Playful Identities

The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures

EDITED BY VALERIE FRISSEN,
SYBILLE LAMMES, MICHIEL DE LANGE,
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1. Homo ludens 2.0: Play, media, and identity

Valerie Frissen, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange, Jos de Mul & Joost Raessens

Immense est le domaine du jeu.
Émile Benveniste

Foreplay

A playful specter is haunting the world. Since the 1960s, when the use of the word "ludic" became popular in both Europe and the US to designate playful behavior and artifacts, playfulness has become increasingly a mainstream characteristic of modern and postmodern culture. In the first decade of the 21st century we can even speak of the global "ludification of culture" (Raessens 2006; 2014). Perhaps the first thing that comes to mind in this context is the immense popularity of computer games, which, as far as global sales are concerned, have already outstripped Hollywood movies. In the US, 8- to 18-year-olds play on average an hour and a half daily on consoles, computers and handheld gaming devices, including mobile phones (Rideout et al. 2010, 2-3). This is by no means only a Western phenomenon. In South Korea, for example, about two-thirds of the country's total population frequently plays online games, turning computer gaming into one of the fastest growing industries and a key driver for the Korean economy (Jin 2012).[1]

Although perhaps most visible, computer game culture is only one manifestation of the process of ludification that seems to penetrate every cultural domain (Neitzel and Nohr 2006). In our present experience economy, for example, playfulness not only characterizes leisure time (fun shopping, game shows on television, amusement parks, playful computer, Internet, and smartphone use), but also those domains that used to be serious, such as work (which should above all be fun nowadays), education (serious gaming), politics (ludic campaigning), and even warfare (computer games like war simulators and interfaces). According to Jeremy Rifkin, "play is becoming as important in the cultural economy as work was in the industrial economy" (2000, 263).[2] Postmodern culture has been described as "a game without an overall aim, a play without a transcendent destination" (Minnema 1998, 21).

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman maintains that human identity has even become a playful phenomenon. In ludic culture, he argues, playfulness is no longer restricted to childhood, but has become a lifelong attitude: "The mark of postmodern adulthood is the willingness to embrace the game whole-heartedly, as children do" (Bauman 1995, 99).

The focus of this volume is on the complex relationship between play, media, and identity in contemporary culture. The chapters in this book investigate, from different perspectives, the role that digital information and communication technologies play in the ludification of personal and cultural identity. The focus on (new) media is not only motivated by the dominant role that digital media play in our present culture, but also by the intuition that "play is central [...] to media experience" (Silverstone 1999, 63; cf. Thimm 2010).

In this introductory chapter, we analyze these three interconnected phenomena that constitute the subject of this volume, offering a conceptual background that enables the reader to situate the contributions to this volume. This introductory chapter consists of three main sections, which correspond to the three parts of this volume, devoted to play, media, and identity.

With regard to the dimension of play in this triad, our starting point is the theory of play developed by Johan Huizinga in his famous 1938 book *Homo ludens*. It is not without reason that *Homo ludens* is regarded as a classic in the study of play. Although published more than seventy-five years ago, Huizinga's central claim, that culture and civilization "arises *in* and *as* play, and never leaves it" (1955, 173), still offers a fruitful framework for the study of the ludification of human identity in our contemporary media landscape, or *playland* as Kenneth Gergen calls it in this book. This claim has found wide acclaim. Thanks to recently developed fields like game and leisure studies, we can even speak of a Huizinga-renaissance. However, we argue that in order to apply Huizinga's theory of play to the world of digital technologies, *Homo ludens* needs a serious "update" because play and technology are almost complete opposites for Huizinga.

In this introductory chapter we will update *Homo ludens* to a "2.0" version that goes beyond the opposition between contemporary play and technologies. In the section on media, we will use the insights from leading scholars in the domains of New Media and Game Studies to substantiate this position further by focusing on the playful dimension of digital technologies. We argue here that both media explicitly designed for play, such as computer games, as well as digital technologies in general, have an inherent ludic dimension. This dimension is closely connected with medium-specific qualities like multimediality, virtuality, interactivity, and connectivity.

In the last section of this chapter, the emphasis lies on the role that these ludic technologies play in the construction of personal and cultural identities. Here the vantage point is Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity. According to this theory, narrative is not only an appropriate metaphor for human identity, but human beings actually construct their identity through stories, ranging from explicit biographies and autobiographies to fictional accounts of human life in novels. In light of the aforementioned ludification of digital culture, we propose 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.

Phrases like "self-construction" and "construction of cultural identity" might suggest that this process is fully controlled by an autonomous subject. Evidently, this is not the case. The fact that "the self" is not something given, but a construction, does not necessarily imply that the self is the (main) constructor. Commercialization, globalization, and technological homogenization mold the subject's self-construction to the logic of an external system. As the chapters in this volume will demonstrate in more detail, practices of reflexive identity construction constantly take place in a tension between communicative action and commercialization, between localization and globalization, and between heterogenization and homogenization.[3]

Play

Viewing man and world *sub specie ludi* is of course not a new phenomenon. Already early in Western thought, Heraclitus speculated that "the course of the world is a playing child moving figures on a board – the child as absolute ruler of the universe" (Sprague 2001). Ludic accounts of man and the world have been formulated at all times and in all cultures. In Western culture we can witness an important development during the past two centuries. Whereas the Enlightenment did not show a deep interest in play, the Romantic movement heralded a new fascination for this phenomenon. Friedrich Schiller – who can be regarded as the founding father of contemporary ludology – even considered the play drive as the core of humanity since it enables man to reconcile necessity and freedom. As he famously phrased it in *On the aesthetic education of man*: "Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and *he is only wholly Man when he is playing*" (Schiller 2004, 80). Alongside reasoning (*Homo sapiens*) and making

(*Homo faber*), playing (*Homo ludens*) now advanced to the center of attention. Philosophers including Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Gadamer, Marcuse, Deleuze, and Derrida (most of them considered as forerunners or representatives of postmodern culture), followed the ludological footprints of Heraclites and Schiller in their attempts to transform the modern, predominantly rationalistic and utilitarian ontology and anthropology (Axelos 1964; cf. Minnema 1998). Moreover, play and games have gained strong attention in the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. One can think, for example, of the implementation of *game theory* in biology (Sigmund 1993), economics (Neumann and Morgenstern 1944; Leonard 2010), and cultural anthropology (Bateson 1955; 1977). In addition to the increased interest in play and games in these already existing disciplines, in the last decades – motivated by the substantial growth of leisure time and the growth of ludo-industry and ludo-capitalism (Dibbell 2008) – several new fields entirely devoted to the study of play and (computer) games have emerged (cf. Mitchell et al. 1934; Avedon and Sutton-Smith 1971; Raessens and Goldstein 2005; Mäyrä 2008; Ritterfeld, Cody and Vorderer 2009; Fuchs et al. 2014).

As mentioned above, one of the most foundational works in the contemporary study of play is Johan Huizinga's *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. This book, first published in Dutch in 1938 and later translated into many other languages, can even be considered as "the key modernist statement on play" (Motte 2009, 26). "Richly suggestive and admirably broad in scope, it provides the first full-blown theory of ludics, and it remains moreover, seven decades after it first appeared, an inevitable point of reference for any 'serious' discussion of play" (ibid., 26).

