Gianluca Maestri
Notes on the semantics of play

Abstract
This article aims to take a new look at the theme of play through the recognition of the semantics which are proper to it. The path we have identified develops around the suggestions of Huizinga, Caillois and Goffman's thoughts. These authors have grasped in the theme of play, although with different perspectives, a symbolic space and a common practice necessary for the life of culture. In fact, within our play takes place/occurs the encounter and negotiation between the different points of view, necessarily heterogeneous and conflicting, as well as their unceasing/constant/ incessant re-inclusion in a shared horizon of meaning, capable of transcending them. For this reason, not only a simple affinity between play and teaching is given, but a dense relationship capable of directing our actions in the world and the ways in which we try to represent it.

Fig. 1
Katsushika Hokusai, *Leçons de dessin par la décomposition géométrique.*
Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie, 4-OD-154.

Semantics and minimal signification around play
Schiller stated that man is only fully a human being when he plays (2002). This fascinating proposition suggests at least two things to those who want to address play. The first, and certainly the most evident, lies in the ontological *quid* of "success" – playing is the only act in which an individual can be fully successful. The second is that play is an activity which is intimately intrinsic to culture. Therefore, on that basis, we inevitably fluctuate in a complementary sense between the sensible and the rational. Consequently, we must recall the activity and the practice of play. This is because play, being made out of rules and objects (but not exclusively), as it shows itself in its pragmatic lines and its normative aspect, involves the person's intentions, his acts and the collective representations that mediate his own relationship with play and with the relationships included within it.
I would now like to recall a distinction made by many authors who wrote about play: the semantic horizon and the practical horizon. If the first helps us to identify the definition of recreational situations and recreational objects through objective and recognisable qualities, the second includes the description of the characteristics of recreational behaviour and the creation of the related recreational situations. Broadly speaking, it is an allocation susceptible to exemplification such as a comparison between passive properties and active properties relating to play.
In Italian, the word *gioco* indicates a leisure, exercise, training activity, or again a regulated competition. However, this activity also represents many other "excesses", starting from the idea of space which could be called into question for mechanical, linguistic, visual etc. reasons. This space of action assumes a fundamental hermeneutic importance which is easily as-

Fig. 2
Hieronymus Bosch, *The Conjurer*, 1502, oil on wood.

cribable to the difficulties that could arise when searching for a unique meaning of *gioco*, to the fact that the concept itself is used to represent an interpretive space which is not reducible or objective.

The English language offers instead an interesting dichotomy constituted by the terms *game* and *play*. The nodal point of the first word is the description of a physical or mental competition carried out by participants opposing each other through rules. Peculiar qualities of (recreational) objects or contexts are described, qualities which we could define as passive, tied to the objectivity of the game. The second word calls into consideration actions, recreational acts and active qualities related to the subjectivity of those who play. Bateson refers to this distinction by making a diachronic connection between the two meanings: in fact, once *play* is organised and regulated, and a sanction is assigned in case of victory or defeat, it becomes a *game* (Bateson, 1996). Certainly, there are two very different readings of this dualism. However, these two terms, although capable of considering the distinction between active and passive properties, don't seem to unambiguously solve the problem around the nature of play. On the one hand, we have playing in an organised and disciplined way; on the other, we have playing linked to fun, attributable to children playing while the world is unravelling. In summary: on one hand we have the object "game", the structure, the context, while, on the other, the act of playing, the creation of a ludic context.

Culture, practice and activities. Reality comes into play

French structuralist studies tried to address play with a prospective approach which is deeply different from mathematical discipline. In the period immediately after the Second World War, Benveniste described play as «any regulated activity which is an end in itself and [which] does not aim at any practical modification of reality» (Benveniste, 2008, 123). In comparison with mathematical theories of that time, the use of strategy in social relationships is therefore hypothesised and a greater emphasis is

placed on rules and the "inefficient" influence of play in reality[1]. Today, Benveniste's comparison of play to a structure, together with the declaration that play itself determines the nature of its players (and not vice versa), represent positions which are hard (please note: not impossible) to support. Beyond the current considerations, the positions taken by Benveniste indirectly cover the theoretical discourses around play. Consider the difference between *ludus* and *jocus*, words that recall exercise (preparation and training) and *non*-serious discourse, and how the second progressively ousted the first in common use when referring to play. Or again, consider the idea that play is distinct from reality but that, at the same time, it is capable of imagining an alternative to it, acquiring some aspects of sacredness. From these intuitions we obtain semantic couples which will necessarily be recoded while imagining an ideal education wanting to deal with itself "through" play: exercise/non exercise; seriousness/non-seriousness; real value/simulated value; sacralisation/desacralisation.

