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Play, Work and Ritual in Gamification

Abstracts

The paper examines a specific rhetoric of productivity that has become part of the discourse of digital games in the last few years. Under the term ›Gamification‹ business consultants, PR managers, educators and game designers argue for a use of game design elements in non-game contexts, which entails the hope of ›transplanting‹ the captivating enjoyment of digital games into situations and environments that are not very engaging by themselves, e.g. jobs or schools. The paper argues that the attempts to make digital games useful must be understood in the context of those theories of play that connect play and games to ritual acts. These rituals as precursors of play open spaces of transition, thus enabling the establishment of new, temporary rules that structure moments of social transformation. The process of transitioning between two diametrically opposed spheres of life (like adolescent/grown up or work/leisure) can then be connected to the goals of Gamification, which is to be considered as an attempt to re-ritualize work through game elements.

Der Beitrag setzt sich mit einer spezifischen Rhetorik der Produktivität auseinander, die in den letzten Jahren unter dem Begriff ›Gamification‹ in den Diskurs digitaler Spiele Einzug gehalten hat. Unternehmensberater, PR-Manager, Bildungsreformer und Game Designer plädieren für eine Übertragung von Spielelementen auf außerspielerische Zusammenhänge. Damit geht die Hoffnung einher, die fesselnden und motivierenden Aspekte digitaler Spiele auf weniger motivierende Umgebungen und Tätigkeiten zu übertragen, etwa den Berufsalltag oder die Schule. Der Text geht von der These aus, dass es zum Verständnis des Wunsches nach produktiven, nützlichen Spielen notwendig ist, sich mit der Kulturgeschichte des Spiels und des Spielens und seinen Wurzeln im Ritual zu befassen. Dabei sind speziell Rituale des Übergangs von Interesse, die liminale Räume eröffnen, in denen zeitweilige Regeln soziale Transformationsprozesse strukturieren. Es ist zu zeigen, dass Gamification sich besonders auf (digitale) Spiele bezieht, insofern diese wie liminale Rituale die Möglichkeit bieten, Übergangsräume hervorzurufen, in denen etwa der Unterschied zwischen Arbeit und Freizeit verschwinden gemacht werden kann. Gamification operiert damit als Re-Ritualisierung von Arbeit durch Spielelemente.

The relationship between play and work in today's media environments is negotiated within and through digital games. This assumption may be grounded in a number of different, albeit interconnected observations that I will summarize briefly before focusing on one of them in greater detail. Specifically, this paper is concerned with Gamification as an emerging strategy to combine work and play and the theoretical ramifications that this combination entails. I will demonstrate how Gamification can be thought of as re-connecting games, play and ritual through liminoid spaces, that is, through spaces (or phases) of transition. It will then become possible to regard (digital) games themselves as transitional or liminoid media. Gamification will be discussed in detail following the first paragraph. I will use the elucidation to de-

scribe the field of theoretical approaches and practical applications. This will stand in contrast to my analysis of the relationship between work and play.

From a media-historical point of view, all digital games can be said to be machines built for the naturalization of work. This perspective is especially prevalent in German Media Theory and German Game Studies. It conceives digital games as artifacts that are only possible; meaning, an artifact can only come into being as a consequence of certain historical and discursive formations that are decidedly non-ludic in nature. When digital games appear, they're not just a civilian application for a military technology (the computer), but they implement training regimes for reflexes, decision-making or strategic thinking.[1] These training regimes can be traced back to various fields of knowledge, e.g. psychological experiments or scientific management. Following Pias, action games can be characterized as time-critical reaction tests that ›train‹ their players to fulfill repetitive tasks quickly and efficiently, similar to the »one best way«[2] of completing specific operations during workflow that Frederick W. Taylor focused on in his research during the early 20th century. Other theories addressing the relationship between video games and working environments point out similarities between the interfaces of professional and entertainment software. Both are striving for an ease of use that makes the complexities of the underlying technology disappear or emphasize the importance of rhythm for scientific management as well as modern digital games.[3] The accounts of Pias and Nohr depict the computer as a historical object and digital games as artifacts that are at the same time connected to historical, discursive formations of optimization and training while also always hiding their historical and scientific inheritance. The main accomplishment of this approach is to uncover the discursive formations that enable digital games in the first place and to thus open the field to a study of games that is explicitly not concerned with modern, commercial videogames. It becomes possible to outline the continuities between digital games and military technologies, cybernetics, behavioral research or scientific management. Consequently, a media-historical analysis of the interdependencies between games, play and work should amongst other things focus on the role of the computer as a machine for work and on the way the personal computer is integrated into working environments. The question of play is then connected to the way interfaces are designed and optimization as well as bureaucratic task-management is integrated into professional and entertainment software, bridging the gap between work and play.

