



## On the Anthropology of Play

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### Abstract

Games are voluntary actions that have their own intrinsic goal and differ from actions in the normal everyday world. It is in play that people form their cultural abilities; it is here that they create themselves as individuals, express emotions, and creatively deal with the demands of the outside world. In play, people generate social relationships, develop their own personalities, and create community and culture. Games are different and diverse and they are unlimited in number. New games are constantly being invented; it is very hard to classify them all. Since many games and ludic arrangements are often physical enactments and performances, they often carry more social weight than mere discourse. With their physicality, the players contribute “more” than merely linguistic communication. This “more” is rooted in the materiality of their bodies and the physical existence of other people. With the staging and performance of games, differences are processed, and commonalities are created. People stage themselves and their relationships to others in play. By inviting people to “play along”, games invite them to accept the structures that are revealed in the games as acceptable. Those who do not accept the invitation to “play along” in a community segregate themselves, are excluded, and can become scapegoats and thus the target of negativity and violence. Games require movements of the body, which result in closeness or distance between the participants of the game. Social attitudes and postures are often expressed in the participants’ body movements. Competitive relationships require movements of the body that are different from those in friendly or even intimate relationships. By shaping ludic situations with the help of body movements, the body is also shaped. There is often a performative element in the staging of games; the participants want their play to be seen and appreciated in a fitting way. In the movements of their bodies, they wish to display and express themselves. The following twelve structural elements can be used for a structural and impact analysis of games: space and time, rules, imagination, the as-if, flow, mimesis, performativity, practical knowledge, community, functionlessness, games-utensils, uncertainty of the game outcome.

**Keywords:** Game play; Performativity; Body; Mimesis; Practical knowledge; Community; Space; Time

### Play as a Condition of the Human Being

“Man plays only where he is man in the full meaning of the word, and he is only fully man where he plays.” In this sentence of his letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Friedrich Schiller expresses the anthropological significance

of play [1,2]. Johan Huizinga develops it further in *Homo ludens* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century [3]. In his view, games are voluntary actions that have their goal in themselves and differ from actions in the normal everyday world. It is in play that people form their cultural abilities; it is here that they generate

themselves as individuals, express emotions, and creatively deal with the demands of the outside world. In play, people generate social relationships, develop themselves, and create community and culture. Games are different and diverse; their number is not limited. New games are invented again and again; classifying them encounters great difficulties.

Play is a movement, an activity that has no purpose, but aims to give pleasure and joy. Even though the playful or ludic is necessary for the creative design of work and purposeful activities, play is not determined by the logic of the world of work. In general, it is neither instrumental nor utilitarian. As activity and movement, it is physical and sensual. In childhood and adolescence, it contributes to the development of the body and the senses. In “free play,” the rules are invented by its participants as they play. For the development of imagination and a communicative practical knowledge, games are of considerable importance in childhood and in the early education of children. Hardly less important in these years are functional and learning games. Many games are based on rules. They include, for example, group and team games (soccer, handball, volleyball). They are central to the generation of community and the formation of the ability to cooperate.

Since many games and ludic arrangements are often physical enactments and performances, they often carry more social weight than mere discourse. With their physicality, the players contribute “more” than merely linguistic communication. This “more” is rooted in the materiality of their bodies and the existence of people grounded in it. With the staging and performance of games, differences are processed, and commonalities are created. People stage themselves, their relationships to others in play. By inviting people to “play along”, games invite them to accept the structures that are revealed in them as acceptable. Those who do not accept the invitation to “play along” in a community segregate themselves, are excluded, and can become scapegoats and thus the projection surface for negativity and violence.

### Principles of the Game

Time and again, attempts have been made to understand what games are and how the diversity of games can be understood. An interesting proposal to structure the diversity of games has been made by Roger Caillois (1982) [4], who assumes that games can be distinguished by the fact that they can be assigned to one or more of the following principles.

**Agon:** This refers to competitive games in which the objective is to win. As in chess or soccer, two opponents face each other, each trying to defeat the other. One wants to measure oneself

against the opponent and thereby experience one’s own strength. Traditionally, these games are played more often by boys and men, respectively, although these preferences seem to be changing today (women’s soccer, for example).