The book is still so impressive because of its grand ambition and scope. Already the book's subtitle – "a study of the play-element of culture"[4] – and foreword make it clear that Huizinga's ambition is no less than to offer a genealogy that explains how "civilization arises and unfolds in and as play" (Huizinga 1955, foreword). In the second to the last chapter – "Western Civilization *Sub Specie Ludi*" – Huizinga summarizes his argument:

> It has not been difficult to show that a certain play-factor was extremely active all through the cultural process and that it produces many of the fundamental forms of social life. The spirit of playful competition is, as a social impulse, older than culture itself and pervades all life like a veritable ferment. Ritual grew up in sacred play; poetry was born in play and nourished on play; music and dancing were pure play. Wisdom and philosophy found expression in words and forms derived from religious

> contests. The rules of warfare, the conventions of noble living were built up on play-patterns. We have to conclude, therefore, that civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come *from* play like a babe detaching itself from the womb: it arises *in* and *as* play, and never leaves it (ibid., 173).

This summary explicates that *Homo ludens* is not primarily a study of play or games, but rather "an inquiry into the creative quality of the play principle in the domain of culture" (Caillois 2001, 4). The first chapter of Huizinga's book offers a definition of the phenomenon of play, which has been quoted in almost every book on play and games that has been published since.[5]

> Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not meant"[6], 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 (Huizinga 1955, 13).

Let us elucidate the six elements of this definition. First, like Schiller and the Romantics before him, Huizinga defines play as an *expression of human freedom* vis-à-vis both nature and morality (ibid., 7-8). Play, like beauty in nature and art, to which it is closely related, is *disinterested*, distinct from ordinary life, "it contains its own course and meaning" and presents itself as an "intermezzo, an *interlude* in our daily lives" (ibid., 9). Playing is "non-serious"[7] in the sense that it is not characterized by our daily concern for food, shelter, and everything else fragile beings like us need in order to survive. Play takes place "outside and above the necessities and seriousness of everyday life" (ibid., 26). We could also say that play is beyond *profane* seriousness. However, this does not exclude the fact that the activity of playing requires total devotion from the player. Playing is not merely "fun", but earnest, even "holy earnest" (ibid., 23). For Huizinga, this is not (merely) a figurative expression: "In all its higher forms the latter [human play] at any rate always belongs to the sphere of festival and ritual – the sacred sphere" (ibid., 9). In order to distinguish this kind of intrinsic, sacred earnestness from profane seriousness we might call it *sacred seriousness* (on the relation between spirituality and play, see Stef Aupers' chapter in this volume).

Second, playing is "not meant", it refers to an activity of "just pretending". The thing represented in play is not real. Playing is only acting *as if*, pretending. Huizinga calls this "the consciousness that it [play] is 'different' from 'ordinary life'" (ibid., 28).

Third, play is not only immersive in the sense that it is absorbing the player intensely; this state of mind is also "accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy" (ibid.). According to Huizinga, the "play-mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth and relaxation follow" (ibid., 132).

Fourth, play is distinct from ordinary life both in terms of locality and duration. It is characterized by specific *limits of time and space:* The *magic circle* ("tovercirkel") of play is not only a spatial circle, but a temporal one as well.[8] It also takes place *in* and *as* what we might call a magic *cycle*: "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" (Huizinga 1955, 10).

Fifth, the *rules* that constitute the play-world are crucial to the 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" (ibid., 11).[9] "As soon as the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses" (ibid.). Whereas the cheater still pretends to play and in doing so still acknowledges the magic circle and cycle, "the player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a 'spoil-sport'" (ibid.).

Sixth, play "creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection" (ibid., 10). Play is "indispensible for the well-being of the community, fecund of cosmic insight and social development" (ibid., 25).

As Huizinga considers play to be a "primary category of life" (ibid., 3), the play-definition presented in the first chapter of *Homo ludens* has a universal ring. Huizinga explicitly claims that "all peoples play, and play remarkably alike" (ibid., 28)[10], and he distinguishes two basic forms of play: "The two ever-recurrent forms in which civilization grows in and as play are the sacred performance and the festal contest" (Huizinga 1955, 48). In *Les jeux et les hommes* (1958), a critical elaboration of Huizinga's work, Roger Caillois presents a typology consisting of four categories. In addition to the two forms mentioned by Huizinga, including "sacred performance", which Caillois terms simulation (*mimicry*), ranging from children's imitation play to theater, and "festal contest", or competition (*agôn*), referring to free play, regulated sports, contests, and so on, Caillois also distinguishes chance

(*alea*), as we find it, for example, in counting-out rhymes and lotteries, and vertigo (*ilinx*), ranging from merry-go-round "whirling" to mountain climbing. Crosscutting this classification of game types Caillois discerns two play attitudes: *paidia* and *ludus*. *Paidia* refers to "free play", improvisation, carefree gaiety and laughter, and spontaneous, impulsive, joyous, and uncontrolled fantasy. *Ludus* on the other hand disciplines and enriches *paidia*, since it refers to "gaming", more explicitly rule-governed forms of play that often involve specific skills and mastery.[11] In each of the four categories, play phenomena are located somewhere between the poles of *paidia* and *ludus*. However, *agôn* and *alea* lean towards the pole of *ludus*, while *ilinx* and *mimicry* tend to lean more towards *paidia*. Taken together, these two classifications are useful tools for the analysis of the ludification of contemporary culture.[12]

Before directing our attention to the playful dimension of contemporary information and communication technologies, we have to return to Huizinga's historical analysis for a moment. Although he emphasizes that all culture "arises and unfolds in and as play", he does not claim that cultures always *keep* playing. Echoing the pessimistic tone of Spengler's *The decline of the West* (1991)[1918-1923], Huizinga argues that cultures are most playful in their youth, and gradually become more serious and lose their playfulness as they grow more mature (Huizinga 1955, 75). For Huizinga, Romanticism was the last period in Western culture that exhibited a playful spirit, while in the 19th century, society "seems to leave little room for play" (ibid., 191). And in the dark-toned last chapter of the book, on the play element in 20th century culture, Huizinga states that the play element in culture is "on the wane": "civilization to-day is no longer played" (ibid., 206).

Huizinga acknowledges that this observation seems to be at odds with the fact that sports and popular culture have become major industries in 20th century culture. However, he discerns two contradictory tendencies with regard to the relationship of play and seriousness that in his view lead to a blurring of boundaries between both play and (profane) seriousness. On the one hand, when referring to professional sports, Huizinga claims play has become more and more serious thereby resulting in a loss of playfulness (ibid., 199; cf. Raessens 2009, 86). On the other hand, he claims that we are witnessing a growing playfulness in the sphere of profane seriousness. For example, he points out in commercial competition: "Sport and athletics showed us play stiffening into seriousness but still being felt as play; now we come to serious business degenerating into play but still being called serious" (ibid., 199).

These developments do not lead so much to a more playful culture, but are instead expressions of cheating – "false play" – and for that reason are undermining (playful) culture as such (ibid., 206). This assertion is actually debated by René Glas later in this volume. According to Huizinga, there are several "external factors independent of culture proper" (ibid., 199) that are responsible for the decay of playful culture. He especially refers to the *global commercialization of culture*[13] and the emergence of *puerilism*: a "blend of adolescence and barbarity which has been rampant all over the world for the last two or three decades" (ibid., 205) that have been "caused or supported by the technology of modern communication" ["veroorzaakt of in de hand gewerkt door de techniek van het moderne geestelijk verkeer"] (Huizinga 1950, 237).[14] In this culture, characterized by an "insatiable thirst for trivial recreation and crude sensationalism, the delight in mass meetings, mass-demonstrations, parades etc." he finds a "[complete lack of] humour, the very idea of decency and fair play" (Huizinga 1955, 205).

