2), a phrasing that echoes Husserl's (2001) famous call to go "back to the 'things themselves'" (168). Moreover, Huizinga specifies that this means a radical openness "to take play as the player himself takes it," without first accepting any dogmatic beliefs from science or common sense (4). As Husserl does in his critique of psychology, Huizinga begins his investigation of play by clearing the ground of existing functionalist and behaviorist theories. In Huizinga's words, "these hypotheses . . . start from the assumption that play must serve something which is *not* play" (3). His main objection is that none of the theories explains why play should be experienced as fun because the functions and mechanisms of exercise, relaxing, or training could seemingly proceed without any such subjective experience. Fun is a sign that disappears in accounts that consider play from the outside and as an object.

At the same time, Huizinga is not content to examine fun as a merely subjective experience that is simple and contained. Rather, fun is part of an act that is both intentional—or about something—and apodictic, or self-evident. These are the basic postulates of phenomenology—that every act of consciousness is consciousness of something and that, in themselves, these acts are beyond doubt. Huizinga continually repeats that play has an intentional relation, that "It

is a *significant* function—that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something ‘at play’ which . . . imparts meaning to the action” (1). As such it offers a peculiar kind of evidence that is beyond doubt, even as Huizinga suggests we might doubt God, mind, or truth, “play cannot be denied” (3). Play becomes a kind of substitute cogito: “We play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely rational beings” (4). Together, these presuppositions give Huizinga a clear method for developing a theory of play acts that stands in significant contrast to an empirical generalization of form.

Before looking more closely at the act structure of play, let me recount Huizinga’s second major definition:

Summing up the formal characteristics of play, we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious,” 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. (13)

There are some important differences between the two definitions. In this longer version, the separation between play and ordinary life is supplemented by a bifurcation between play and seriousness. An aesthetics of order also replaces the sense of tension. Finally, two new additions are present here as well—disinterestedness and a connection to secret societies.

Both definitions of play have exacerbated the formalist confusion because, contrary to Huizinga’s more extended analysis, they seem to emphasize objective qualities over experiential ones through phrases such as “certain fixed limits,” “material interest,” or “profit” (13). Several of the traits have come in for criticism because of this. The freedom of play has been contested on the grounds that children are often coerced into it and that professional athletes are under economic constraint (Caillois 1961; Duncan 1988). Play’s separation from the ordinary world has been confused with its relation to seriousness or work, and the latter binaries have been critiqued (Ehrmann 1968; Hans 1981; Motte 1995; Rodriguez 2006). Huizinga’s description of how play becomes spatially separated from the ordinary world—into a magic circle—has been widely discussed, dismissed, and re-invented based on a too rigid interpretation of what a boundary is (Consalvo 2009; Liebe 2008; Woodford 2008). And

his description of disinterest was reworked first by Roger Caillois, to account for gambling games, and then by later critics, who saw play as deeply integrated into capitalist society (Caillois 1961; Ehrmann 1968). In each case, Huizinga's critics try to take him to task in the same way: they contrast a universal formal quality of play to a particular example in which that quality is missing. It is possible to use the presence of such critiques as a second way to recognize empirically based formalist readings, insofar as they tabulate, organize, and compare isolated elements. These critiques of Huizinga repeat the assumption that form is at stake.

Against the empirical criticisms of Huizinga's definition of play, I mount a phenomenological defense. In my view, none of its traits alone defines the inner feeling of play. Instead, they have to be taken together as a whole, and lacking a single one the act ceases to count as play. It may still look like play to the outside observer, but something crucial has changed in the experience. The phenomenological definition of play can still be considered formalist, but only when that form is understood as a unified structure rather than as several separable aspects. By considering play in this way, we can also trace the multiple and shifting elements of Huizinga's definition back to a smaller number of component causes. I turn now to the phenomenological evidence that reveals and distinguishes each of play's components.