In a development that might be taken as the confirmation of these theories, we can currently witness an actual convergence between the cultural spheres

1 See Claus Pias: *Computer Spiel Welten*, Zurich: Diaphanes 2010.
2 See Robert Kanigel: *The One Best Way. Frederick Winslow Taylor and the Enigma of Efficiency*, Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press 2005.
3 See Rolf Nohr: *Die Natürlichkeit des Spielens. Vom Verschwinden des Gemachten im Computerspiel*, Munster: LIT 2008.

of ›work‹ and ›(digital) gameplay‹, both in terms of games that become fields of employment for their players and in working environments that are to be structured like games.[4] While this article will mainly focus on the latter, a short explanation of the former is necessary to fully flesh out the argument I want to present. Although digital games today are still predominantly considered leisure-time pursuits, it has become entirely possible to play them in a professional way and thus, to work in or with the game. There are several ways this can happen. Two of those I want to discuss: the first one is professionalization through competition and mainly concerns ›eSports‹, that is, all kinds of professional, competitive gameplay in digital games.[5] To participate in eSport on a professional level means adhering to a rigid training regime, playing one's game of choice daily and eventually (through a system of sponsors and prize money quite similar to that of ›analogue‹ sports) getting paid to do so. As far as working in games is concerned, eSports may be discussed in terms of Caillois's account of professional sports. He points out that in all cases of ›professionalized‹ games, the participants are not actually playing, but instead working – they are paid to play and thus, their participation is not voluntary.[6] Caillois's definition of the terms game and play perceives them as highly idealistic concepts. The ›purity‹ is constantly endangered by the influx of non-game-elements or non-play-motivations like profit and monetary gains. In this he follows Huizinga's earlier definition that still proves to be a central point of reference for game studies, although Huizinga and Caillois differ greatly in their ideological frame of reference respectively.[7] I will return to these theories in the third paragraph. The idealistic way of thinking about games as a cultural practice that is deliberately removed from, or marked off against work and more serious pursuits continues to implicitly shape many arguments that are developed by scholars of digital games. Consequently, every instance of profitable or professionalized game-playing is treated as a curiosity, a novelty or an aberration. This is also true for the second example of digital games as places of work that I want to discuss.

4 I will use the terms play and game interchangeably, since they signify a difference of degree, not of kind. While the term ›game‹ is usually reserved for rule-based structures and their materiality, ›play‹ can mean both the act of engaging with formulated rule-based structures and a form of spontaneous, non-formal ludic action. Both terms are used in the English translations of Johan Huizinga's and Roger Caillois's work and I will follow Caillois's theory in considering rule-based and free play as being situated on opposite ends of a fluid continuum encompassing all ludic phenomena.

5 See Michael G. Wagner: »On the Scientific Relevance of eSports«, in: *Proceedings of the 2006 International Conference on Internet Computing & Conference on Computer Games Development*, ICOMP 2006.

6 Roger Caillois: *Man, Play and Games*, Chicago: Illinois UP 2001, pp. 6.

7 Alexander Galloway: *Gaming. Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Minneapolis: Minnesota UP 2006, pp. 19–25.

The rising popularity of massively multiplayer online games since the late 1990 s,[8] which culminated in *World of Warcraft's* success with more than 12 million players at the height of its popularity, enables a development that fascinates journalists,[9] economists[10] and scholars of media alike.[11] MMOs have become parallel economies whose (entirely virtual) goods like fictional herbs, magic swords or futuristic spaceships are traded among players for ›real‹, out-of-game currency. Either the goods themselves are sold on third-party marketplaces like eBay or on specialized websites. Alternatively, the corresponding in-game currency can be bought for dollars or euros. While there are numerous questions arising from these practices, attempting to answer them is beyond the scope of this article.[12] In this context, it is sufficient to point out one obvious consequence of virtual, ludic economies that become intertwined with real-world economies: playing these games can earn the players money and playing them in a way that is solely focused on optimizing the gain of marketable goods can become a job. Dibbell has explored these emerging services at length and since his account has been published,[13] the market for virtual goods has continually grown, with most of the work (usually referred to as ›gold farming‹) being outsourced to countries like China and to low-skilled and low-paid workers in a sweat-shop working environment to save costs.