We should not forget that Huizinga wrote these bitter words in 1938, with the disconcerting memories of the First World War still fresh, and in terrifying anticipation of the no less outrageous barbarisms of the emerging fascist movements. However, in our view, Huizinga's pessimism is not only motivated by the historical context, but points at real contradictions in his argument. If we want to use Huizinga's penetrating insights into play as a fundamental category of life to gain a deeper understanding of the ludification of contemporary, strongly mediated culture, we first have to come to terms with these contradictions, which point at the fundamental ambiguities of the play phenomenon itself.

Despite its inspiring insights, *Homo ludens* still puzzles the reader because of its many contradictions and ambiguities. Let us mention the four most important ones. First, Huizinga presents play as being both *reality and appearance*. On the one hand, he sees play as a key dimension in human life and even maintains that culture is only possible in and as play. On the other hand, he argues that play entirely takes place outside everyday life and is nothing more than a disinterested "*interlude*" (ibid., 9). While play is "indispensable for the well-being of the community, fecund of cosmic insight and social development", it is at the same time only pretending, "make-believe" (ibid., 25) – and for that reason is inconsequential to real life. Because of its reality, we play "holy earnest", yet our play is completely non-serious. Second, play is both *freedom and force*. According to Huizinga, play is a celebration of human freedom, yet he is of the opinion that it "casts a spell over us" because it demands our complete maddening absorption (ibid., 10).[15] For a critique of this idea, see Gordon Calleja's chapter in this

volume. Conversely, although the rules of the game are "absolutely binding", players are also constantly breaking these rules. Third, games are both *determined and changing*. Huizinga emphasizes that the rules of a game are absolute, and at the same time *Homo ludens* is above all a historical narrative about the never-ending transformation of play into various cultural forms. Fourth, play is both an *individual and collective* activity. Although the player is absorbed in his own private play-world, in most cases he plays with or against other players in a shared play-world, often before an audience. Even when one plays a solitary game, it is played before an imagined audience.[16] Moreover, in the case of *mimicry*, the player is pretending to be someone else by creating a community of personae within himself.[17]

Scholars such as Jacques Ehrmann (1968) and Warren Motte (2009) have also pointed out these ambiguities. They have criticized Huizinga for being entangled in contradictions. According to Ehrmann, the "hierarchical dichotomy", in which play is understood as a *re*presentation of a reality existing prior to and independent from play, is highly problematic, as "there is no 'reality' (ordinary or extraordinary!) outside of or prior to the manifestations of the culture that expresses it" (Ehrmann 1968, 33). However, Ehrmann's alternative – "Play, reality, culture are synonymous and interchangeable" (ibid., 56) – is equally problematic since in this case these concepts completely lose their distinctive meaning. And, as Huizinga rightly observes, in our lives we constantly use distinctions as the one between play and non-play. Every culture is based on fundamental distinctions, such as those between nature and culture, profane and sacred, life and death, male and female, good and evil, freedom and constraint (Oudemans and Lardinois 1987, 31). Although these distinctions have a natural basis, they are not simply a given, they are (at least partly) historically and culturally variable constructions (de Mul 2004, 146-52). And often we find ourselves in the uncanny, and sometimes tragic, situation in which we cannot distinguish sharply between these opposites, because things are fundamentally ambiguous or because both opposites turn out to be the case (de Mul 2009).

Moreover, we are often confronted in the case of play with fundamental ambiguities. Sometimes, in case of dangerous sports or war, it is difficult to distinguish between play and seriousness. Or, in the case of game or gambling addiction, between freedom and force. However, within the "separative cosmology" that characterizes modern thinking, including Huizinga's analysis, in the last analysis these ambiguities have no place and have to be exorcized. But in his constant, almost ritual opposing of play and non-play (reality, utility, seriousness, etc.), Huizinga cannot avoid

becoming entangled in the insoluble conceptual tensions that we have pointed out above (cf. Motte 2009, 25-6).

Yet, Motte points to the fact that Huizinga, at several places in *Homo ludens,* shows a greater sensitivity towards the "ambiguity of play" (cf. Sutton-Smith 1997, and Jos de Mul's contribution to this volume) than Ehrmann attributes to him. For example, in the last chapter of *Homo ludens*, Huizinga acknowledges that "play can be cruel and bloody and, in addition, can often be false play. […] War and everything to do with it remains fast in the daemonic and magical bonds of play" (Huizinga 1955, 208-9). And in the same chapter of his book, Huizinga even – reluctantly – acknowledges the blurring of play and profane seriousness in modern culture. However, just because of the aforementioned "separative drive", Huizinga is not able to explain *that* and *how* culture (sacred seriousness) and ordinary life (profane seriousness) can merge *in* and *as* play. Eugen Fink offers an intriguing ontology of play in *Spiel als Weltsymbol* (1960). He maintains that we cannot arrive at such an explanation as long as we stick to the modernist dichotomy of – on the level of attitude – play and seriousness, and – on the ontological level – play and reality (Fink 1968, 19). If we want to grasp this ontological meaning, we should realize that human play never really occurs outside everyday reality. Huizinga is right that the world of play has its own kind of reality. However, the building blocks of the play-world – the playing field, the other players, play objects – are at the same time part of our everyday reality. What distinguishes playing from more serious modes of being on the one hand, and sheer fantasy on the other hand, is that the player is *simultaneously* in the ordinary world and in the play-world. Moreover, as Huizinga acknowledges explicitly, in the playful experience the child, sportsman, and actor are all *aware* of being in both worlds simultaneously (Huizinga 1955, 18).

Here again, the play-experience is very close to aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is characterized by a similar double experience. When we watch a horror movie, and are fully immersed in the narrative, we may experience intense fear. At the same time, however, we know that what we are seeing is "just a movie", "only as if". In psychoanalytical terms we can say that the aesthetic experience requires an ego-split that enables us to have two contradictory experiences at once, e.g. the vampire in the movie is experienced as both real and non-real.[18] This ambiguous, double experience is connected with human reflexivity, the fact that human beings not only experience, but are also, and at the same time, able to experience their experience. In the terminology of Plessner's philosophical anthropology: human experience is simultaneously centric and eccentric, in one word:

(*ec*)*centric*. Being (ec)centric not only implies that we can go beyond our private experience and imagine ourselves in someone else's experience, but also that we can mask ourselves and play different roles in social life. However, at the same time we also remain immersed in our own experiences (Plessner 1975, 288ff.; cf. de Mul 2003, 247-66). As a consequence, when we engage into playful activities, we do not, as Huizinga and Caillois suggest, step outside the everyday world into the magic circle of the play-world, but we intentionally and explicitly play with the double existence that characterize human life. As Eugen Fink explains:

> The player who participates in a game executes in the real world an action of a familiar type. Within the context of the internal meaning of play, however, he is taking over a role. Here we must distinguish between the real man who "plays" and the man created by the role within the play. The player hides his real self behind his role and is submerged in it. He lives *in* his role with a singular intensity, and yet not like the schizophrenic, who is unable to distinguish between "reality" and "illusion". The player can recall himself from his role; while playing, man retains a knowledge of his double existence, however greatly reduced this knowledge may be. Man exists in two spheres simultaneously, not for lack of concentration or out of forgetfulness, but because this double personality is essential to play (Fink 1968, 23).

We might further elucidate this double experience of play by referring to Gregory Bateson's analysis of play. According to Bateson, play combines communication and meta-communication (Bateson 1955). Play is always accompanied by the signal "it's just play" or "it's only a game". We already witness this in higher animals, for example, when two dogs are playfully biting each other. When we play, we can enthusiastically immerse ourselves in the play-world, while at the same time keeping an ironic distance towards our playful behavior, which just for that reason can be termed "playful".