In this direction, I would like first to ponder on some theories belonging to Huizinga and Caillois, as they offer a primarily morphological analysis of play. Afterwards, following Goffman's perspective, I will consider the concepts of "disguise" and "encounter" present in ludic interactions.

Ludens

Huizinga is the first scholar of the twentieth century to dedicate himself with depth of analysis to the understanding of play. His work certainly shows an excessively aestheticised interdisciplinary emphasis. However, criticism notwithstanding[2], the heuristic efficacy of Huizinga's illuminating intuition remains: culture and play are overlapping and comparable ideas. This means if it's not possible to offer one or more boundaries to the concept of play, in it we can find and recognise conceptual plots and problematic nodes which are susceptible to being tested in different disciplinary fields. Concentrating on the analysis of play as a process (and not as a structure) appears to the present author to be an effective choice.

In Huizinga's work (1973) the distinction between *game* and *play*, despite implicitly running through the entirety of the text, remains unanswered. It's hard to understand which definition Huizinga prefers in his defining research, even if he seems to be closer to the idea of *play*. This only emphasises the dualism between the formal analysis of the play object and the observation of the ludic practices and acts concentrating on the involved subjects. According to Caillois, Huizinga performed «a research on the fecundity of the ludic spirit which presides over certain kinds of games: regulated competition games» (Caillois, 2000, 19). Therefore, the inherent contradiction in limiting the analysis to regulated and structured games analysing them as ludic acts (*play*), ignoring their inherent characteristics (*affordance*), is evident. Hence, Huizinga realises the need to use other instruments, related to the analysis of the ludic act, to more widely consider the different existing ludic configurations, but he ends up limiting himself to the traditional ones.

The point where he recognises the possibility for play to be serious, even tragic, is interesting. Play and seriousness are not opposed as two mutually exclusive options, but as dialectical poles which exclude each other, and «the metagame is the 'serious' moment which rejects the game object within the games to be redeveloped…» (Eco, 1973, XXV-XXVI.). Huizinga's work is still extremely important for its description of a lucidity which is parallel to human existence, and not a simple cause or effect of cultural

changes: «It was not my object to define the place of play among all the other manifestations of culture, but rather to ascertain how far culture itself bears the character of play. [It was a question of integrating] the concept of *play* into that of *culture*» (Huizinga, 1973, XXXII.). The ludic activity configures itself transversely to reality, to a culture that can by itself be play (with all the risks this entails)[3].

Homo Ludens also contains a definition of play on which should be carefully pondered since it describes a series of qualities that characterise ludic practice. Play is a free act, a potentially serious activity capable of captivating the player completely (cf. *ibidem*, 17). It is an order that creates order through regulation and as such it is an act performed within defined spatio-temporal limits. Possessing these characteristics, it presents itself as an alternative to real and ordinary life with its own purposes, a generator of social relationships which imply the use of masks and disguises. These characteristics evidently possess different benefits and essences.

Surely, claiming that play is a potentially serious and involving activity is not something unheard of nowadays. However, Huizinga was out of step with the common sense of the time that considered play as an irremediably trivial activity. Today, the evaluation of the semantic opposition serious/not serious regarding play appears to be clear in its value and the attention seems to shift toward other semantisations. Instead, it's useful to hold together the characteristics of play which emerge as crucial issues worth pondering over: its spatio-temporal limit, its regulation, its alternative situation to real life related to masks and disguises, and its simulation. These characteristics appear to partially contradict each other. To that effect, we understand that simulation and freedom of action refer to the intention of the player, to his actions (*active properties*), while separation and regulation represent the contextual existence conditions of the ludic situation itself (*passive properties*).

Moving in this direction, *Homo Ludens* brings us four crucial problems to consider, belonging to two different orders. Two refer to the inherent nature of the ludic situation, to its objectivity: regulation and the well-defined separation from real life; the other two to the act of play and to the related creation of the ludic situation itself: freedom and the simulation of "real" life.