Both examples, eSports and gold farming, demonstrate that digital games have – all theories regarding the supposed purity and non-productivity of games and play aside – become places of work in which play can be both mandatory and productive. It is possible to go ›to work‹ in or with a digital game. While these practices are marginal in comparison to ›regular‹ video game uses, they still raise questions concerning our concepts of game, play, work, and their correlations. I will return to those in the third paragraph. Like Aarseth once noted regarding the bias game scholars tend to exhibit towards the rare unusual and creative practices of play, it sometimes makes sense to focus on these practices to find out what makes certain

8 Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOs) are online games designed for many (several thousand) simultaneous players. They usually take place in persistent environments, that is, the game world is continuous and it changes and develops regardless of whether or not an individual player is present and acts or not. In short: the ›world‹ of *World of Warcraft* is always present and accessible to those with active subscriptions for the game, whether they actually decide to log in and play or not.

9 See Julian Dibbell: *Play Money or*, *How I Quit My Day Job & Made Millions Trading Virtual Loot*, New York: Basic s 2006.

10 See Edward Castronova: *Synthetic Worlds. The Business and Culture of Online Games*, Chicago: Chicago UP 2005.

11 See Joyce Goggin: »Playbour, farming and leisure«, in: *Ephemera. Theory & Politics in Organization* 11 (2001), pp. 357–368.

12 Among other things, the trading of virtual (in-game) goods raises the question to whom these goods belong legally, with most game publishers claiming the rights to all goods generated in their games as part of their intellectual property while players point to the time they invested to collect the virtual items as working hours.

13 Dibbell: *Play Money*.

games stand out.[14] I would add that creative gameplay is always worth considering, because it demonstrates the spaces of possibility opened by player-game interactions. In turn, they can contribute to shifts in the way the medium is perceived. Where the convergence of work and play is concerned, we even have to pay special attention to digital games, both as media and as technological artifacts, because they provide the spaces in which this convergence is currently taking place. As such, they appear to confirm the media-historical theory of digital games as phenomena that make their players work in one way or another, whether they realize it or not. I want to offer a different view on games as places of work by returning to the anthropological and cultural-historical theories that are the foundation of our concepts of game and play in digital contexts. Special attention will be paid to the relationship between play, work and the concept of ritual. I will connect it to the issues raised by Gamification following the third paragraph. Before doing so, however, we need to have a look at the development that is at the center of current debates around digital games and work: Gamification.

Gamification

So far, I have described the convergence of work and play in digital games as having two directions: digital games as places of work and working environments structured like games. The former is of lesser importance to the argument developed here, mainly because it appears to have less discursive relevance in the debate on games, play and work. It can also be connected to a long tradition of ›professionalized‹ gameplay in sports and thus can appear as an unsurprising, if not expected, development in digital gaming culture, regardless of the difficulties it causes with classical cultural theories of games and play. The latter, however, is presented as a novelty, as an innovative way to harness the potential of digital games for something else than ›mere‹ entertainment. The term that has emerged to encompass all these hopes, visions, strategies, business models and applications focused on ›using‹ digital games in non-game-contexts is called ›Gamification‹. Following Deterding et al., I will define Gamification as »the use of game design elements in non-game contexts«.[15] As far as advocates for Gamification are concerned, ›game design elements‹ can mean anything from design paradigms and feedback mechanisms to visual clues and competitive statistical evaluation. When I compared several popular guidebooks on Gamification to outline the way they referred to digital games and

14 Espen Aarseth: »I Fought the Law: Transgressive Play and the Implied Player«, in: *Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference: Situated Play*.

15 Sebastian Deterding et al.: »Gamification: Using Game Design Elements in Non-Gaming Contexts«, in: *CHI 2011 Workshop Gamification: Using Game Design Elements in Non-Game Contexts*, Vancouver, May 7, 2011.

their potential, several qualities were repeatedly attributed to games and singled out as ›useful‹ elements: digital games employ scoring mechanisms through which they reward and visualize progress, they enable competition through scoreboards, they are conductive to optimal experiences like flow (thus alleviating boredom), they offer cheap environments for training and experimentation and they valorize mundane tasks through narrative reframing (doing the dishes can be framed as a heroic deed).[16] According to proponents of Gamification, these ›game design elements‹ can be removed from their ludic contexts and employed in marketing campaigns and PR strategies, as self-improvement techniques or in working environments. The broader reason for pursuing this transfer appears to be obvious: digital games can be highly motivating pastimes and their players willingly invest substantial amounts of time and effort into them. If one could single out those elements of digital games that are especially engaging, they could be used to enhance or restructure those mundane, non-ludic tasks that are by themselves less motivating, like jobs or household chores.