This double character of play has several important implications for a correct understanding of the phenomenon of play. In the first place, Huizinga's remark that play creates order acquires a deeper meaning. The order created by play is not so much a temporary order completely outside or beyond everyday reality, but rather a layer of meaning that *during* play is superimposed on everyday reality. That is why we can call the act of playing a "medium" between us and the world outside us in which lived experience is organized as a meaningful whole (cf. Rodriquez 2006). In the act of play, profane reality is enriched by a layer of sacred seriousness.

Augmented reality before technology! But it is just because it is part of our condition to add new layers to our experiences that human experience is so susceptible to all kinds of technological add-ons.

A second implication of the double character of play is that, just because the immersion in the play-world is always accompanied by the experience that "it's just play", the rules that guide the play are necessarily experienced as being contingent, flexible, and changeable. Just because we are both inside and outside the magic circle, we are able to reflect on the rules as "just play rules" and can modify them if we want to. This is in sharp contrast with Huizinga's emphasis on the absolute character of rules. Moreover, playing *with* the rules is inherent to many forms of play. We already see in child's play that playing with the rules – "Now I'm policeman and you are the naughty boy" – is an important part of the fun.

In addition, in children's play the boundaries of the magical circle (and magical cycle) are rather fuzzy. Where exactly are the spatial boundaries located for children's play-world? When exactly does children's play begin or end? And this also counts for many other playful situations, like playing with your pen while making a telephone call, flirting with someone on a train, or joining a pervasive game (Montola 2005; de Lange 2009). The flexibility and changeability of games cannot only be discerned at the micro level (e.g. small changes in the rules of soccer), but also on the macro level. Entirely new domains of playfulness may be disclosed, for example funshopping or serious gaming.

Connecting to the flexibility of play, Lourens Minnema provides an interesting explanation for the growing interest in play in 19th and 20th century culture. Following Luhmann, Minnema points to the fact that since the Modern Age Western culture has transformed the so far hierarchically stratified structure of society into a functionally differentiated structure, consisting of many substructures, such as politics, economy, law, education, science, technology, and art, which each possess relative autonomy and have their own specific roles and rules. This causes a much higher level of societal complexity and flexibility. According to Minnema, the 20th century fascination for play and games is strongly connected with this societal development. We see our postmodern culture "as a complex of games each one having its own framework, its own rules, risks, chances, and charms" (Minnema 1998, 21). Play becomes a *rite de passage*, a room for new (re) combinations of actions and thoughts, a database of alternative models for living (Turner 1969).[19] However, unlike premodern and modern rites, postmodern rites no longer seem to have a clearly demarcated transformational (liminal) period, but have become a never-ending (liminoid) phenomenon,

an integral part of the socio-economic, cultural and multimedial systems (cf. Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1982).

When we speak about the ludification of culture we are confronted with the question whether this ludification consists in an increase in playful activities or rather a transformation in perspective, in which we use play as a metaphor to understand entities and domains that in themselves are not necessarily considered playful. We think both answers are correct. On the one hand, and contrary to what Huizinga claims, Western culture has witnessed a remarkable revival of the "ludic worldview" since the Romantic movement, with Huizinga's *Homo ludens* being one of the fruits of this development. On the other hand, this change in perspective has also generated the development of all kinds of new ludic attitudes, practices, and objects, which in turn stimulate the ludification of our worldview. In principle, no single "serious domain" within human life is exempt from "ludification". This even applies to the "serious domain" that Huizinga considered to embody the very decay of playfulness: modern technology.

Ludic media technologies

Not only Huizinga's claim that the ludic worldview has disappeared since the beginning of the 19th century is debatable, the same goes for his claim that play and technology are incompatible. Media archaeologist Errki Huhtamo provides a telling example of the interconnectedness of play and technology. According to Huhtamo, "the introduction of large-scale machine production [in the 19th century] was accompanied by an avalanche of different devices that provided amusement, including game-play" (2005, 3). These so-called "slot machines" prepared the ground for the introduction of computer games in the early 1960s. Moreover, we assert that in our contemporary culture, deeply entrenched with digital technologies, play is the key feature for understanding this culture and "playful technologies" are the very means by which we – as we will see in the next section – reflexively construct our identity.

When we talk about the medium-specific ludic characteristics of digital information and communication technologies, we by no means refer to a set of essentialist qualities (see the chapter by Daniel Cermak-Sassenrath in this volume). As we argued above, playfulness does not reside in a single characteristic, but should rather be understood as a set of characteristics that can appear in activities in various more or less overlapping combinations.[20] The question is what affordances (and limitations) for play are being

provided to users by digital media such as computer games, Internet, and mobile phones through their design: "The term affordance refers to the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used. [...] Affordances provide strong clues to the operations of things" (Norman 1988, 9; see also the contributions of Menno Deen, Ben Schouten, and Tilde Bekker). A playful affordance is, thus, only "virtual" (in the sense of a potentiality) until it is actualized by the playful attitude of the user and experienced as such.[21] This search for playful affordances goes hand in hand with what we earlier called a transformation of perspective. Regarding digital media as ludic practices enables us to conceptualize them in specific terms, as we will discuss in more detail at the end of this section.

The characteristics of digital media that we are focusing on here are: multimediality, virtuality, interactivity, and connectivity. *Multimediality* not only refers to the multitude of means of expression including images (still or moving), sound (talk, music, and noises), and written text that digital media share with, for example, film and television, but also, and more importantly, the fact that these elements share one common digital code which has all kinds of economic and legal implications. Think of the ease with which computer games can be (illegally) modified, copied, and distributed without any loss of quality.[22] The second characteristic of digital media, *virtuality*, traditionally refers to immersive experiences provided by new forms of simulation technology (think of virtual reality), as well as to metaphorical spaces created by communication networks (think of the space which comes into being when you're talking on the telephone). But, as Michiel de Lange argues, these descriptions were mostly "founded on two ontologies that were mutually exclusive, the *real* and the *virtual*. Much current (mobile) media research questions this separation. Mobile phone 'virtualities' are embedded in 'real life'. Inversely, 'real life' is encapsulated in 'virtual' communication practices" (de Lange 2010, 165). "Virtual reality" has increasingly become "real virtuality".[23] An example of this is the online game *I'd Hide You* by the Brighton (UK) based artist group Blast Theory. In *I'd Hide You*, players see the world through the eyes of a group of illuminated live runners as they roam the city streets trying to film each other, while at the same time challenging their friends online.[24] Due to a third characteristic, *interactivity* (or *participation*), digital media afford different levels of engagement. Next to "cognitive interactivity" (or "interpretative participation") – digital media also share this with other media – users can intervene in a meaningful way within the representation itself. According to Salen and Zimmerman, this intervention can assume two different forms. The first

one they call "explicit interactivity: or participation with designed choices and procedures". The second form is "beyond-the-object-interactivity: or participation within the culture of the object" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 60; cf. Raessens 2005). We can think, for example, of the co-construction of online games in fan cultures or WEB 2.0 applications which enable their users to co-shape websites. In his contribution to this volume, Frans Mäyrä adds to this debate by zooming in on the casual kinds of play and engagement. An example of the fourth characteristic, *connectivity*, is Facebook, the largest social network site worldwide which now claims to have more than one billion active subscribers. "Due to its make-up, Facebook can be seen both as a site for individual entertainment, and as a tool for maintaining and building communities" (Timmermans 2010, 189).