Men playing

In his book *Man, play and games*, Caillois clearly observes the presence of ludic activity in the entire human social and cultural evolution:

«One can find a mark, an influence of the principle of play, or at least a concurrence with its particular intentions. It's possible to interpret the progress of civilization to the extent that it consists in the passage from a chaotic universe to a regulated universe which rests on a coherent and harmonious system of rights and duties, or of privileges and responsibilities» (Caillois, 2000, 11).

Play becomes the embodiment of human evolution. Games and toys represent fundamental cultural residues which are easily understandable and interpretable. In their evolution, it is possible to identify societal and cultural changes which have already happened or are currently happening. Caillois specifies his concept of "residue" describing ludic activities with a political and religious meaning tied to specific eras. These activities, when deprived of their related meanings, end up as simple structures, "pure" games. This way, play becomes not only an activity that transcends cultures, but also a

recognisable "residue" of the preceding culture (*Ibidem*, 76-77).
This is in evident contrast with Huizinga, who states that play is a concept intrinsic to culture and not a consequence of it. If Huizinga considered the current ludic spirit in continuity with culture, according to Caillois the change in social function, which happens when an activity is deprived of its original meanings, is essential. In fact, the key point in the definition of a "civilised" ludic activity is the presence of a regulation[4]. Caillois hypothesised an historical evolution that would have led humanity from experiencing free ludic forms, tied to the definition of *play*, to the inclination toward regulated and structured forms, tied to the definition of *game*: "Rules are inseparable from play as soon as the latter becomes institutionalized. From this moment on they become part of its nature and they transform it into an instrument of fecund and decisive culture" (*Ibidem*, 46). This value judgement comes from the distinction between *Ludus* and *Paidia* present in the entirety of the text. That is, a distinction between two opposite play methods comparable to the already mentioned lexical difference in the English language: *Paidia* is fantasy and improvisation, "as if" (primary improvisational and carefreeness powers), while *Ludus* is "for real", a regulated attempt to overcome obstacles (the completion and the education of the *Paida* disciplined and enriched by *Ludus*) (cf. *ibidem*, 55). Caillois' other fundamental theoretical effort is the creation of a model dividing games in: *Argon* (competition), games of competition, challenges with a claim of responsibility for one's own actions; *Alea* (chance), gambling and games of luck related to the abandonment of an individual to destiny; *Mimicry* (mask), games of identification, simulacra, with one rule for each role; the actor must charm the audience and the audience must believe the portrayal; *Ilinx* (vertigo), games of vertigo and pure enjoyment. The cultural evolution from *Paidia* to *Ludus* also applies to these new categories such as the passage from an era characterised by *Mimicry* and *Ilinx*, games of representation and vertigo, to the contemporary era, characterised by Argon and *Alea*, competition and chance games (cf. *ibidem*, 46-60).
Caillois then clarifies the concept of *Paidia*, at first glance at odds with regulated play. In reality, free and imaginary play answers to rules of a different nature. However, these remain strict and precise. At this instance one considers the ludic activity intended as a representation or a simulation, but Caillois does not follow this path, remaining sceptical about the opportunity to consider a play without borders, determinedly affirming its corrupting power:

«If play consists in providing formal, ideal, limited, and escapist satisfaction for these powerful drives, what happens when every convention is rejected? When the universe of play is no longer tightly closed? When it is contaminated by the real world in which every act has inescapable consequences? Corresponding to each of the basic categories there is a specific perversion which results from the absence of both restraint and protection» (*Ibidem*, 62).

Here lies an important node: the collapse of barriers is something "negative" and play must be kept separated from real life in order to avoid dangerous consequences for the individual (repudiation, superstition, alienation, vice, etc.). Rules create and maintain these barriers as necessary instruments to protect the "civility" of a ludic activity and, at the same time, as devices to turn it into an exercise for real life:

«Games discipline instincts and institutionalise them. For the time that they afford formal and limited satisfaction, they educate, enrich, and immunise the mind against their virulence. At the same time, they are made fit to contribute usefully to the enrichment and the establishment of various patterns of culture» (*Ibidem*, 73).