**Alea:** Chance plays a crucial role here. Male and female players learn that their success in the game does not depend on them in the first place, but on chance, which - even if you try again and again - you cannot influence. You play against or with a power that is superior to you and that decides whether you win or lose. Here belong e.g. dice games.

**Illinx:** In these games, one tries to bring oneself into a state of intoxication that is clearly different from normal life. Children try this, for example, by spinning rapidly in circles until they lose their balance and sink to the ground in a state of intoxication. Young people seek similar experiences at folk festivals on the merry-go-round or “roller coaster,” in which their bodies are greatly accelerated by circular movements or by falling down. Bungee jumping also belongs here.

**Mimicry:** With masks, costumes and make-up, people try to give themselves a different identity. One no longer wants to be who one is, but wants to signal through the appropriate paraphernalia that one is someone else or someone else. This component plays an important role at folk festivals with parades and disguises.

### Games as Performative Acts

The sustainability of the effects of games is tied to their performative character, i.e., to the physicality of the scenic enactments and performances. In the physical performance of games, people show who they are and how they understand their relationship to other people and to the world. Games can be understood as scenic performances of performative action [5].

The staging and performance of games involves appropriate framing that reveals how the game is related to preceding actions and provides clues as to how the game is to be understood. The framing creates the salient character of the game and ensures its magical character. This results from the belief of all participants in the game, for example in a world championship, through which the community is first created.

The staging and execution of many games requires performative expressions and props: In the case of a World Cup, for example, it is mascots that invoke happiness. Or there are intense training sequences to ensure the hoped-for top form also the commentaries that classify and evaluate the game afterwards play a role here. In games, performative actions create scenes and sequences of scenes. Their design

includes not only the staging of human bodies, but also the arrangement of environments. They must also be designed in a way appropriate to the games to create the necessary ensemble. It is in the “Gesamtkunstwerk” of a game that the ludic order emerges.

Games require movements of the body, with the help of which closeness and distance as well as approach and distance between the participants of the game. Social attitudes and postures are often expressed in their body movements. Competitive relationships require different movements of the body than friendly or even intimate relationships. By shaping ludic situations with the help of body movements, the body is also shaped. There is often an ostentatious element in the staging of games; the participants want their play to be seen and appropriately appreciated. In the movements of their bodies, their concern is to be displayed and expressed.

When we speak of the performative, of performance and performativity, the accent is on the world-constituting side of the body. When we speak of the performative character of play, we refer to language as action and play as staging and performance. If human play is conceived of as a performing cultural action, this results in changes for the understanding of social processes. In this case, the physicality of the players as well as the event and staging character of their play find greater attention. Play is more than the realization of intentions. The surplus of meaning consists, among other things, in the way in which players pursue and attempt to realize their goals. Desires, experiences, and sensations enter this process. Despite the intentional similarity of a game, significant differences are evident in the staging of the physical performance of the players and in the how of the performance of the game.

The performative also contains an aesthetic dimension that is constitutive of artistic performances, but also of many games [6]. This perspective points to the limitations of a functionalist approach to the performativity of games. Just as the aesthetic consideration of artistic performances leads to their not being reduced to intention-driven action, it also reminds us that the meaning of games is not exhausted in the realization of goals. No less important than the goals is the way in which the players realize their goals.

Finally, the performative character of language during or after games assumes considerable importance. The extensive commentary on the actions of individual players and the staging and performance of a soccer match by commentators leads to the affirmation or criticism of the game. The same is true for games in which gender identity or the relationship between the sexes is organized and in which repeated playful actions of a child are seen as typical of “boys” or “girls” and thereby contribute to the formation of gender identity [7].

## Structural Elements of the Game

Another attempt to understand the diversity of games and to analyze the spectrum of games consists in developing structural elements that are important for understanding games and that are also suitable for understanding their historical and cultural character. Without claiming to be exhaustive, I will name twelve structural elements that can be used for a structural and impact analysis of games.

**Space and time:** Games take place in certain spaces and times and structure space and time in their staging and performance. For example, a stadium becomes a soccer stadium through soccer games.

**Rules:** Games succeed only when their participants adhere to specific rules, and be it rules they develop themselves. They provide the criteria according to which and with which games are played.