The concept of play, as elaborated by Huizinga, is a very useful starting point for the analysis of the media experience. Our media and play experiences have many common characteristics. Or, to put it differently, digital media afford users new opportunities to play. To show how the medium-specificity of digital media opens up particular possibilities for play, we have to take into account the six elements of play we distinguished in the section on play (cf. Raessens 2012).

The first element, *expression of human freedom*, can be subdivided in three parts: freedom to play, freedom to make decisions while you are playing, and freedom towards the world (cf. Cermak-Sassenrath 2010, 129-53). What is striking when we take a closer look at how this kind of freedom takes shape in actual media use, is that freedom and force are not as diametrically opposed as Huizinga claims, as we have argued above when discussing the ambiguities in Huizinga's analysis. The freedom to play becomes visible in the player's decision to do so. But when you are forced to play to make a living – as we see in the example of the Chinese gold farmers – play and work, as well as freedom and force, become entangled in the most curious of ways.[25] In relation to mobile phones, this freedom to play is described by Michiel de Lange as "play on, with and through the mobile" (de Lange 2010; see also Rich Ling's chapter in this volume). Play *on* the mobile means that a mobile phone can be used as a platform to play games, anytime and anywhere; while play *with* the mobile means that mobile phone devices have certain properties that elicit play. For example, playing with the mobile phone's camera, in a game called "photo war" with girls competing against boys to get as many opponents as possible in one sharply focused mobile phone photograph (Jarkievich et al. 2008; de Lange 2010, 191). An example of play *through* the mobile would be playful communication. For instance, the use of text messages (SMS): "A text message is less direct and often more

playful in character by making creative use of language and smileys" (de Lange 2010, 209).

The freedom to make meaningful decisions refers to the interactive or participatory nature of digital media. As Huizinga states, play is a "free *activity*" (our italics). An example of the rise of participatory culture is the transition from WEB 1.0 to WEB 2.0. Instead of a few producers of media content sending it out to the masses by limited television or radio channels, WEB 2.0 turns anyone with access to the web into a potential content-provider who can report on specific, idiosyncratic topics to a targeted audience. We should realize, however, that media users are only to a certain degree "in control", as we will discuss later on in relation to the rules of play. Leopoldina Fortunati even suggests in her contribution to this volume that ludic culture might be used as a new control mechanism.

To play, finally, also means that you are free from the constraints of the outside world, it goes beyond profane seriousness as we referred to earlier. The claim that play should have "its aim in itself" (Huizinga 1955, 28) seems difficult to maintain in today's gaming culture where items from Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGS) are being traded on a large scale at online auction and shopping websites such as eBay, and where serious games seem to employ play for educational purposes. But, according to Hector Rodriguez, this is not necessarily the case. Playing serious games can, not only be used "as a vehicle to maximize the 'effectiveness' of teaching", but it can also be used to illuminate "the fundamental nature of the subject being taught. Philosophical games should not, for instance, be merely treated as efficient techniques to make philosophy more appealing or entertaining to students; the act of playing can become a genuine medium of scholarly inquiry into the roots of philosophical activity" (cf. Rodriquez 2006). This means that in serious games, such as *Food Force* and *Darfur is Dying*, profane and sacred seriousness are not mutually exclusive beforehand as claimed by some critics (see Joost Raessens' chapter in this volume).[26]

The second element, *pretending* (not meant), refers to (digital) media use and/or understanding as doing *as if*, or, the double character of media. Like play, "our media culture consists of the acceptance of the 'as-if-ness' of the world" (Silverstone 1999, 59). And in our media culture, too, "we know when we are playing and when we are not" (ibid., 66). The reason for this is twofold. In the first place, it is related to what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin call "the two logics of remediation". Even when (digital) media obey the logic of transparent immediacy – which means that it is the medium's purpose to disappear – think of "the promise of immediacy

through the flexibility and liveness of the web's networked communication" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 197) – they, at the same time, obey the logic of hypermediacy. This means that the user is constantly reminded or brought back into contact with the interface (and its constructedness), in the case of the web the filling of the screen with windows, each with a variety of multimedia applications (ibid., 196-210). Media users are, in principle, in a position to realize that the reality they are facing "is just mediated". It is the explicit goal of media education to make media users more aware of the ways in which media try to mask their own constructedness (for example, their own ideological presuppositions) in order to come across as spontaneous and transparent presentations of so-called "reality". In the second place there is a historical argument. According to Gianni Vattimo, the proliferation of digital media today "makes it increasingly difficult to conceive of a *single* reality. It may be that in the world of the mass media a 'prophecy' of Nietzsche's is fulfilled: in the end the true world becomes a fable" (1992, 7). Media realities are just versions of the way the world works, but never the one and only objective reality.

To analyze the *pleasures* (and/or displeasures) of digital media use, the third element, we have to take into account the medium-specific relationships between production, media texts and reception. Consequently, we have to focus on two questions: "how pleasure is generated in the relationship between the rules and scripts developed by producers and how they are experienced and engaged with by users" (Kerr et al. 2006, 64). The suggestion by advertising and marketing campaigns that digital media can offer more fun and pleasure than traditional media seems untenable to us.[27] We do claim that digital media can offer a wide diversity of complex pleasures – dependent on the particular users and contexts – that are partly the same (for example, the pleasure of narrative), partly more intensive (for example, the pleasure of immersion), and partly different from what traditional media have to offer. Specific for digital media are those displeasures and pleasures that are related to interactivity, including computer game addiction, boredom, or frustration ("World Wide Wait"), and the feeling of being in and out of control, the tension of winning or losing, of succeeding or failing, as well as those pleasures that can be experienced by submitting and confirming to the rules, including negotiating or resisting these rules. According to Aphra Kerr, Julian Kücklich, and Pat Brereton, play is "a key concept for understanding the interaction of users with new media" and "the unique pleasure experienced when [the pleasures of] control, immersion and performance are combined" (ibid., 69-70). Players experience the pleasure of immersion, for example, while performing their skills (e.g.

playing Dance Dance Revolution)[28] or while they modify the original goals of the designers by playing with the rules of the system, for example teaching Sony's robot dog AIBO how to dance, as we will discuss later on.

The fourth element, *specific limits of time and space*, seems to be subjected to great pressure in this time of ubiquitous computing. It is, on the contrary, the illimitability of the mobile phone for example that seems to be the defining and at the same time the liberating and the restraining characteristic of today's media culture: "At its introduction it was praised as the ultimate device in terms of mobile communication, the freedom to move and staying 'logged in' at the same time, but it also forced us into a culture of constant reachability, reciprocity in terms of answering phone calls and text messages and an 'always on' mentality" (Timmermans 2010, 134). This does not mean, however, that digital media would not have a separate time and place: "The media have the capacity, indeed they entirely depend upon that capacity, to engage an audience within spaces and times that are distinguished – marked off – from the otherwise relentless confusions of everyday life. There is a threshold to be crossed each time we participate in the process of mediation" (Silverstone 1999, 61). This is evident, for example, when we focus on security issues. Digital media users can, as players do, try out or test or experiment with new identities, something that does not need to have real-life consequences (see the chapter by Jeroen Jansz in this volume). "Both surprises and security. The challenge of the new within the bounds of the familiar. Risks managed. Games, in their endless, electronic recurrence, that, unlike in life, we never really lose" (ibid., 61). The limits also come to the fore at moments when a user wants to continue (the magic cycle), but is forced, by external reasons, to stop using the medium.