The Phenomenal Structure of the Play Act

To start, I examine the way that play becomes differentiated from the ordinary world, because this goes to the heart of the difference between an empirical and a phenomenological treatment. When it comes to characterizing the special realm of play, Huizinga sets it into a complex relation with ordinary life, a relation he calls "stepping out of 'real' life" (8). "Stepping out" brackets and neutralizes the ordinary world without wholly negating it, which is why the words "real" and "ordinary" are constantly bracketed by quotation marks within Huizinga's text (see 4, 8, 14). Now, the difference between these two realms is not one visible to the outside observer, but one established by a feeling. Play is characterized by the experience of "only pretending," but in such a way that a player cannot fully acknowledge that feeling (8). Huizinga develops this characterization using the example of a child playing with his father. The child pretends that some chairs are train cars, but warns his father not to "kiss the engine, Daddy, or the car-

riages won't think it's real" (8). The child recognizes that his father is not quite in the play world but also recognizes that his father might make the pretense too explicit.

Already the emphasis on subjective experience puts this description at a remove from the empirical account of play's separate character. However, I want to draw attention to the way Huizinga leverages this feeling into a specific kind of evidence. The player's recognition of "onlyness" does not alter play in a piecemeal manner but dramatically and all at once. The intruding father threatens the boundary between the ordinary world and the play world. Nothing objective about the game needs to change for play to evaporate into the air and to be replaced by a mood of threat and danger. Huizinga does not claim that onlyness empirically occurs in every case. The fact that it is even possible for onlyness to disrupt play all at once and as a whole attests instead to a structural connection. Huizinga's first piece of phenomenological evidence comes to this—if the father can destroy the character of play by crossing a boundary, then the boundary is somehow related to the nature of play.

The relationship of play and the ordinary, therefore, is not the opposition, gradation, or simple exteriority critics take it to be (Ehrmann 1968). Rather, Huizinga understands play as transforming and carrying the ordinary world along with it as a kind of substratum with which it is in constant contact. The child in Huizinga's example who uses chairs as pretend train engines must still deal with the ordinary physicality of the chairs. The neutralization that play engenders has links to the acts of doubt, of fantasy, and of pretense, and not least to Husserl's phenomenological and eidetic reductions. Mihai Spariosu goes so far as to call the "phenomenological reduction or bracketing . . . a play concept" (Spariosu 1982, 13). Play, like these other acts, preserves the world under a change of sign. But although doubt or fantasy can be expanded to engulf everything in a total skepticism, play always neutralizes within a limited scope.

Three further traits of play—its disinterestedness, spatial bounds, and marked duration—can be seen, then, as simple variations of the separation between play and the ordinary world. Huizinga introduces each category in relation to ordinariness—"play is distinct from 'ordinary' life both as to locality and duration," and "not being 'ordinary' life [play] stands outside the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites" (Huizinga 1949, 9). As a result, each of these categories should not be interpreted as a *de facto* separation, but a phenomenological one. Play can, for example, serve an interest so long as the player does not experience it as interested. Huizinga is perfectly comfortable arguing

that play habitually relaxes people without being directed toward relaxation in itself. At issue is play's ability to neutralize existing values, and if there are values internal to the play sphere, these can only have a contingent relationship to the ordinary world. Caillois thus misinterprets Huizinga when he uses gambling as a counterexample. Though the gambler may want to make money, he can only play by setting aside the question of whether his chips are worth one cent or a thousand dollars. Play defines its own goal, and to play is to follow that goal whether it is variably connected to wealth and status or, on the contrary, to material loss and death.

The same interpretation applies to the spatial separation in Huizinga's concept of the "magic circle." Play does not simply lie outside the normal world, but overlays it, and within play the social, conceptual, and even perceptual relationships that define a given space are neutralized. Caillois again interprets this element of play too narrowly when he summarizes that play is "circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance" (Caillois 1961, 9). Huizinga in contrast sees play marked off "either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course" (Huizinga 1949, 10) with a fluidity that encompasses a wider variety of games and that points to uncertain events that might interrupt play (Juul 2008; Arsenault and Perron 2009).