Gamification can be (and has been) addressed in various ways. On the one hand, when adopted uncritically, it can become the central claim of consulting strategies, self-help advice, marketing guidebooks or utopian visions for the future of humanity.[17] On the other hand, the concept has been criticized as an empty marketing ploy,[18] as a capitalist strategy to thinly veil the alienation of work,[19] or as a neo-behavioristic attempt at behavior modification.[20] It has also been discussed in the light of some of the media-historical theories regarding digital games and work I mentioned above: DeWinter et al. describe Gamification as an updated resurgence of Taylorism that employs ›fun‹ to disguise strategies of optimization and even exploitation.[21] While these criticisms, as well as the question of whether or not Gamifi-

16 See Felix Raczkowski: »It's all fun and games… A history of ideas concerning gamification«, in: *Proceedings of DiGRA 2013 Conference: DeFragging Game Studies*, Atlanta, August 26–29, 2013.

17 There are several published examples for either claim. However, discussing them here at length is beyond the scope of this article. For more information regarding the arguments presented by popular accounts of Gamification, see Raczkowski: »It's all fun and games…« and Scott Nicholson: »Strategies for Meaningful Gamification: Concepts behind Transformative Play and Participatory Museums«, in: *Paper Presented at Meaningful Play 2012*, University of Michigan (East Lansing), October 18–20, 2012.

18 Ian Bogost: »Why Gamification is Bullshit«, in: Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding, eds.: *The Gameful World. Approaches, Issues, Applications*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2014, pp. 65–79.

19 PJ Rey: »Gamification and Post-Fordist Capitalism«, in: Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding, eds.: *The Gameful World. Approaches, Issues, Applications*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2014, pp. 277–295.

20 Raczkowski: »It's all fun and games…«.

21 Jennifer DeWinter, Carly A. Kocurek and Randall Nichols: »Taylorism 2.0. Gamification, scientific management and the capitalist appropriation of play«, in: *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 6/2 (2014), pp. 109–127.

cation actually works when applied in practice,[22] are important to consider when discussing the concept, I will not focus on them in this argument. Instead, I propose to consider Gamification as a popular idea and all the comments and criticisms associated with it as discursive phenomena that enable specific ways of speaking about work, games and play while making other statements unlikely to appear. Following Foucault, we can assume that there are certain conditions that allow the idea or the statement of Gamification to emerge and that govern our way of thinking and speaking about the various topics addressed by Gamification.[23] I will try to clarify these conditions, both in their theoretical and their practical dimensions, in the following paragraphs.

On Games, Play and Work

The concept of Gamification requires a specific way of thinking about games, play and work. This encompasses digital games as media and technologies as well as broader, cultural assumptions about games and play and the borders separating them from work or other ›serious‹ pursuits. I will discuss these broader concepts of play and games first, while returning to the question of technology and digital games in the fifth paragraph. To consider the application of ›game design elements‹ to ›non-game contexts‹ a novel idea, one must (at least implicitly) view their strict separation as being the cultural status quo. It is a notion that will go uncontested in most debates about games. Games and play are perceived as separated from, or even as the opposite of everyday life and work. In language, the use of the terms game and play in proverbs or as metaphors indicates that they are strongly associated with non-serious, sometimes irresponsible behavior (e.g. ›Is this a game to you‹, ›Stop playing with me‹) or with childhood (›child's play‹). To play with something means to engage with it in a non-serious way, not aiming for any productive outcomes. Digital games are delineated as entertainment software and marketed on other platforms than software for non-entertainment purposes. Finally, there are reservations and fears that games might somehow leave their assigned cultural space and influence the rest of the world they're part of, as evidenced by the continuous debates on violent video games or the strict regulation of gambling.

22 Juho Hamari, Jonna Koivisto and Harri Sarsa: »Does Gamification Work? A Literature Review of Empirical Studies on Gamification«, in: *Paper presented at 47th Hawaii International Conference on System Science* 2014, Waikoloa (Hawaii), January 6-9, 2014, pp. 3025–3034.

23 Gamification, or rather the whole field of useful applications of games, could be considered a discursive formation in Foucault's words, that is, a set of statements regarding a certain topic (thereby bringing forth said topic). See Michel Foucault: *Archaeology of Knowledge*, New York: Vintage 2002, pp. 34–43.

These implicit assumptions are formalized as part of two theoretical accounts of games and play that shape games research in the humanities and especially in game studies even today: Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*[24] and Roger Caillois's *Man, Play and Games*.[25] In the light of the extensive reception of both texts in international game scholarship, it might seem redundant and unnecessary to return to them once more. On the contrary, I maintain that these ›classics‹ are especially relevant for the question at hand, mainly for two reasons: Firstly, the ubiquitous reception of both Huizinga and Caillois still (at least implicitly) determines the way games and play are addressed in game studies. Developments like the ones I described above can only appear surprising when viewed against the backdrop of idealized definitions of games and play. Secondly, Huizinga's account in particular offers a rarely considered hint to develop another perspective on games, play and work that is better suited to discuss Gamification than the outright dismissal that would result from arguing for a strict separation of play and work.