**Imagination:** Games require players to create their own world with the help of their imagination and to be willing to move in it and shape it.

**The as-if:** In games, seriousness, and non-seriousness overlap. Players engage with all their might, even though they know at the same time that it is a game and not a confrontation in reality, in which defeat might have existentially dangerous consequences.

“Flow” and experience of meaning: games are made meaningful and enjoyable by the fact that there is a “flow” between their participants. Each move responds to another as if by itself. As if by itself, a flow of game movement arises, to which there seems to be no alternative.

**Mimesis:** Playing is a mimetic process, that is, a process of creative imitation. The players refer to the rules and arrangements of previous games. In doing so, they take an imprint of these, as it were, and use them independently in their current game. In this way, they do not restrict the design of their game, but allow freedom of game design.

**Performativity:** Games are the result of stagings and performances. In them, physical and sensual components play a central role. If one arranges to play a game of dodgeball, for example, then all participants know what is being played. They know the staging of “dodgeball” with its rules and peculiarities and, based on this knowledge, create concrete performances that differ with each repetition.

**Practical knowledge:** Being able to play requires not only a linguistic and cognitive knowledge, but also a practical knowledge acquired in mimetic processes, with the help of which the players can participate in the game in a formative

way.

**Community:** Games make a community out of the players. In games, the participants experience that they are dependent on each other and can only succeed if feelings of connectedness arise between them.

**Functionlessness:** Games have no function outside of themselves. They are self-referential and pursue only their own goals. Only in a meta-analysis can a function beyond them be identified.

**Game utensils:** Many games use game utensils such as the soccer game uses the soccer ball, the ludo game uses an appropriate game surface, game pieces and dice.

**Uncertainty of the game outcome:** Players do not know in advance how a game will end. Its outcome is open. Dealing with not knowing and uncertainty is a condition of playing.

### Games and their Family Resemblance

Due to the multidimensionality of their materiality, many games have an uncatchable surplus of meaning. In addition to their side that aims at classification and adaptation, they have a constructive side that makes it possible for players to work through problems and conflicts as well. As cultural performances, games are physical, performative, expressive, symbolic, ostentatious, regular. In them, collectively shared knowledge and collectively shared practices of action are enacted, in which a self-representation and self-interpretation of the communal order is affirmed. The scenic arrangements of games contain moments of reproduction, construction, and innovation. They take place in designed social spaces and have a salient character. They are ostentatious and are determined by their respective framings. In games, differences between people and situations are processed. Games are involved in power relations and structure social reality; they create and change social orders and hierarchies. Their staging and performance require a practical knowledge of games.

The variety of games is so great that attempts to structure them are limited. If one considers that playful or ludic elements can also be found in rituals and other forms of social action, the spectrum of the ludic becomes even larger. In many cases, these are not fully formed games, but social actions that contain ludic elements. Games and social action with ludic elements occur in a variety of contexts. They are best understood in terms of Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance. In the "Philosophical Investigations," Wittgenstein (2001) [8] asks what is "the common thing" about games. His answer: "They must have something in common, otherwise they would not be called 'games'-see if

they all have something in common. - Because, if you look at them, you will not see something that would be common to all of them, but you will see similarities, kinships, and quite a few. "Family resemblance" forms transitive relationships: One can go on to another member of the family by means of one characteristic, then again to another relative by means of yet another characteristic [9].

In games, people create their own world, but refer to other worlds that already exist in reality or in the imagination. People learn to play by playing together with other people and by acquiring play competence in interrelated mimetic actions, i.e., in processes of creative imitation.

### Games in Modern Society

In today's social situation, which is characterized by discussions about the disintegration of the social, the loss of values and the search for cultural identity, games and ludic arrangements gain increasing importance. They assume a bridging function between individuals, communities, and cultures. They generate social coherence, which through their ethical and aesthetic content provides security in times of confusion. Games and ludic arrangements offer compensation for the loss of community, identity, authenticity, and stability associated with modernity, the tendencies toward individualism, the phenomena of abstraction and virtualization, and the erosion of social and cultural systems. With the help of games and ludic arrangements, the world and human relations are interpreted; in them they are experienced and constructed. Games have an important function for the shaping of the world today and for a contemporary education of people [10-12].

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