Closely linked to the way play steps out of the world is a second phenomenological trait that structures its boundaries and what takes place within them. Huizinga describes the way in which temporal boundaries make play into a repeatable game, establishing its form as a "new-found creation of the mind" (Huizinga 1949, 10). By stepping out of the ordinary world, play simultaneously creates new kinds of space, new temporal rhythms, and new values that outshine their ordinary counterparts. Such newly stamped creations can range from vague pretend play to the formalized rules of chess. The organization of this extraordinary world can be distinguished from the moment of neutralization that sets it apart by another piece of phenomenological evidence. Order not only makes play possible but also makes it vulnerable, such that "the least deviation from [the game's order] 'spoils the game,' robs it of its character" (10). Huizinga further specifies this creative and ordered element as the rules that govern a game, and cheating means that "as soon as the rules are transgressed, the whole play world collapses" (11). Order is a feeling first and foremost, and its disruption can ruin play.

Huizinga further specifies the nature of play's order by arguing that it requires tension. Tension has two elements that occupy different roles in the

phenomenology of play. One is an element of uncertainty, and the other is “a striving to decide the issue and so to end it” (Huizinga 1949, 10). Only the first element concerns the order and rules of the game, which must be structured so as to create that uncertainty. Huizinga narrates another example to illustrate this necessity. The story involves the Shah of Persia, who “was supposed to have declined the pleasure of attending a race meeting, saying that he knew very well that one horse runs faster than another” (49). The anecdote highlights uncertainty as a feeling that the rules have to generate if play is to take hold. Without it, play tilts into boredom and tedium. The tense character alloys otherwise banal systems of rules to produce a wide range of games, from the “solitary games of skill . . . such as puzzles” where uncertainty derives from one’s own limitations, to gambling, where the randomness of the cards or dice maintains suspense (11). If tension fails—because opponents are poorly matched, or because someone knows a formula to unerringly win—then the character of play is destroyed. Huizinga thus gives two pieces of phenomenological evidence to support his characterization of play as ordered—one to show that rules must exist and another to show the kind of rules these must be.

Complementing uncertainty is the player’s need to strive, to “dare, to take risks, to bear uncertainty, to endure tension” (Huizinga 1949, 51). This is the third aspect of the play act. It depends on established rules to give players a realm in which to strive toward an outcome and, by doing so, to introduce movement, activity, and life. Without the willingness to enter into uncertainty, play would not just be boring but pejorative and shameful. Huizinga demonstrates this aspect of play by introducing another persona, the spoilsport—who breaks the rules like the cheat but who, unlike the cheat, does not even “[pretend] to play the game” (11). And, unlike the father or the shah, who never enter the play sphere at all, the spoilsport buys into the rules but “by withdrawing from the game, . . . reveals the relativity and fragility of the play world” (11). This withdrawal leaves the play structures intact but rejects any particular outcome as worthy of effort. Huizinga makes the connection to striving explicit in the way that the play community attempts to recover from such breaks by naming the spoilsport’s refusal as “not daring” (11). Once again, the fragility of play demonstrates a fundamental connection with striving, whose disruption transforms the play atmosphere into resentment.

Freedom is the final aspect that Huizinga establishes in play, and it provides the ground for all others. Huizinga is careful to distinguish the kind of freedom he means as felt freedom, which has nothing to do with either freedom in a

social or philosophical sense. In the now familiar evidence of fragility, Huizinga argues that “play to order is no longer play: it could at best be a forcible imitation” (Huizinga 1949, 7). The real absurdity involved in forced play becomes apparent when considered next to the separation of play from the ordinary world. We saw that play creates a separate sphere by neutralizing the world in a limited way, but this requires the player to be capable of bracketing the demands of the world on the play sphere. As a consequence, any outside rule would either have its binding force neutralized or destroy the freedom of play. While play may be ordered from within, it rebels at external coercion, and forced play radically transforms an activity from a phenomenological perspective. Coerced children may go through the same motions, but, without a sense of freedom, their actions are a dissimulation.

