

You need to crawl before you can walk; learn before you can educate; speak before you can articulate. However thus far there is no consensus from which we are able to speak about the medium of games, much less be articulate. Those saying otherwise have yet to provide a context in which a child running around a backyard mimicking an airplane¹ may be comparatively, and consistently, spoken of in the same breath as *Super Mario Bros.*, as well as *September 12th* and *JFK Reloaded*. There are sexier topics with which we may immediately concern ourselves, but if we are to express ourselves with games, we must teach ourselves to speak about them. A crisis of vocabulary prevents us from oratory.

The English language establishes a linguistic distinction between the designations of "play" and "game."² Johann Huizinga (1950) observed that this situation is not endemic to all languages:

...French has jeu, jouer; Italian gioco, giocare; Spanish juego, jugar; Portuguese jogo, jogar; Rumanian joc, juca; while similar words occur in Catalan, Provençal and Rhaeto-Romanic...The points that matter here are the following. First of all, the connection between [the] verb with its predicate. Though you can "ein Spiel treiben" in German and "een Spiel doen" in Dutch and "pursue a game" in English, the proper verb is "play" itself. You "play a game", or "spielen ein Spiel". To some extent this is lost in English by the doublet play and game...in order to express the nature of the activity the idea contained in the noun must be repeated in the verb. (36-37)

In stating that *in order to express the nature of the activity the idea contained in the noun must be repeated in the verb*, Huizinga is suggesting an inherent

¹ Gonzalo Frasca, [Videogames of the Oppressed: Videogames as a Means of Critical Thinking and Debate](#) (2001) 7-8.
29 Dec. 2004 <<http://www.ludology.org/articles/thesis/>>.

² Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, [Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals](#). (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004) 72.

relationship between the concepts of "play" and "game." He reinforces this stance by stating that this relationship is diminished in English's disconnected designations of "play" and "game." Therefore if we are to privilege Huizinga's observations, then we must draw the conclusion that due to traditional linguistic divisions and designations English maybe generally ill equipped for the study of games. However, this is not to say that any language featuring interconnected verbs and nouns for the concepts of "play" and "game" is automatically best fit for our discourse.

Roger Caillois (1958) published in his native French, a language that Huizinga noted, features interconnected verb/noun designations for the concepts of "play" and "game" (*jeu, jouer*)³. However this intimate linguistic relationship proves to be problematic for isolating the intended meaning of the author for the purposes of interruption as well as translation. For example an excerpt from *Man, Play, and Games*, the English version of Caillois' *Les jeux et les hommes* as translated by Meyer Barash, is as follows:

There is no doubt that play must be defined as a free and voluntary activity, a source of joy and amusement. A game which one would be forced to play would at once cease being play (6).

While it is possible to ascertain Caillois' intended meaning of the statement, it is not possible to do so with absolute accuracy. We can reasonably agree that a game one is forced to play would indeed cease being play by Caillois' definition, but could it not also cease being a game? It is possible that Caillois could have intended to imply either meanings or both. Any fluidity to the statement's meaning was lost when Barash interpreted the work and assigned English designations.

³ Johann Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950) 36.

It is highly plausible to suggest that Caillois foresaw the failings of contemporary languages and chose to remove himself from them in an effort to locate *the most meaning and comprehensive term possible* (13). In order to accomplish this he created *the universe of play* (13), which divided all games into four general categories; *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx*. *Agon* describes games based on direct competition between players. The category of *alea* covers games that based on chance- activities that we mainly consider to be forms of gambling. Games that we might refer to as role-playing are games of *mimicry*, such as *Playing House*. Finally, *ilinx* describes games centered on the pleasures of movement⁴.

Caillois readily admits that an activity could easily be placed under more than one designation, but the nature of these designations is not the focus of this inquiry. What is of immediate interest is the context that Caillois created to bring order to his universe. Caillois (1958) writes:

...games are arranged in a rank order of progression. They can be placed on a continuum between two opposite poles. At one extreme an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety...that can be designated by the term *paidia*. At the opposite extreme, this frolicsome and impulsive exuberance is almost entirely absorbed or disciplined by a complementary, and in some respects inverse, tendency to its anarchic and capricious nature: there is a growing tendency to bind it with arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions...I call this second component *ludus* (13).