The *rules of play*, the fifth element, can either be accepted or played with both on the individual micro level and on the macro level of the media system. On the one hand, digital media require users to submit to their rules. Within specific limits, there is freedom for the user to play. Individual users give what Stuart Hall called "preferred readings" (or in this case preferred play) of a media text, while they explore and/or select one of the many preprogrammed system-internal possibilities of a digital media system (Hall 1996, 128-138). In both cases users play according to the rules. On the other hand, users can play with these rules in – more or less – subversive ways. Here, users are involved in "oppositional readings" of media texts, and, on a macro level try to change the relationship between media producers, distributors and consumers. An example of this is the participatory culture that has been established around online games such as *World of Warcraft*. We are witnessing here again, within certain limits, a

disintegration of the traditional distinction between the consumer and the producer. Players become, for example, active participants in the process of *World of Warcraft*'s creation and evolution (cf. Glas 2013). And referring to the aforementioned codification of digital culture, all software-based products can be modified and adapted to the personal needs of a user: "A Microsoft Xbox becomes a Linux computer. Nintendo's GameBoy gets turned into a musical instrument, and Sony's robot dog AIBO learns how to dance" (Schäfer 2011, 12). These examples of playful product modifications are exemplary of the important changes that have taken place in today's cultural industries. But we have to keep in mind that, within a globalizing economy, the basic rule of "industrial temporal objects" (a Stiegelerian term used by Patrick Crogan in this volume) like *World of Warcraft* is that in order to play the game, players – even when they have become "prosumers" – need to buy the game, pay a monthly subscription fee to play it and, on top of that, have to pay for the creative cultural modifications resulting from (sometimes their own) active player participation. So we need to be careful. The concept of participatory culture is in danger of overstating the importance of Do-It-Yourself counterculture, as discussed in the chapter of Valerie Frissen in this volume. As Henry Jenkins phrases it: "Allowing consumers to interact with media under controlled circumstances is one thing; allowing them to participate in the production and distribution of cultural goods – on their own terms – is something else altogether" (Jenkins 2006, 133).[29] This sense of "being-played" is what Michiel de Lange calls play *by* the mobile: "We are not univocal masters over our information and communication technologies. Mobile media also impose their logics on us in a dialectic between freedom and force" (2010, 215).

The sixth element, *order*, is related to the formation of social groupings. A good example of a WEB 2.0 application that creates a community-based temporary order is the so-called green blog. In line with Félix Guattari's analysis of a *post-media age* "in which the media will be re-appropriated by a multitude of subject-groups capable of directing its resingularisation" (2000, 61), people from all over the globe gather online in their struggle for a cleaner environment. The decentralized nature of the Internet "lends itself particularly well to grassroots activism. Disenfranchised segments of society who are fighting against environmental injustices in their communities no longer need to deal with intermediaries in the form of the mainstream mass media and established publishing routes" (Timmermans 2010, 164). These "green blogs" are engaged in forms of "*playful* social resistance and "a *light* dealing with matters that were formerly often seen as 'abstract', 'incomprehensive', or 'too big' for individuals" (ibid., 166-7).[30] Green blogs

enrich so to say – like play does – (profane) reality with a layer of (sacred) seriousness.

This example of playful social resistance makes clear that media can be used as part of a political battlefield (*agôn*), as we discussed earlier in relation to Roger Caillois' typology of play. But depending on the specific type of play that is chosen, the world can also be presented as a performance (*mimicry*), a place where chance rules (*alea*) or where people strive for kicks (*ilinx*). In the domain of mobile media, we can provide the following examples. We already referred to the practice of "photo wars" as an example of mobile *agôn* where "girls [compete] against boys to get as many opponents as possible sharply in one mobile phone photograph" (de Lange 2010, 191). The fact that many people in Asia place high value on lucky telephone numbers in the hope that this brings them fortune is a good example of mobile *alea* (ibid., 195). An example of mobile *mimicry* is "stage-phoning": "the presence of the mobile can be used to inform the audience that this is a person with a life, a person of the mobile world" (Plant 2003, 49). Finally, users of iPods dwelling in their own privatized sound "bubble" can be considered a good case in point of mobile *ilinx* (de Lange 2010, 164, 200).

Approaching digital media as playful practices enables us to conceptualize them in terms of the four ambiguities we discerned in the section on play. The first ambiguity refers to the "as-if-ness" character of media; *reality and appearance* are not strictly separated, but are interrelated in meaningful ways. Digital media, at least in principle, afford users the opportunity to become (more or less) aware of the constructedness of their media experiences. This implies a second ambiguity, that of *freedom versus force*. As is the case with play, we are able to reflect on the rules as "just play rules" always open for modifications, both on a basic micro level (the individual user that interacts with a media text and/or technology) and on a macro level (changes in the relationships between media producers, distributors and consumers). There is a dialectic relationship between freedom and force: we can play and are "being-played" (cf. players who suffer from game addiction) at the same time. The third ambiguity is that of *determination versus change*. Each medium pretends to be the final phase of a long-lasting development, think of the Web's claim for immediacy based on its flexible and live network communication possibilities, and the mobile phone's claim to realize the desire for ideal communication (cf. de Vries 2012). But, as history shows, many if not most of these claims are being outdated by the arrival and claims of newer media. The liveness of the WEB, for example, is "a refashioned version of the liveness of broadcast television" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 197). The fourth ambiguity, *individuality versus collectivity*,

deals with the identity of individual media in today's media landscape. This landscape can be characterized by concepts such as "convergence" which represents "an ongoing process or series of intersections between different media systems" (Jenkins 2006, 282) or "remediation" which is "the representation of one medium in another" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 45). We just need to think of the Web's claim to represent or absorb all other media. However, because all the current media – consoles, computers, as well as mobile phones – have play applications and can be used as play devices, they lose a bit of their presumed individual identity and all become part of and play a role in the collective playful media landscape. A mobile phone, for example, has developed over time from a strict communications tool into a multimedia computer you can play on, play with, and play through as we have seen. Moreover, the converging multimedia landscape also provides extremely fruitful soil for crossmedia games and virals, as well as for online game worlds that combine, in various (re)combinations, *agôn*, *mimicry*, *alea*, and *ilinx*, such as *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life.*

Playful identities

Now that we have explored the characteristics and ambiguities of play and "playful media", we would like to explain how this relates to personal and cultural identity. The claim we will defend in this section is that the playful technologies, which have substantially invaded our lives in recent decades, have a profound impact on the construction of our identity. In order to defend our claim, we start with some general remarks on identity and its construction.

The word "identity" has its etymological roots in the Latin concept *identitas*, which in turn is derived from the Latin word "*idem*" referring to "the same". Indeed, the "I" remains the same during my lifetime as far as this word refers to my *numerical unity*: x=x. I am identical to myself and to no one else. It is reasonable to expect that I will still be the same person tomorrow as I am today, and will not, for example, awake as my neighbor. Obviously, this does not mean that we do not change. After all, during our lifetime both our body and our mental life undergo substantial transformations. Due to biological growth and renewal (almost all of the cells in our body are gradually replaced by new ones), our learning processes, new experiences and, finally, decay, our identity changes from birth to death. However, when we talk about *personal identity,* we usually do not refer to

some unchangeable entity,[31] but rather to a particular kind of *spatial and temporal continuity*.