The phenomenological results of Huizinga’s definition can be summarized in a structure of play as a complex act composed of four intentional layers, each dependent on the previous ones. First, play involves an act of perception that sees the world as free enough to “[step] out of” the ordinary, to treat it as no longer in force, to neutralize it. Second, comes an act of doubting or neutralizing the world in a limited manner. Third, play needs an act of imaginative positing that discovers an ordering principle which creates both uncertainty and boundaries within the neutralized space. Fourth, there must be an act of striving to reduce or master this uncertainty. In the absence of any one of these facets, the joyful quality of play shifts into the negative effects of coercion, danger, boredom, and resentment. As a mnemonic for these aspects, we might use the four characters that bring the phenomenological clarification of fragility to life: the coerced participant, the intruding daddy, the Shah of Persia, and the spoilsport.

This structure of play differs markedly from the empirical formalism I outlined earlier. It treats the features of play as interrelated and necessary, and it focuses discussion on the action of play rather than on the existence of games that instantiate a particular form. Ultimately, however, even this account of play does not go to the heart of Huizinga’s insights.

Toward a Play Spirit beyond Formalism

Substituting a phenomenological idea of play’s form for an empirical generalization goes some way toward accurately characterizing *Homo Ludens*. However, phenomenology remains too tied to an account of play as stable and unchang-

ing, too tied to its own version of formalism. In fact, it is only a starting point for a much more radical interrogation of play. Huizinga's interest in history and culture made him skeptical about the extent to which a form is ever fixed and given, and, as a result, he turns toward an existential and interpretive method for recognizing play. While the phenomenological structure accurately gauges the possibility that an event could be experienced as play, it does not reveal whether it was actually experienced that way. It is as if Huizinga is saying, "granted this could have been a game, it matches all the criteria necessary for it to be a game, but did anyone play it? Was it provocative enough in its moment to create tension for its players? Were they free enough to partake? Could they erect boundaries and grasp rules?" Questions like these propel Huizinga to rethink the nature of play on the basis of the spirit that pervades and animates a historical event, and, as a result, he transforms his phenomenological criteria into hermeneutic ones.

A first characterization of this play spirit appears when a doubt about the usefulness of formalism causes Huizinga to elaborate his justifications for counting or discounting something as an example of play. For example, when Huizinga considers the relationship between music and play, including the semantic coincidence that music is "played," he acknowledges that "music bears at the outset all the formal characteristics of play proper" (42). Simultaneously, he feels that this makes the concept of play overbroad and argues—against his own formal criteria—that "we know that play is something different [from music], standing on its own" (42). Huizinga never specifies what this difference consists of, but something other than form is at stake. Along the same lines, he dismisses the similarities between games and sex, logic, science, and the stock exchange as merely formal (Ruberg 2010). At other times, he sets out to convince the reader that what seems a merely formal equivalence is actually grounded in a shared exuberance and excess. Huizinga's genius for imagining himself into history shines in these moments—especially in his description of eighteenth-century wigs as an elaborate game of dress-up. His account of poetry falls in this category, which resembles play in that it "proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted outside the sphere of necessity or material unity" (132). Now, this is a contestable description of poetry, but Huizinga does not try to justify it before continuing that "the affinity between poetry and play is not external only . . . in the turning of a poetic phrase, the development of a motif, the expression of a mood, there is always a play element at work" (132). These internal characteristics, the playful spirit or play element, are the real justification for whatever connection exists.