This continuum, anchored by the values *paidia* and *ludus*, provided a structure with which Caillois could compare play and game activities based on the complexity of their rules. Activities classified as *paidia* contained relatively simple

⁴ Roger Caillois, Man, Play and Games. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1958) 17-23.

rules while ludus activities employed increasingly complex rule sets to direct action. Gonzalo Frasca (2001) adopted Caillois' terminology, but chose to disregard the spectral relationship between paidia and ludus. Frasca used what I refer to as the *zero-sum threshold* to separate paidia and ludus into binary values. In his view, ludus activities contain a rule that establishes a victory condition while paidia are play-activities with rules but no formalized victory condition⁵.

Caillois' model reflects what could be considered as a dialectic method for the study of games while Frasca's model is based on binary oppositions. As there are inherent advantages to either approach, it is my position that a hybridized model based on the two examples presented would be of the greatest utility to the study of games. That model would consist of a continuum anchored alternately by, potentially theoretical, superlative forms of paidia and ludus with a zero-sum threshold located at a point equidistant from each pole. Once established, any and all game-like or play-like activities may be simultaneously located on this continuum and discussed in comparative fashion.

Enduring success of this model relies on developing an understanding pure paidia and absolute ludus, as I have come to call them, and effectively differentiating between them. However before we define these entities, we need to establish and emphasize that these comparative opposites are conceptually contextual and that they potentially exhibit more similarities than differences.

First and foremost, all activities located on the paidia/ludus spectrum are systems. In *The Rules of Play*, Salen and Zimmerman (2004) define a system as

⁵ Frasca 9.

a set of parts that interrelate to form a complex whole. They further state that all systems share four common elements; objects, attributes, internal relationships, and an environment. Objects are the individual parts within a system. Attributes describe the characteristics of those objects, identifying possible combinations of objects. While the attributes of a system establish permutative possibilities, internal relationships establish rules of function and interaction that are external to individual objects. Finally, the system's environment is not only the context of interrelated elements, but is the sum total of all of the system's surroundings⁶.

A critical distinction is that while all paidia and ludus activities are the products of systems, not all systems generate paidia or ludus activities- or games as they are commonly referenced. Referring to an activity as a game is a shorthand citation of its existence on the paidia & ludus continuum. The question remains, what qualifies a system as being able to produce either a paidia or ludus activity? The answer is that a paidia or ludus activity is the product of a system that by design or circumstance facilitates the play concept. In *Homo Ludens* Huizinga describes the play concept as:

...a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is "different" from "ordinary life" (28).

As one can easily extrapolate, Huizinga's play concept is highly systematic in nature. Objects are players and playthings. Attributes are descriptors of agents engaged in play, compiled code of a video game, and the size and weight of a rubber ball. Internal relationships are rules that state the team with the most runs

⁶ Salen and Zimmerman 50,55.

scored after nine innings of play wins, that an individual running while holding their arms horizontal to the ground is supposed to be interpreted as an airplane, and that a player has a fixed amount of time to get Mario to the end of any given level in *Super Mario Bros*. Finally as the scope of paidia and ludus activities has broadened, we have expanded our understanding and inquiries of these environments passed simple temporal and spatial identifications. Our discipline should engage in a debate regarding the differences in the environments paidia and ludus activities take place in; the visceral conditions of analog existence versus the selective, programmed reality of the digital realm. As this debate is currently beyond the scope of this project, this critical threshold will have to be explored another time.

It would be negligent to assume that all systems that include an individual, a ball, and a time limit are automatically paidia or ludus activities. Imagine a factory assembly line where a worker is expected to put X amount of balls into boxes per hour. While this system could certainly generate a paidia or ludus activity, it is not a given. Huizinga's play concept includes several qualifications that in many instances systems are not able to satisfy. The first being, the activity must be voluntary. Simply put, one cannot be forced to play. Secondly the activity must have an aim that is strictly in itself. When player engages in a paidia or ludus activity for reasons other than the activity itself, compensation for example, the individual becomes something other than a player- such as a worker in our example. Finally, all active agents within the system must accept the system's rules as absolute. For just as the system directs activity by the attributes and

internal relationships it endorses via inclusion, it shelters and protects its activity and agents by disallowing other attributes and internal relationships expressly or via exclusion. Adherence to these special qualifications creates an awareness that the activity one is engaging in is outside of and different from "ordinary life," and subsequently generates the feelings of tension and joy referenced by Huizinga⁷.