Nevertheless, Caillois maintains the idea of associating his four macro-categories of play to both marginal ludic form and their related degenerations, and to institutionalised and socially integrated ludic forms. Therefore, the idea of a ludic activity capable of coming out of its own contexts invading real life comes into play, even if the belief that a barrier must delimit it to avoid its degeneration still remains.

Face to face, in disguise

In the first section of *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (2003), Goffman describes the dynamics of face to face interactions and of "focused gatherings" through the analysis of the concept of fun. The (theoretical) point is indeed the idea of play.

The concept of "gatherings", of being together, is meticulously described, because it implies, for those who participate, a single visual and cognitive focus of attention; a mutual and preferential openness to verbal communication; a reinforcement of the reciprocal relevance of actions; an eye-to-eye ecological huddle that maximises each participant's opportunity to perceive the other participants' monitoring of him (*Ibidem*, 31-33). This (communicative) condition is compared to the "ludic situation", primarily for the presence of a regulatory set restricting the "correct" experience of the situation and for the definition of a "barrier" separating the communicative-ludic situation from reality. Therefore, play is still considered the union of two qualities: regulation and separation from reality.

Goffman develops these two aspects by describing certain kinds of rules. A first order of rules, defined as "of irrelevance", act as a selection related to external stimuli: this way, the participants avoid distractions caused by an overabundant influx of thoughts unrelated to the ludic action (*Ibidem*, 33). This means that the shape of the objects, or of the contexts used in the game, is not important in relation to its rules: as we know, the shape of the pawns on a chessboard is of no importance compared to the range of moves each pawn can perform according to the rules of chess. This filter highlights the dis-junction of play given as a separate situation, which is able to autonomously feed a self-sufficient and coherent world, notwithstanding the stimuli originating from reality. A second class of rules helps us to understand how this barrier is comparable to a porous membrane, recovering some of the characteristics of the wider world inside the ludic situation. In fact, "transformation" rules guide the behavioural qualities of the participants, which are taken into consideration during play (*Ibidem*, 43). Therefore, the structure of the "magic circle"[5] faces the participation and the subjectivity of the player in this case as well. In addition, the porosity of the membrane separating play from reality considers the psycho-biological nature of the player's involvement, defined as "spontaneous" and "non-objective". This involvement would be lost if we limited ourselves to a formal study of the context or of the ludic object. When this "spontaneity" is coherently contained within the game world as defined by transformation rules, the player is comfortable, or else he/she could find himself/herself in a situation of dysphoric tension that could lead to the rejection of the game itself. Controlling this tension is essential to the

conservation of the barrier and, therefore, of the ludic situation. In fact, more or less integrated incidents could occur, difficult and "overflowing" situations which influence the game, inducing the participants to «openly alter the rules, redefining the situation around the plight of the offender, but treating him now *not as a participant but as a mere focus of attention* - in fact, as an involuntary performer» (*Ibidem*, 71).

Therefore, the ludic situation conforms and configures itself to the nature of the interaction membrane: when the wider world crosses the borders of an encounter and is elaborated inside the interactional activity, something greater than a simple reorganisation or a simple transformation of models happens. What happens is something of a psycho-biological, organic nature. A potentially determinative part of the wider world «is easily ignored; some is repressed and some is suppressed self-consciously at the price of felt distraction» (*Ibidem*, 76). In addition, certain components of the external environment are able to expand or contract the events that belong to the encounter, while others are able to make it durable or to destroy it.

Reflecting on these components, it is possible to provide a definition of the two substantive principles of play: uncertainty of outcome and simulation in the form of a sanctioned exhibition of real-world qualities. In addition, continuing the study of the second aspect, games can be considered as a means of instilling or integrating a great variety of external, socially significant facts to encounters. Through what Goffman defines as "disguise", play represents a simulation instrument, an area where we are able to "safely" try and experiment new social factors and communicative dynamics, with very limited consequences on real life: it is "a way of revealing as much of it as can be tolerated in an encounter. We fence our encounters in with gates; the very means by which we hold off a part of reality can be the means by which we can bear introducing it" (*Ibidem*, 87). Other than de-potentiating the possibilities of reality, disguise in a ludic context allows us to understand that what holds people inside a game answers to a need to face complexities, to measure ourselves against fatigue and risk, to challenge what is already planned. The situation of play is extraordinary also because it is constantly surrounded by external reality: if the normal situation is that of a variety of roles, of a multiple and synchronous reference to different *frames*, to meta-communicative messages which indicate how to read reality and how to navigate it, the technologically advanced society seems to progressively disturb the natural rhythms in consonance with the interior laws of behaviour. This means that reality and technology undermine the clarity of roles that the individual can assume in the ludic situation. Goffman himself (implicitly) confirms this when he describes the simulative ability that makes the ludic situation an exercise of real instincts, reduced and symbolically effective at the same time.