Such examples might be taken as outliers that plague any attempt at defining play, but the same concern comes to light in the central categories Huizinga uses to read the presence of play in history. Ritual and agonism are the two key ways that play becomes a social institution, and both possess “all the formal and most of the functional features of a game” (48). Nevertheless, Huizinga repeatedly returns to both categories to justify their play character through reference to a pervading spirit. In both cases, the mark of playfulness turns out to be the festive attitude in which they are undertaken. The challenge is particularly pointed when it comes to agonism, extreme examples of which—war and gladiatorial combat—threaten to destroy play. Rather than exclude physical danger, which would also exclude many sports and leisure activities, Huizinga looks for an attitude of gaiety and fun that can accompany violence. It is this approach that Margaret Duncan (1988) calls a “particular pride in describing [the] exceptions” to otherwise straightforwardly cruel or brutal acts (38). Festivity becomes a nonformal sign of play. Festivity needs to be interpreted from the tone and style of an account, and from the cultural context that makes festivity into a recognizable feeling. Huizinga risks his formal system on an interpretive hunch, a flash of insight into the spirit in which violent and sacred acts are undertaken. How, then, are we to understand festivity as a kind of play spirit?

In these passages, Huizinga begins to point out a new dimension to play, one that requires a moment of interpretation to recognize. Festivity cannot be something merely added on as one more criteria to check off, or we would simply return to a formalist paradigm. Rather, Huizinga makes room for festivity in the phenomenology of play by showing how play is preinterpreted by language. After arriving at his seemingly self-evident definition, Huizinga suddenly opens up that definition to a new form of scrutiny by arguing that “when speaking of play as something known to all . . . we must always bear in mind that the idea as we know it is defined and perhaps limited by the word we use for it” (28). In this regard, his phenomenology is closer to Martin Heidegger’s manner of beginning with eclectic etymologies than to Husserl’s idealism. Huizinga is a magpie with languages, and in *Homo Ludens* he looks at the grammar, lexicography, and etymology of play in twenty-three languages that range from Greek to Japanese, Blackfoot to Aramaic, and Portuguese to Old Norse. He uses these as points of comparison that disturb the self-evidence of any single play concept.

Each of the component acts that make up the phenomenon of play now become self-evident because of a contingent linguistic fact. To take the act of neutralization as a starting point, Huizinga makes an argument that a quirk of

Germanic languages produces the same effect. This language family, including English, tends to use a unique verb for play, which is often doubled as the direct object. So, “you ‘play a game,’ or ‘spielen ein Spiel’ rather than ‘using,’ ‘acting,’ or ‘doing’ a game.” Huizinga interprets this fact to mean that “the act of playing is of such a peculiar and independent nature as to lie outside the ordinary categories of action. . . . Playing is no ‘doing’ in the ordinary sense” (37). Here the extra-ordinary existence of play comes to look like the result of a grammatical fact. In a language where one merely “did” a game, the phenomenology of play might be significantly different.

The component act of grasping the world as free enough and the act of neutralizing it in a specific and ordered manner are also related to the verb for play, though at a different level of abstraction. One of the things that fascinates Huizinga is the nearly unlimited scope of things to which the verb can be attached, and he lists ways that other languages formalize this scope. In Greek, for instance, the suffix *-inda* is able to “give to any word the connotation of ‘playing at something,’” and in Blackfoot, there is the “possibility of giving any verb a secondary meaning of ‘for fun,’ ‘not seriously’ by adding the prefix *kip-*” (29, 33). In Japanese and Arabic, the same function is transferred to types of verb conjugation or address. There are two things to note in these examples. First, play’s particular freedom finds echoes in the difference between the grammatical ability to neutralize any particular content and the pragmatic contexts of politeness or aptness. This is especially present in Huizinga’s analysis of the class distinctions that undergird the Japanese use of play as a formal address. Without this linguistic scope, play might not seem so free. Second, grammar becomes a mode of imposing play on an event, and grammatical rules become a paradigm for the ordering rules of the game. Implicitly, Huizinga suggests that the perception of a game’s order might differ according to the grammatical norms of a language.