Spatial continuity lies in the fact that the elements from which the physical and psychic identity are constructed do not form a loose conglomerate, but rather constitute an internal nexus, in which the parts and the whole are closely connected. This is evident for the physical dimension of our existence, where the various body parts – cells, tissues, organs, limbs, etc. – are integrated into a functional whole. But our embodied thoughts, actions, social roles and desires are also part of a functional and meaningful whole. Of course, this integration is never complete. Human identity consists of many heterogeneous elements that are often more in conflict than not. Moreover, our life shows all kinds of dissociative states, such as (day)dreaming, religious or sexual ecstasy, immersion in a movie or a (computer) game, highway hypnosis, intoxication by alcohol and other drugs, symptoms of bodily and mental disintegration, and so on. When the functional or meaningful nexus is largely or completely destroyed (for example in case of dissociative identity disorders), disintegration or even a total loss of the person's identity may be the result.

Although we change all the time during our lives, the temporal continuity lies in the fact that our bodily and mental changes mostly take place gradually. One does not become an adolescent, adult, or graybeard overnight. And the same counts for our personal relationships, social roles, professions, etc. Memory and anticipation play a crucial role with regard to temporal continuity because they constitute permanence in time.[32] Also in this case, the continuity is never complete; it is characterized by interruptions (sleep) and gaps (forgetting). This is also with regard to the temporal nexus, sometimes radical discontinuities – for example, the loss of memory in the case of dementia, the loss of a limb, a transgender operation, a disruptive addiction, or a radical religious or political conversion – may result in fundamental changes or even total distortion of the temporal (bodily and mental) identity.

Much of what has been said about personal identity also counts for *cultural identity*. A culture or subculture also shows a certain unity of the constituting parts and at the same time can involve interruptions. A Calvinist culture or a hip-hop subculture, to mention two examples, are not only characterized by a particular worldview, but also find expression in the lifestyle of their members, the way they dress, their musical taste, the way they organize their social relations, among other things. In addition, cultures also show temporal continuity. Calvinism and hip-hop enjoy a particular history, which is expressed in collective memories. Moreover,

they entail specific aims and ideals that guide future behavior. Just as in the case of personal identity, the spatial and temporal continuity of cultural identities is never complete, but shows all kinds of dissociations and interruptions. And like individual persons, cultures are characterized by a lifespan that ranges from birth to death, and in between they change and influence each other continuously.

A third and crucial aspect of the human identity – next to its numerical unity and spatio-temporal continuity – concerns its *reflexive* character. We came across the notion of reflexivity already in the section on play, when we discussed the double existence that characterizes human play. Reflexivity consists of "the turning-back of the experience of the individual upon himself" (Mead 1934, 134), or, in other words, the ability to "experience our experiencing" (Plessner 1975, 364). In the context of identity, we encounter this reflexive dimension when we pose the question for whom the spatial and temporal continuity characteristic of personal and cultural identity arises. Although other people can ascribe a personal or cultural identity for us (which obviously can have a great influence on the way we experience our selves), we ourselves are the ones who actually finally *experience* our personal and cultural identity. Reflexivity denotes self-awareness, self-reflection, having a self-image. We express ourselves in daily conversations, the way we dress, our lifestyle, and so on, and also experience how others describe or treat us, but what is crucial for our identity is whether we recognize ourselves in these (re)presentations. Whether someone identifies with being female, with Islam, or hip-hop culture (or possibly all three) is not only always, and somewhat arbitrary, determined by physical characteristics, actions, habits, preferences or beliefs, but it also depends on whether this person regards and recognizes themselves as such.[33]

In sum, our personal and cultural identity is not a self-contained and unchanging entity, somewhere hidden in the depths of our "inner self" or "national spirit", but it is reflexively constructed in a social world with the aid of various expressions. According to the hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur, among these expressions (life) stories play a prominent and even crucial role. This is understandable, as life stories are particularly suitable to express the spatial and temporal continuity of our identity. In a series of publications Ricoeur has developed this insight into a full-fledged theory of *narrative identity* (Ricoeur 1985; 1991a; 1991b; 1992). His starting point is the insight that "Answering the question 'Who?' [...] implies the narration of a life story" (Ricoeur 1985, 335). It is only in the stories we tell others and ourselves about our own lives and about other people's lives (real or fictional) that we are able to adequately articulate our own selves, and only

by identifying ourselves with these stories does our own identity come into being. Thus the narrative for Ricoeur is not only a suitable metaphor for human identity, but it is also preeminently the *medium* we use to give our identity form. We might even say that for Ricoeur our identity is contained in our life story.

At first sight, Ricoeur's narrative model offers a good starting point for a theory of *ludic* identity construction. When seen from the perspective of Huizinga's *Homo ludens*, literature entirely belongs to the sphere of play. Huizinga writes in his chapter dedicated to the relationship of play and poetry: "All poetry is born of play: the sacred play of worship, the festive play of courtship, the martial play of the contest, the disputatious play of braggadocio, mockery and invective, the nimble play of wit and readiness" (1955, 129; cf. Raessens 2009, 88). After enumerating the six characteristics of play again that we discussed in the section on play (expression of freedom, as if character, tension and joy, specific time-space limits, rule-governed, creation of order), he even states: "Now it can hardly be denied that these qualities are also proper to poetic creation. In fact, the definition we have just given of play might serve as a definition of poetry" (Huizinga 1955, 132). Actually, in a civilization that becomes increasingly serious, poetry even is play's last haven of refuge: "Civilization as a whole becomes more serious – law and war, commerce, technics and science lose touch with play; and even ritual, once the field *par excellence* for its expression, seems to share the process of dissociation. Finally only poetry remains as the stronghold of living and noble play" (ibid., 134).

How then do stories, in Ricoeur's account, contribute to our identity construction?[34] Ricoeur's starting point is that (life) stories are not pre-given and static, but attain form through our actions and our narrative reflection on them. According to Ricoeur, we can distinguish in this process a threefold *mimesis*. The first level, referred to as *mimesis*$_1$, is connected with the narrative prefiguration of our daily life. In Ricoeur's view this lies in the practical knowledge that guides our actions. We experience our dealings with our fellow human beings in terms of meaning: we distinguish motives and interests, we set standards and ascribe values, and we attempt to realize certain ideals in life. Therefore, in a certain sense, our actions already contain an implicit narrative. Our life is an unremitting "quest of narrative" (Ricoeur 1991a).

Ricoeur designates the expression of the experienced prenarrative coherence in explicit narratives as *mimesis*$_2$. He describes this second stage in narrative construction of our identity in dramaturgical terms, derived from Aristotle's analysis of tragedy in his *Poetics*. According to Aristotle,

the notion of the plot (*muthos*) is central for the expression of a series of mutually connected and motivated actions (1984, 2321). For Ricoeur, the plot (in the French original he uses the phrase *mise en intrigue*) can be understood as "a synthesis of the heterogeneous" (1992, 141). The plot unites the heterogeneous elements that make up a story – events, such as actions and happenings, and existents, such as settings and characters (cf. Chatman 1978). The Aristotelian plot can be regarded as a complete whole. It is a whole because all the elements within the plot are linked and there are no elements unrelated to the plot. In the plot, every element has meaning in light of the whole. It is complete because together the elements provide the narrative closure. In a nutshell, a plot endows a heterogeneous whole with a proper beginning, middle, and end (Aristotle 1984, 2321). Ricoeur refers to the meaningful configuration created by the plot as the *concordance*. However, this concordance is no static state, but is continuously jeopardized by *discordance*, such as reversals of fortune that threaten the meaningful closure of the narrative. A story is the representation of an act that is continuously frustrated by more or less unforeseen settings and happenings. This makes the story a dynamic whole. For that reason Ricoeur calls the story a *discordant concordance* (Ricoeur 1992, 141).