Escape routes, or coming back to play

We can see how it is possible to identify qualities and proprieties inherent to play that go through, although with undeniable differences, the different subjects that we addressed: regulation, separation from reality through a porous membrane, the idea of simulation or a setting where it's possible to safely (as compared to real consequences) test and experiment, the instinctive need to prove oneself and the presence of uncertain outcomes. Considering these as a whole, play emerges as a field in which it is possible to

experiment potentially "negative" roles without facing their consequences, to deal with the uncertain outcomes of our projects, of our design (*signum*), of the com-position, even by instinct, of our own personality.

Therefore, there's more than an affinity between play and didactics. In this *locus* a person finds clues, signals capable to let him/her face (with limitations) a macrocosm that provides meaning and significance to his/her own life, capable of orienting (and legitimise) his/her own symbolic and material behaviour. Play re-enchants, ritualises, while at the same time reveals a non-apparent decisional power. In this regard, the teacher has the responsibility to understand how to play and how to make others play. Doing this, he/she should carefully consider something directly related to our times and with the digital or physical material *used* to play.

Technical and technological innovations are shaping teaching and traditional disciplinary methods, and have always been accompanied by lively public debate regarding the more or less harmful consequences that they could bring to humanity. In one of his last published studies, Morin, in an essay on our planet's current situation and on the paths we can pursue to end its crises and to promote a new future for humanity, states that the human planetary crises are cognitive crises: «Our system of knowledge, as encoded in our minds, conducts us to important ignorances» (Morin 2012, 133). In fact, the fragmentation and compartmentalisation of knowledge in separate disciplines and doctrines has broken the overall fabric of reality, making us lose its overall meaning. So, «our compartmentalised way of knowledge could produce global ignorance» (*Ibidem*, 134). This way, our mutilated way of thought leads to "mutilated actions", because those are unidimensional and decontextualised knowledges and actions.

Taking this into consideration, play could also become a key in recomposing a pluridimensionality of knowledge and of the world itself. Play oscillates, it requires mobility and understanding of "roles", but it mostly requires a constant incentive to act, to intervene in reality through simulations or reductions in which the player is involved. The play space is a space of reality which mobilises what is familiar, common or part of common sense, where some of the rigidities of reality can be questioned. Play intervenes in the habitual thought breaking it through the practice of creativity itself.