While both Huizinga's and Caillois's accounts have been written under very different circumstances, the broad perspective they develop on games and play is fairly similar. In the 1930 s, the Dutch historian Huizinga makes the bold argument that all human culture emerges from play. He defines play in the following way:

> »we might call it [play] a free activity standing quite consciously outside ›ordinary‹ life as being ›not serious‹, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner«.[26]

In the 1950 s, Caillois built upon Huizinga's work to develop a more nuanced account of play and games, a theory that is remembered today for the attempt to offer an exhaustive classification of the types of play. Caillois's definition lists the following essential qualities of play:

> »1. Free: in which playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as diversion;
> 2. Separate: circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance;
> 3. Uncertain: the course of which cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player's initiative;
> 4. Unproductive: creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind; and, except for the exchange of property among the players, ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game;
> 5. Governed by rules: under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts;

24 Johan Huizinga: *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, London: Beacon 1980.
25 Caillois: *Man, Play and Games*.
26 Huizinga: *Homo Ludens*, p. 13.

6. Make-believe: accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life«.[27]

Although there is a lot to unpack in both definitions, I will focus on the questions raised by the concept of Gamification. Huizinga and Caillois explicitly exclude productivity of any kind, while at the same time emphasizing the ›separateness‹ of games and play. Especially Huizingas theory of play and its boundaries has become a point of debate in game studies, centered on the term »magic circle«[28] that he uses to describe the special physical and imaginary area in which play happens.[29] Huizinga points out the position of play in opposition to seriousness, although he objects the notion of considering this opposition as absolute: »Play turns to seriousness and seriousness to play«.[30] Under the right circumstances, all play can become very serious indeed – Huizinga points to the close relationship between play and ritual that I will return to in the following paragraph. Yet seriousness in this context is not to be confounded with efficiency or productivity, which mark the end of play and games for Huizinga and Caillois, since they invite obligatory competition. Huizinga prophetically remarks: »Business becomes play. This process goes so far that some of the great business concerns deliberately instil [sic!] the play-spirit into their workers so as to step up production«.[31] Unfortunately, he offers no example or source, although he contrasts the play-like businesses with the business-like play of professional sports. Both developments stand in conflict with another quality of play emphasized by both definitions: its voluntary nature or the freedom to play. Playing that becomes mandatory ceases to be play. Interestingly, both Huizinga and Caillois connect the question of freedom to the type of fun and enjoyment that are associated with play. Apparently, the fun in play and games is directly connected to the voluntary decision to take part in them. Finally, there is the matter of boundaries, of the separation of play and reality: the rules of any game and any playing activity are in effect only temporary; however, for the duration of the game, their status is absolute and unquestionable.

In which way does the idea of Gamification factor into this? It is apparent that Gamification purposefully transcends the dichotomies in our view on play and games.[32] Games are no longer defined through their unproductivity and the way they're removed from everyday life, on the contrary, they are suddenly of interest for

27 Caillois: *Man, Play and Games*, pp. 9–10.
28 Huizinga: *Homo Ludens*, p. 10.
29 Regarding the concept of the magic circle in game studies, see Jaakko Stenros: »In Defence of a Magic Circle. The Social and Mental Boundaries of Play«, in: *Proceedings of DiGRA Nordic 2012 Conference: Local and Global – Games in Culture and Society*, Tampere, June 6–8, 2012.
30 Huizinga: *Homo Ludens*, p. 8.
31 Ibid., p. 200.
32 Of course it must be stated that the highly idealistic idea of games and play being concepts that exist completely removed from reality and that have no consequences beyond the artificial

consultants, managers and chairmen, because they can potentially be inserted into facets of everyday life to enhance productivity. This might appear as a novel and forward-thinking use of games and play precisely because it subverts the general understanding of how the cultural practice of play functions. Consequently, following Huizinga, the concept of Gamification could be regarded as the ultimate form of corruption of games and play. With Caillois it could be stated that Gamification relies upon the exploitation of people's ludic desires by escalating the corresponding games in a specific, profit-oriented way (e.g. the desire for competition is transplanted into an office environment using ›agonal‹ game elements like high-score-lists). While the ideal of unproductive gameplay that is set apart from reality has been dismissed in game studies for some time now, it seems like Gamification is a central part (or a symptom) of a larger shift in the discursive formations that structure our way of thinking about games. Games and play are less regarded as childish pastimes or as potentially dangerous (as in the media harm debates), instead they are increasingly considered worthwhile and productive. This brings working and playing closer together, as one no longer necessarily excludes the other. Games (or, in case of Gamification, their elements) no longer follow the rules of exclusion, they are neither removed nor apart from ordinary life, but instead they appear to be designed to blur the lines between concepts that seem contradictory to us.