Now that we've established the play concept⁸ as being inherent to all paidia and ludus activities, it is appropriate to define the superlative values of paidia and ludus as best we can. Pure paidia and absolute ludus are not singular activities. Rather, they are classes of systems. Caillois initially described paidia as any activity that incorporates the play concept while consisting of less complex and lucid rules. However further pondering the subject, Caillois alludes to a greater, primordial form of paidia:

...the first manifestations of paidia have no name and could not have any, precisely because they are not part of any order, distinctive symbolism, or clearly differentiated life that would permit a vocabulary to consecrate their autonomy with a specific term (29).

As this pure paidia exists outside of any order or culture, the standards by which we consider ourselves to be educated and civilized would seem to partition us away from it. While discussing this core facet of play, Johann Huizinga noted:

We can safely assert...that human civilization has added no essential feature to the general idea of play (I).

In this statement, I believe that Huizinga is affirming the existence of pure paidia as stable concept isolated from human intervention. It is the foundation that all of

⁷ Huizinga 28.

⁸ Huizinga 28.

our paidic and ludic activities are built upon. The basic building block of these structures is the rule.

Rules in general, as defined by Salen and Zimmerman, are guidelines that guide and direct behavior. Rules endemic to paidia and ludus systems, as outlined in *Rules of Play*, specifically limit player action, are explicit and unambiguous, shared by all players, fixed, binding, and repeatable⁹. In *Man, Play, and Games*, Caillois outlines an indoctrinating relationship between rules and the play concept.

Rules are inseparable from play as soon as the other becomes institutionalized. From this moment on they become part of its nature. They transform it into an instrument of fecund and decisive culture (27).

Perhaps what Caillois is saying is that as soon as an individual, most likely a child, formalizes the play concept by grafting a rule to it, pure paidia becomes an inaccessible concept. Conversely, isn't the presence of rules a basic component of the play concept as defined by Huizinga? Where then does that leave us in our task to define pure paidia? Further more, does this speculative barrier prevent us from attempting metaphoric returns to Neverland?

In *Videogames of the Oppressed*, Gonzalo Frasca compares the work of Jean Piaget and anthropologist Daniel Vidart. Frasca details that Piaget believed that games (paidia and ludus systems) could be divided into three categories; games of exercise, symbolic games, and games with rules. Games of exercise, he said, are games played during the first two years of life that primarily involve basic senses and movements. Symbolic games are typically played between the

⁹ Salen and Zimmerman 122-123, 125.

ages of two and seven and rely on imagination and association. For example, a child running with his or her arms out-stretched parallel to the ground is associated with an airplane in the context of a symbolic game. Finally Piaget observed that around the age of seven, children undergo a socialization process and games with rules emerge. Games with rules are recognized as the games we play into adulthood such as sports and board games¹⁰.

Frasca is quick to elaborate on Daniel Vidart's stance that:

...the child who is playing and pretending to be a plane is following a clear rule: to extend his arms pretending to be flying. This "plane" make-believe game has particular rules, and they differ from, say, pretending to be a doctor or a locomotive. According to Piaget's classification, these make-believe games would be symbolic and could not be described as "games with rules" (7-8).

Based on this exchange we can first affirm Huizinga's belief that play concept contains rules, even on its most basic level provided that we slightly alter what we understand as a rule. As stated, Salen and Zimmerman define rules as principles that guide and direct behavior¹¹. For our purposes, we can reframe that view: a rule is anything that defines an association or relationship between objects in a system. In the event that objects are not initially in the same system, the establishment of a rule creates a common context, which may then be considered a system. However if it is indeed true that the presence of rules is a basic quality of the play concept and that the establishment of a single rule can create a paidia system, could not all paidia systems containing a single rule be considered pure paidia?

¹⁰ Frasca 6-8.

¹¹ Salen and Zimmerman 122-123, 125.