Finally, Huizinga traces the quality of tension to the etymology of play. He argues that the Western word can be traced back to the “idea of rapid movement,” and especially to-and-fro movements (32). Quick to-and-fro motions, like Plato’s conjecture that “the origin of play lies in the need of all young creatures . . . to leap,” which Huizinga notes approvingly, suggest the bare elements of uncertainty about direction, timing, and striving to keep up (37). Other etymologies of play, however, are just as viable and would give the phenomenon of play a different cast. Sanskrit and Latin associate play with “shining and radiance,” “sudden appearance,” “seeming,” and “imitation,” while Chinese, the Semitic languages,

and the Romance languages add mockery, trifling, and jesting as possibilities (32, 35). Japanese emphasizes the opposite of tension by associating play with idleness and relaxation. Rapid movement opens up one valid phenomenological perspective on play, but these etymologies point to other equally original possibilities. Even if Huizinga is wrong about the details of his philology—as George Steiner (1970) has argued—these investigations have value as grammatical thought experiments. With them, Huizinga breaks open the phenomenological categories and shows how the preconditioning of language makes play seem self-evident.

Play in the Mode of Producing Culture

The question remains: how are we to understand a quality like festivity as making play recognizable beyond its formal definition? Huizinga's linguistic investigations take us part of the way to an answer by showing how formal categories always already have a historical and linguistic interpretation embedded in them. From this we might be tempted to conclude that Huizinga's concept of play constitutes a cultural or linguistic relativism, a position he himself sometimes entertains. If Huizinga avoids this relativism, it is because play is never simply the object of a cultural interpretation, but is always involved in a reciprocal and actively interpretive relation to culture. As Huizinga says: "It is through this playing that society expresses its *interpretation* of life and the world" (my emphasis, 46). This line of inquiry opens up a new horizon in which we can start to distinguish some styles of playfulness that make play recognizable.

To understand play as a force that is not merely inflected by culture but inflects culture, we need to grasp the importance of play as an instrument of civilization. For Huizinga, play is responsible for creating and preserving everything that takes human life beyond the realm of necessity and struggle. Play is the origin of culture itself, which "arises in the form of play" and never leaves it (46). If one follows this line of thought, then the cultural differences that give rise to relativism are derived from a more original moment of play. In other words, linguistic and historical interpretations of play as a *product* of culture ultimately refer back to play as the *production* of culture. If there is a kind of circularity here, it is not so much a vicious circle as an iterative development, where play produces cultural forms that further define and shape what it means to play. The similarity I noted between linguistic facts and the phenomenology of play thus takes on an ambivalent character, which can be read as either the imposition of

arbitrary grammatical rules onto the conception of play or the working out of a nascent play spirit through the specification and formalization of language.

The same kind of double reading applies to culture, a category that gets worked out in *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*, where Huizinga tries to grapple with the political problems plaguing Europe in the 1930s. He argues there that culture requires three elements bearing a striking similarity to play and that go some way toward explaining why Huizinga thinks culture arises through play. First, a culture must exert “control over nature,” which means both securing the necessities that a community needs to live and, more importantly, taming the instinctual impulses of human beings (43). Thus, a culture establishes a zone of relative human freedom and leisure, protected by a boundary that keeps nature at bay. Moreover, once this realm is created, a culture must work to maintain “a balance of material and spiritual values” so that it does not allow some aspect of itself to atrophy (40). The balance between these two forces establishes an uncertainty, a back-and-forth motion around which cultural development continually circles. Finally, culture requires an “element of striving” toward an ideal, which can guide it beyond the leisure of satisfied need and the circularity of balancing values (42). Huizinga’s understanding of culture thus reproduces the component elements of play in the same way that his linguistic investigations do—and with the same kind of ambivalence as to which is more original.

Festivity, in this framework, takes on a new and more complex relation to play. It becomes a sign that play is productive. This does not mean that festivity is something superadded or that it is present or absent alongside the other formal categories. The phenomenological form is already play in the mode of a product. It is a heritage that players receive from a long history of previous games and that provides the framework for any player to grasp play. Festivity, by contrast, is a mark of that grasping, of play in the modality of producing culture, of people taking up the ready-made form of play and putting it to use for themselves in new ways. If this is an accurate reflection, then style is not something separate from the moments of freedom, neutralization, positing, and tension, but the manner of grasping these moments. It is a way of being playful—and not the only one. Play always needs a style, but its form is never a predictor of how players will take it up, which can happen in messy and contradictory ways and can differ across history and according to local custom.