Especially where work and play are concerned, (digital) games become spaces of mediation or of liminality – they are reconnected to their cultural-historical roots in form of ritualistic practices.

The connection between games, play and ritual is a well-established assumption in anthropology and ritual theory that influenced Huizinga's and Caillois's writing. However, it is not usually discussed in the context of game studies, let alone of recent phenomena like Gamification. Closing this gap, I will argue that Gamification represents the ›re-ritualization‹ of both play and work and through this enables another perspective on (digital) games in our society: they are media of liminality.

Liminal and Liminoid

Huizinga argues that play can at the same time be unproductive, removed from everyday life, voluntary and serious. This seriousness is owed to the roots that play and games have in ritualistic practices, there is a »holy earnest«[33] that permeates ritual and play alike. Huizinga lists several examples for play that happens in earnest, from

constraints of their own rules has been thoroughly criticized in game studies. The ›borders‹ of games are usually regarded as being very permeable to the point of nonexistence and it is accepted that all rule-based play has consequences (if only teaching the players a better understanding of the rules for subsequent playing).

33 Huizinga: *Homo Ludens*, pp. 20–21.

the playing child to the sportsman and the actor,[34] while pointing out that this serious commitment to a ›place‹ and a set of rules outside ordinary reality is proof of the connection between play and ritual: »The ritual act has all the formal and essential characteristics of play which we enumerated above, particularly in so far as it transports the participants to another world«.[35] The relationship between ritual and non-serious play then becomes a mere question of degree: »[…] it is impossible to fix accurately the lower limit where holy earnest reduces itself to mere ›fun‹«.[36] The transformation, the change between the two forms is fluid: it is impossible to tell where concentrated, earnest play ends and ritual begins. We can still discuss a specific type of ritual that highlights the potential of games as transitional media: the rite of passage. Huizinga, interested in broad claims about the nature of play and culture, refers to specific rituals only in passing. However, besides briefly discussing rites of passage, he also (knowingly or not) lifts what would become his most famous term in games research from an ethnographical account of transitional rites: the magic circle.

In 1909 the German-French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep published *The Rites of Passage*,[37] in which he explored transitional rites in various cultures. These rites, he argues, structure the way members of a society transition from one group, circle or status in these societies into another. For example, well-known transitions in today's society include the change from youth to adulthood (coming of age) or the change from unwed to wed (marriage). While both are mainly thought of today as differences in the legal status of an individual, they still carry substantial symbolic and ritualistic weight. Van Gennep focused his research on the specific rites and festivities that accompany these transitions, especially in tribal societies. He identifies three types of rites structuring the transitions:

> »Consequently, I propose to call the rites of separation from a previous world, preliminal rites, those executed during the transitional stage liminal (or threshold) rites, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world postliminal rites«.[38]

These rites are dangerous to society, since they suspend the rules of everyday life and allow transgressions that are otherwise forbidden (Van Gennep cites ritual transitions into adulthood that allow young men to steal with impunity).[39] Because of this, it is imperative that the rites are limited in duration and sometimes in space, while at the same time being subject to strict rules that govern even the apparent transgressions. In other words: they take place in magic circles.[40]

34 Ibid., p. 18.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Arnold van Gennep: *The Rites of Passage*, London: Routledge 1977.
38 Ibid., p. 21.
39 Ibid., p. 114
40 Ibid., p. 177.

While Van Gennep thinks and argues exclusively in terms of classical ethnography, he influences scholars like Victor Turner, who in turn extends Van Genneps argument to modern, western societies and to practices that appear to have little connection to rituals.[41] Turner recognizes what Van Gennep observed for singular, limited rituals is also true for larger social shifts; with the social shift Turner is most interested in being the Industrial Revolution.[42] Industrialization, he argues, marks the point of separation for ritual, work and play, which are indistinguishable from one another in pre-industrialized societies.[43] Before work becomes a necessity in itself following the industrialization, it is part of the way rituals structure everyday life in tribal and agrarian societies – one does not work for a living or to sustain oneself, but instead one works for the gods. Just as play and ritual are closely related like shown by Huizinga, work is encompassed by ritual. The Industrial Revolution changes this by introducing the possibility of choice as well as by separating work from other, everyday activities: the work-ritual is no longer a unifying necessity for every member of a society; instead, one is (at least theoretically) able to choose where to work. Ironically, Turner's conception of work as a phenomenon that's apart from daily life mirrors Huizinga's and Caillois's definitions of play, a practice that Turner situates in the realm of leisure and thus as an idea that can only appear in opposition to (or as reward for) ›pure‹ work. Leisure encompasses everything from sports and fine arts to the attendance to basic personal needs like sleeping or eating.[44] It thus is associated with a duality of freedom: the *freedom from* work or other obligations and the *freedom to* take part in various recreational activities – not the least of which is play. Leisure is the place of the liminoid – the phenomena resembling the liminal without being identical to them (since they are not rituals in the narrow sense). Here, Turners argument becomes very interesting, insofar as it moves even closer to Huizinga's and Caillois's positions, without citing either. Because it grants the *freedom to*, Turner postulates, leisure is the place of innovation and individuation as well as cultural advancement:

> »Sports such as football, games such as chess, recreations such as mountaineering can be hard and exacting and governed by rules and routines even more stringent than those of the work situation, but, since they are optional, they are part of an individual's freedom, of his growing self-mastery, even self-transcendence. Hence they are imbued more thoroughly with pleasure than those many types of industrial work in which men are alienated from the fruits and results of their labor. Leisure is potentially capable of releasing

41 Victor Turner: »Liminal to Liminoid, In Play, Flow, And Ritual. An Essay in Comparative Symbology«, in: *The Rice University Studies*, 60/3 (1974), pp. 53–92, here p. 56.
42 Ibid., p. 62.
43 Ibid., p. 64.
44 Ibid., p. 68.

creative powers, individual or communal, either to criticize or buttress the dominant social structural values«.[45]

However, Turner (following Weber) sees leisure as threatened by work and obligation, with the Calvinists and their work ethic being the main culprits. Work is regarded as de-facto sacred, while leisure is potentially suspicious. The work for the gods encompassing ritual, work and play in pre-industrial societies becomes the work for one's own, individual salvation, a development that adversely affects all dimensions of leisure. Turner develops a convincing argument, outlining several historical examples for the campaign against leisure led by the Calvinist movement while extending his observations to more recent phenomena of »industrial leisure« that are turned into jobs and professions (e.g. acting, dancing, singing).[46] Even child's play can no longer be allowed to be unproductive, but instead must serve specific pedagogic goals. Turner concludes: »[…] even leisure became ›ergic‹, ›of the nature of work‹, instead of ›ludic‹, ›of the nature of play‹«.[47] He goes on to argue that current western societies see more leisure-positive attitudes that allow the liminoid to be the place for (sometimes critical) play, games, art, sports and other activities. That these activities are likely to be commodified is no issue for Turner, as long as taking part in them remains a choice and does not become obligatory like the liminal sphere of work: »One works at the liminal, one plays with the liminoid«.[48]

With this in mind, let us now return to Gamification and the question of digital games, work, and play.

Gamification and the ritualization of work and play

Turner considers the Calvinist opposition to leisure and play a thing of the past in modern societies. On the contrary, I suppose that the cultural shift that's currently most clearly articulated in the discursive phenomenon of Gamification transcends the developments that Turner associated with Calvinist work ethic: Gamification employs digital games as liminoid spaces not to turn leisure into work, but to make the difference between play and work disappear altogether. It thus proposes to erase a dichotomy that appears to be, if we follow Turners own words, natural in industrial and post-industrial societies.[49] The arguments presented by the proponents of Gamification are decidedly profane in most cases, yet the widespread use of game design elements in work environments enables work-play that closely resembles obligatory

45 Ibid., pp. 68–69.
46 Ibid., p. 70.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., p. 86.
49 Ibid., p. 70.

rituals. Just like Van Gennep and Turner have shown in case of pre-industrial societies, the work-play (or work-ritual) is supposed to be without alternative – not participating is not an option. This is the reason that most Gamification guidebooks and consultants advocate for the implementation of far-reaching systems and, ideally, the transformation of whole corporations, institutions and campaigns (see the works of Zichermann and Linder,[50] Werbach and Hunter,[51] or the solutions offered by companies like badgeville).[52] Gamification, it seems, always must be implemented following some (outside) suggestion or advice, it cannot arise spontaneously. It is also no longer limited in time and space, although it still adheres to strict rules – the question appears to be whether we're not dealing with play or games at all or whether Huizinga's and Caillois's definitions are rendered irrelevant by the fluidity of the phenomenon they tried to describe.