Please note again: the fact is that any product of human activity - be it an instrument or a machine, or a scientific or creative work, or a ludic combination of forms that express the willingness to reproduce and understand the world, namely to embody ideal realities that are part of life - inevitably retroacts *on* and *with* mankind itself and its own life. Arts, literature, painting, music, architecture etc. have always developed the potential of mankind to reproduce worlds. This is not so much because they are free from the necessity of realisation, (such as the artificial reproduction of machinery, robots, etc.) but because we think they are more adequate to give sense and meaning to mankind's aspiration to create and design possible worlds, based or not on reality. Men do not interact only with each other or only with artefacts according to rules and values which characterise their social life, but they interact with each other also thanks to the artefacts which they produce to this end and which consequently have a repercussion on how they stay together. In general, the observation that mankind uses artefacts as means or instruments designed to social activities is obvious and shared. It is harder to recognise that these instruments impose, by interacting with men, some behaviours and customs.
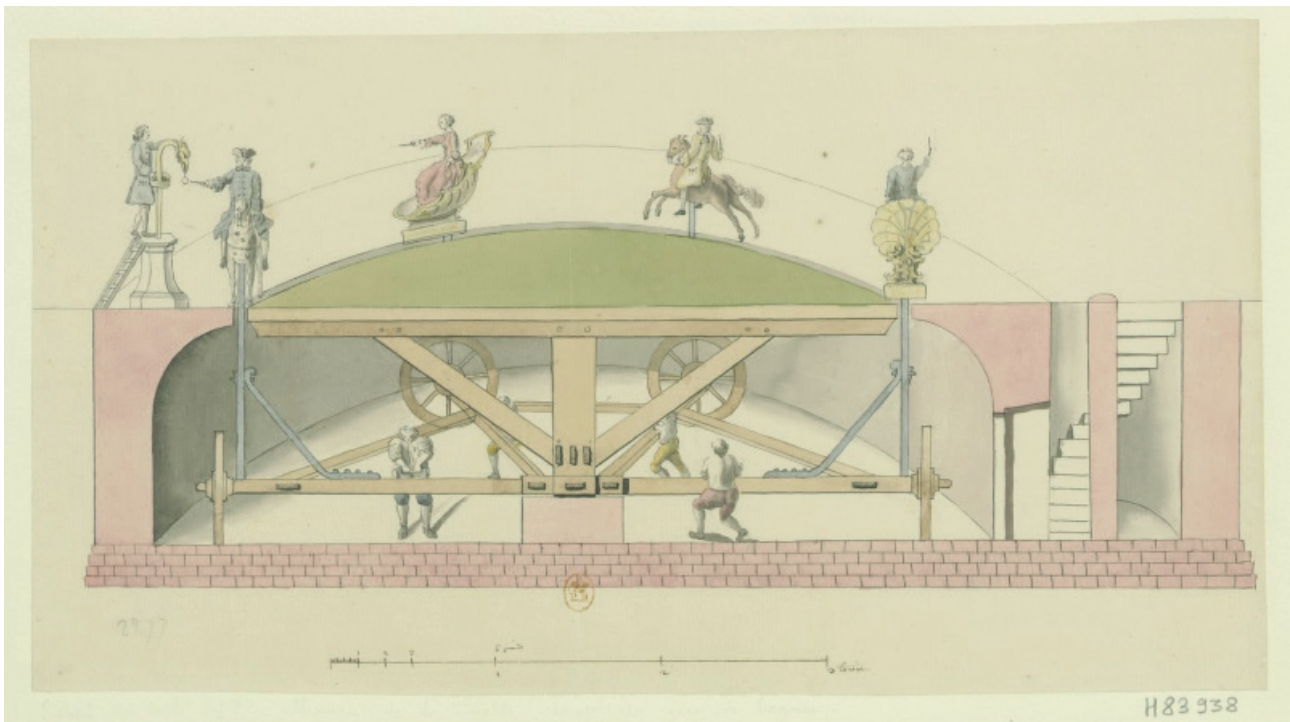
Fig. 3
Paris, *Château de la Muette: coupe de la plateforme du jeu de bague*, dessin, 1719.

We shouldn't believe that, on one hand, there are technical objects and, on the other, the individuals who use them and employ them as more or less adequate instruments to accomplish individual goals in a more or less facilitated and productive way, since they are produced by men for this purpose. Individuals and technical products have always formed a single relational reality. This single reality constitutes the life "environment" where individuals live and where it is possible for them to form relationships and to build anything that qualifies their social trade. Including their games.

Notes

[1] We are unable to linger on the mathematical theories of play, therefore please refer to, for example, Von Neumann and Morgenstein (1944).

[2] We consider in particular what Eco (the structuralist) wrote in his preface to the book.

[3] The issue of the inherent risk in play and its application in relation to culture cannot be addressed here.

[4] A shared point between Caillois and Huizinga and many other authors.

[5] *Magic Circle* is one of the terms used in game studies to define the dynamics which form the basis of the game. In brief, "magic circle" indicates the existence of a border between a game and the world beyond the game itself. Inside this space, the players submit by choice to rules in order to allow the game to function. In this sense, the game is a magic space where the rules and the manners of daily life are suspended. Nowadays, the idea of Magic Circle encounters many critics or even radical misunderstandings.

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Gianluca Maestri, PhD in Sociology and Social Research, is a research fellow in Sociology of cultural processes at the Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali dell'Università di Bologna. He deals with issues related to the culturalist paradigm with particular attention to the representations of the social imagination and the cultural codes with which they are transmitted.