



Reinventing Play. A tribute to Prof. dr. Johan Huizinga. 1872 – 1945

Based on blog articles by Gerard Dekker and MadLogic fellows (2013 - 2015).

2015 will see the 70th anniversary of Johan Huizinga's death. In order to mark this anniversary, we once again reflect on Huizinga's great intellectual legacy.

In *Homo Ludens* (1938) Huizinga attempts to show how culture is shaped by play. The importance of this endeavor is that it identifies play as an independent phenomenon. Play for Huizinga has its own organizational forces, its own purposes and its own space.

In 2012/13 we have dedicated four blog posts on Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*. Why? Well..., because he inspired us to think FUNdamentally about play,... and to the gamification movement, his "Homo Ludens" still forms a rich source of inspiration.

Introduction

The book discusses the importance of the play element of culture and society. Huizinga suggests that play is primary to and a necessary condition of the generation of culture.

Play is a voluntary act or activity, that within certain limits set by time and place be carried out into willingly accepted, but totally binding rules, with her goal in itself, accompanied by a sense of excitement and joy, and by a sense of different than ordinary life.

All play is first and foremost a free act, it is free, it is freedom. Every play space has its own, but absolute order. The game creates order, it is order. The combination of strict determinacy and real freedom are the main common traits of games. Other elements that are specific to play are uncertainty and chance, motion, ceremony, excitement.

Games take place outside the reasonableness of the ordinary and practical life, outside the sphere of utility. Games have their validity outside reason and duty. Another main characteristic of games are rules. Every game has rules, otherwise it is not a game. Once the rules are bent or broken, the game world falls to pieces. Players who break the rules are game breakers.

Play as a preliminary stage of culture

According to Huizinga culture does not start as play, nor from play, but in game. However, simultaneously with the development of a culture, the factor play moves to the background. What remains is the essence of the game; respect of the rules.

Ancient Greeks battled over justice as a strict rule contest, in sacred forms, where the two opposite parties sought the decision of a referee. The process was seen as game of chance, a battle with words. The lawsuit was a fight for justice or injustice, to right or wrong, to win or lose. The scale of justice. The law outweighing injustice.

Like games, poetry is beyond seriousness, where the child, the animal, the wild and the visionary belong, in the field of dream, ecstasy, intoxication and laughter. Poetry matures through play, as the holy game of worship, the festive game of courtship, the game of competition, with swagger, derision and/or ridicule, but always a game of ingenuity and skill. Poetry converts cult into words, it decides social relationships, it is the vehicle of wisdom, law and morals.

Philosophy emerged from the cultic game of knowledge and wisdom. Discussing questions with no conclusive answer, was a popular social game to the Greeks. Most of these questions could be characterized as cosmological dilemmas and mysteries. What is bigger: the sea or the earth? What came first: day or night? Historically, people were used to think everything in a duality of opposites and manage it through battles.

Play in the 19th and early 20th century

Ludic characteristics are both evident in ancient Roman and Greek society, though more evident in the former than the latter. Namely, culture of ancient Latin was determined by practical economic and legal thinking, little fantasy and superstition. Whilst the ludic element clearly shows in the expression 'Panem et Circenses' (bread and games), as to what the people demanded of their government.

During medieval times, only when not rooted religious or classical, there was still room for the creative effects of elements of play within culture. A good example is the ludic book of 'Praise of Folly' (Lof der Zotheid) in which the Dutch philosopher and writer Erasmus mocks all walks of life.

In the Renaissance people attempted to grasp life in a game of imaginary perfection. In spite of the emergence of modern science, which with its strict requirements of accuracy clearly lessened an attitude of play, the element of play livened until the eighteenth century.



In the nineteenth century culture was by far less played than before and in almost all her cultural functions play faded into the background. People worked on their own earthly wellbeing through science and the ideals of labor, education and democracy hardly left any room for the eternal principal of play.

In the 20th century, sports seem to have made up for the loss of other forms of social play. However, by this increasing systematization and disciplining of play one could say that play in its purest form has been lost. Play has become serious business, the play sentiment has disappeared.

Play in the 21st Century (in our view)

Currently play is being reinvented, simply because there is no substitute. Play is the most natural, fun and rewarding way to explore new situations and learn. People simply have a natural tendency and desire to play, learn and grow and suppressing it does not make sense, nor makes the world a better place.

The best scenario is the one where play will become integral part of the way we think, act and tackle societal issues. Play has indeed a huge creative potential, which should and could be unlocked. We are playfully committed to be part of that movement.

MadLogic fellows