There are several points to address with this issue. First of all, it seems to me that both Huizinga and Caillois touched upon a quality of games and play (their relation to ritual) that could not be incorporated into their attempts to develop a formal definition of the ludic. The liminoid dimension of games and play allows us to think of them as media of transition, as practices that bridge gaps, that unify dichotomies and that allow relations and comparisons between concepts that don't readily appear to be comparable. This becomes more apparent with digital games: they open up liminoid spaces in which, among other things, the convergence of play and work can take place. Digital media are suited for this not only because they are historically indebted to techniques of rationalization, optimization and measurement, like mentioned above, but also because they enable a new level of formalization of games and play as cultural practices. It is important to understand that the view on games and play that is associated with Gamification – the extension of the ludic into every facet of life – is only possible because digital technologies fragmented games into their elements. Games are no longer regarded as a whole, but as collections of design practices, technical elements, interface conventions and narrative tropes. The reason for this is the emergence of a ›Games Industry‹, a professionalized and profit-oriented field in which ›making‹ games and enabling play become specialized jobs. This development carries along procedures that are implemented to make game development more efficient, mostly by licensing external programs and tools (e.g. game engines),[53] or by outsourcing part of the development process. Games and play have to become not only a job, but a highly profitable industry to enable strate-

50 Gabe Zichermann and Joselin Linder: *Game-Based Marketing*, New Jersey: Wiley 2010.
51 Kevin Werbach and Dan Hunter: *For the Win. How Game Thinking Can Revolutionize Your Business*, Philadelphia: Wharton 2012.
52 Badgeville, *https://badgeville.com/* (visited: 17.01.16).
53 On game engines in game studies, see Ian Bogost: *Unit Operations*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2006, pp. 55–66 and Stephan Günzel: *Ego-Shooter. Das Raumbild des Computerspiels*, Frankfurt on the Main: Campus 2013, pp. 106–107.

gies like Gamification. Games are commodities; their elements have been formalized and conventionalized for easy recombination, which, following the logic of Gamification, allows their integration into everyday life.

A paradoxical relationship between games, play and ritual emerges. The liminoid potential of digital games is not lost in their professionalization and commodification, but it is transformed through fragmentation, that undermines Turner's difference between liminal and liminoid. Working and playing can take place in the same sphere of life right now, in surroundings that become transitional spaces through game elements. Similar to the pre-industrial societies analyzed by Turner, ritual dominates this process, albeit not in a religious sense, but instead through the way games and play are revered as potentially world-saving practices,[54] or as a cultural revolution.[55] Play, we may assume, thus takes the place of the religious fervor that Weber saw as the origin of capitalism, while also observing its obsolescence in the capitalist system of the early 20th century.[56]

Final Remarks

We have seen that there are complex, multi-faceted transformations taking place where games, play and work are concerned in the age of digital games. Highly idealistic definitions taking games and play as removed from everyday reality, as unproductive and free of consequence do no longer apply in the face of an extensive commodification and professionalization of games. And yet, this also leads ludic phenomena back to their roots in obligatory and earnest ritualistic practices, thus positioning them as media of transition. Gamification, as an example of the discursive shift towards ›useful‹ (as opposed to harmful) digital games, enables us to understand the mediality of games as a space of liminality, a space that enables the convergence of play and work, seriousness and fun, ritual and entertainment or productivity and leisure.

When games are employed in this way, their systemic dimension as rule-based and regulated practices is emphasized, while their elements of spontaneity and cre-

54 See Jane McGonigal: *Reality is Broken. Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*, London: Penguin 2011. McGonigal can be considered as an advocate for a utopian vision in which elements and strategies from digital games are employed to address large-scale, societal problems like various health issues (e.g. depression), motivational deficits in working environments or environmental challenges. Her rhetoric refers to reality as being fundamentally broken, while digital games and their elements are regarded as a ›fix‹ for said problems.

55 Eric Zimmerman: »Manifesto for a Ludic Century«, in: Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding, eds.: *The Gameful World. Approaches, Issues, Applications*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2014, pp. 19–22.

56 Max Weber: The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, London: Merchant 2005, p. 124.

ativity are marginalized. Playing becomes more about following the rules than about creatively negotiating them, which disregards a major part of Huizinga's, Caillois's and Turner's theories, since it can no longer be a catalyst of change in society. This seems to me the major challenge not only for all practical attempts at implementing Gamification, but also for media-theoretical accounts of digital games and the way they are used. The players that creatively explore the limits of rule-based systems can not only be considered threats for gamified applications,[57] or outliers in the face of standardized training regimes,[58] or spoil-sports endangering the magic circle,[59] but instead they must be thought of as contributors to a different kind of productivity. Taking games as transitional spaces seriously means to be open towards the player-driven transformations that take place in the margins of the large rituals of ludic productivity.

57 Zichermann: *Game-Based Marketing*, p. 105.
58 Pias: *Computer Spiel Welten*.
59 Huizinga: *Homo Ludens*, p. 11.