Throughout *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga teases out other styles that reveal the aliveness of play. Fairness is one of the most important styles that the book engages because Huizinga turns to it, like festivity, at moments where he wants

to distinguish agonism from antagonism, competition from simple violence. Fairness is an ethical value that tempers the player's desire to win by holding her to rules. He calls it "good faith expressed in play terms" (11, 211). It also has a resonance with games of competition, because fairness raises the tension and uncertainty of a game by balancing the two sides in an evermore precarious manner. Only the thumb of a god can tip the scales by aligning the two sides of a competition. Fairness seems to be primarily about freely and voluntarily withholding from any force or capacity that could upset the initial balance and give one player an advantage. It is expressed by taking up rules in a sportsmanlike way and has an affinity with the phenomenological act of freely entering into play. The opposite of fairness, such as the abrogation of the rules of war or the targeting of civilian populations, is most bitter for Huizinga.

Secrecy is another style of play—and one important enough to be mentioned in Huizinga's definition. The feeling for secrecy grows out of play's separateness, which puts the players in an unusual or liminal relation to the social body (12–13). It is intimately connected to miming and to forms of make-believe in which players hide themselves with costumes and masks to become something other. Secrecy obscures the relation between the subject who is acting and her intention, leading to an uncertainty that can infect even the performer. For Huizinga, it is this uncertainty that links play to the sacred. When considering any tradition that has grown useful, powerful, or self-justifying, secrecy becomes a hermeneutic criterion for questioning whether it began as mere play. Its principal forms, outside the mask, are in the themes of literature and philosophy where a secret knowledge unites or distinguishes people.

A third style that Huizinga returns to often, without quite knowing what to make of it, is the rhythmic quality of play (McDonald 2014). Grace, harmony, and rhythm show a marked tendency to adhere in play and are intimately linked to the etymological idea of play as to-and-fro motion. The playfulness of rhythm, for Huizinga, depends on the possibility of improvising a response, a model of "beat and counter-beat, rise and fall, question and answer" that is fundamentally off-center or "exorbitant" (142). It is not the assurance of the repetition but the uncertainty of the simultaneous break from and reestablishment of the rule that renders rhythm playful.

Finally, there is a quality to which Huizinga refers variously as daring, wit, cunning, and trickiness. Such feats are fundamentally asymmetrical, unlike the balance of fairness. A situation presents itself that seems insurmountable, but through some minor gesture an impossible reversal of fortune comes about all

at once. The riddle is the prototype of this style for Huizinga, and though it can be made competitive and symmetrical by alternating roles as questioner and questionee, the playful and culturally productive character seems to inhere in the provocative enigma itself. Gathered in this category of playful reversal are the gambler's attempt to overcome impossible odds, the sharp turns of jokes, and what Huizinga describes as the literary theme of the hero's "seemingly impossible" tasks (6, 133). Of the four categories, this one seems to thematize and exaggerate the striving of play to gigantic levels.

My notes on these four styles are only cursory, meant to point to how Huizinga might be used differently. Already, however, there are several interesting features that bubble to the surface. Each play spirit has an affinity with one of the phenomenological traits of play. Each one enlivens an aspect of play and makes it into the central pleasure of a game. In other words, the evidence of play's character shines through style in a way that differs from the fragility of form. Another fascinating connection is the way each style prefigures something like Roger Caillois's classic typology of game genres. Fairness shares a bond with competition, trickiness with games of chance, secrecy with make-believe, and rhythm with games of vertigo. In the end, however, Huizinga only leaves hints behind about what style consists of. The idea of an animating play spirit pushes his thought to its limit, where his arguments become murky and difficult to follow. Beyond this murk lies the real heritage of Huizinga's work, the part of his thought from which we have the most to learn.

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