The third step in the construction of narrative identity, *mimesis*$_3$, consists of the reflective application of the narrative configuration on the self, resulting in our identification with the characters of the story. In Ricoeur's view, the unity of the story – the plot – is closely connected to the characters figuring in it. Telling a story is telling who does what and why. In the story, we witness how a character develops. Just like with the plot, characters show a dialectic of concordance and discordance. Contingent events receive a narrative coherence through the character. From a psychoanalytical point of view, we could say that the identification that characterizes *mimesis*$_3$, consists in the internalization of the object of desire – the state of concordance obtained by the characters in the story. This is not a simple imitation, but an appropriation or assimilation that results in a change in the identity of the identifying person (cf. Freud 1953, IV, 156). However, just as in the case of the plot, the stability obtained by this internalization is rather shaky, as it is continuously confronted by the return of the heterogeneous, which threatens the concordance of our identity. A sublime love, a personal vendetta, a crisis or addiction, illness and death – such happenings give our life story unexpected turns, and keep challenging the concordance of the character and ultimately may destroy it. Until its very end, the (life) story is characterized by this dialectic between concordance and discordance.

In our view, Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity offers an excellent starting point for a better understanding of identity construction in the age of ludic technologies, as it illuminates the mediated character of human identity construction. However, we have to adapt his theory in order to apply it to popular media culture. Ricoeur's notion of narrative is limited for several reasons.

First, in his work he almost *exclusively pays attention to the art of the novel*. Because of his focus on works belonging to *serious* high culture, he seems to be blind to the often more *frivolous* ways identity construction takes place in everyday gossip and life stories, and in popular fictional accounts, such as movies, soaps, comics, and narrative computer games, among others.

Second, his focus on mostly classical novels also results in a greater emphasis on elements of form that are connected with these kinds of novels, such as *monomediality*, *linearity*, and *closure*. The kinds of narratives we come across in the aforementioned genres in popular culture often have a different form; they are, for example, *multimedial, interactive, connected*, and *open-ended*. If Ricoeur's presupposition that the structure of the explicit narrative (*mimesis*$_2$) is crucial for identity construction, since it influences the identity that results from its identification with this explicit narrative (*mimesis*$_3$), is true, then narratives that have a different aesthetic form might also result in *different forms of identity*. This is exactly what Ajit Maan argues in *Internarrative identity* where she investigates identity construction in (post)modernist and non-Western novels that are characterized by open endings or multiple openings and/or endings (Maan 1999). And the same can be argued with regard to self-constructions in the domain of narration in digital media. Even when they remain within the domain of *mimicry*, they may result in other "identity effects" than classical narratives.

Third, Ricoeur's focus on *mimicry* is another limitation of his theory. As we noted earlier in this section, for Huizinga, "poetry" encloses much more than narrative accounts of human action. It also includes the play of worship, of courtship, and contests, among other things. Connecting to the division that Caillois has derived from Huizinga, we claim that an adequate *theory of ludic identity construction* should not only take into account the ways classical and contemporary postmodern and/or popular narratives (understood as *mimicry*) constitute and structure our identity, but it should also address the ways other ludic expressions, characterized by *alea, agôn*, and *ilinx*, constitute and structure our identity.

This intended extension of Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity construction is necessary, in our opinion, because in our present culture self-construction via classical narratives is increasingly being complemented,

and partly replaced by self-constructions using all kinds of "ludic" digital technologies, as analyzed in the previous section. We realize the need for such a theory, when we consider the fact that identity construction in today's present culture has become rather problematic. This has to do with what sociologist Anthony Giddens has conceptualized as *reflexive uncertainty* (Giddens 1991). Because of the complexity, flexibility and changeability of our present life, and the abundance of media of expression, it has become a real challenge to master the overwhelming discordant character of our lives. Because of their abundance and heterogeneity, as well as their rapid development, present information and communication technologies contribute substantially to this uncertainty. However – and here again we touch upon one of the aforementioned ambiguities of new media – it at the same time also offers us the tools to cope with it.[35] The construction of identity has become a highly reflexive project, and communication media are at the very heart of this reflexivity. Mainly for this reason, we maintain that the playfulness of modern communication technologies is key to understanding contemporary identity construction.

In order to express our adaptation of Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity to include the ludic categories of *alea, agôn*, and *illinx*, we will replace in the following the base term *mimesis* (which is strongly connected to *mimicry*) with *play*. This enables us to reformulate Ricoeur's mimetic triad with $Play_{1,}$ $Play_{2}$, and $Play_{3.}$ In the remainder of this section we discuss the new insights that this extension of Ricoeur's theory provides in the nature of identity construction in today's culture.

$Play_{1}$ refers to the ludic prefiguration of our everyday life. This moment consists of our lived experience of the natural and human world as playful. For example, when we notice the play of light or waves or when we watch the play of animals or children. Whereas some of our playful experiences are connected to *mimicry,* as in the example of watching playing children or when we are enjoying a good joke or a funny story told by a friend or colleague, *alea, agôn*, and *illinx* can also offer many playful moments in our daily lives. The dimension of *alea* ranges from counting-out rhymes like children do, to betting who will win the soccer finals with your colleagues. Especially the experience of *agôn* pervades almost every aspect of our lives. The car driver who tries to take the lead when the traffic light turns green, is no less "infected" by the spirit of *agôn* than the student or employee who wants to show that he is the best of his class or the office, the heaviest drinker in the pub, or the most successful womanizer. In sports as well as transportation, to mention only a few domains, the experience of *illinx* always plays a role, ranging from the kicks we derive from speed,

from running and cycling, to car racing, high speed trains and aviation or the kicks we get from dangerous activities such as mountain climbing or bungee jumping.

However, in addition to these more or less traditional manifestations of play, the ubiquitous presence of digital media in our everyday life is implicitly prefiguring our experiences and actions in a playful way. For instance, this is happening when our daily tasks, travels, and communications are being aestheticized by fancy apps on our smartphones and tablets, or when we are invited to rank a sportsman, actress, or politician on a fan site, share casual tweets or mobile camera images during our daily interactions with others, or get engaged in the erotic play of seduction when exchanging text messages. In a world full of playful technologies, we are constantly seduced to become more receptive to the ludic dimensions of life. In a world of ludic technologies we are invited to experience this kind of playful movements backward and forward that renew themselves in constant repetition everywhere in the world (Gadamer 1986).

While *Play*$_1$ refers to the more implicit understanding of our everyday life as playful, and our more or less casual playing (*paidia*), *Play*$_2$ refers to the expression of this experienced ludic nexus in more or less explicitly articulated and regulated games (*ludus*). In addition to the already overwhelming amount of games in the offline world, the new media afford an abundance of online ludic activities in all four dimensions of play. We can think of online worlds such as *Second Life* and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), such as *World of Warcraft* and *Star Wars: The Old Republic,* which combine *mimicry*, *agôn*, and *illinx*, and gambling websites and dating sites (*alea*). We already introduced several examples in the previous section and the contributions to this volume discuss many other examples in detail. We will restrict ourselves here to a discussion of just a few other examples in order to explicate some of the most striking tendencies that shape identity construction.

One of the notable characteristics of playful technologies is that they tend to mix the different types of play into one total play experience. In our view this characteristic is connected to the fact that the computer is a "universal machine" that thanks to its digital code is not only able to mix most of our media (hence its multimedial character discussed in the previous section), but can also simulate all possible machines and practices. The computer, tablet, or smartphone easily becomes the "focal device" of our life (cf. Borgmann 1984). Michiel de Lange provides an example of mixed *mimicry*, *alea* and *agôn* in this volume by analyzing the practice of *gengsi* in urban Indonesia. *Gengsi* refers to the display of prestige or status, originally