Pure paidia is the most basic expression of the play concept. As far as the possibility of returning to a state of pure paidia, I believe that this discussion often incorrectly centers itself on the quantification of rules. Recall that paidia activities are the products of systems facilitating the play concept while employing less complex and lucid rules. As the complexity of the rules involved diminishes, the closer an activity is to being a pure paidia activity. The relative complexity of rules should never be mistaken for the quantity of rules as there is a world of difference between the two values.

For clarification, we can contrast Piaget and Vidart's *Playing Airplane* with another relatively simple paidia activity- *Fetch*. In its most basic form one can say as Vidart did, that *Playing Airplane* has one rule, "be an airplane." Accordingly when examining the most basic form of *Fetch*, we must conclude that it has two rules; Player A throws an object and Player B retrieves the object for Player A. *Fetch* has twice as many rules as *Playing Airplane*, but which activity has simpler rules and is therefore closer to pure paidia?

For someone to understand the rules of *Fetch*, they need only understand the basic mechanics of throwing or retrieving an object and which action corresponds to their role in the overall activity. In contrast it is a far more difficult process to understand the rule "be an airplane." Foremost, the individual needs to be able to comprehend what an airplane is; a man-made vehicle that is able to circumvent the laws of gravity and fly. An exact understanding of the physics involved is not required but, at bare minimum, a frame of reference is. Additionally grasping the rules become more complex as the activity *Playing*

Airplane becomes more specific. For example if one is to effectively mimic an F-14 Tomcat in an iconic sense, that individual not only needs to recognize the concept of airplane but he or she also needs to be able to discern what differentiates the F-14 Tomcat from all other types of airplanes. As you can see despite having fifty percent fewer rules than *Fetch*, *Playing Airplane* proves to be the more complex activity and is located comparatively further away from pure paidia.

It seems that pure paidia may be a elusive concept. Ultimately, the more adamant we are in our attempts to isolate and positively identify an example of pure paidia, the more it will elude our lens of inquiry. This isn't to say that a real-life example does not exist. If it does, it is an activity that precludes an individual's acculturation and most resembles what Jean Piaget described as symbolic games. To this pursuit, I can only add that we will probably know it when and if we ever see it.

Nearly obverse in encumbrance to the inquiry of pure paidia is the investigation into the nature of ludus activities and their superlative form absolute ludus. However before we take up that task, it is important to remain cognizant of paidia and ludus' spectral relationship. Every activity that can be located on the paidia / ludus continuum perpetually exists as gradations of each type of activity. Caillois acknowledges this relationship by stating that ludus:

...is complementary to and a refinement of paidia, which it disciplines and refines (29).

A point of obvious inquiry would then be: when is an activity considered to be more ludus than paidia, or vice versa? Caillois did not explicitly establish a clear

boundary differentiating paidia and ludus. Frasca, however, did. He stated that activities containing a rule that outlined a clear victory condition were following ludus rules, while activities without such a rule were following paidia rules¹².

The point at which an activity acquires or sheds this formalized victory condition is what I will refer to as the zero-sum threshold. Salen and Zimmerman define a zero-sum game as a game where the winnings equal the overall losses. *Winning is always equally balanced by losing, making the end sum zero (255)*. Thus the zero-sum threshold is the logical mid-point for the paidia / ludus continuum and is the clearest indicator as to whether an activity may be considered to be more paidia or more ludus in nature.

The presence of a zero-sum rule in an activity is significant as it establishes a defined and concluding outcome to the activity. In most cases, the ludus activity is over when a player accomplishes or fails to accomplish X. Our previous examples of *Fetch* and *Playing Airplane*, as presented, are paidia activities and therefore do not have zero-sum rules and corresponding defined outcomes. *Fetch* continues as long as its participants wish it to. However these paidia activities can be quickly converted to ludus activities. Say in the course of *Playing Airplane* a player says, "Let's see who can be the first on to fly to that tree." If the other player(s) accept the condition, a zero-sum rule has been added to the system and the activity becomes ludus. This instance of ludus *Playing Airplane* will then effectively conclude as soon as the first player reaches the appointed tree. The primary difference between paidia and ludus activities is that in paidia activities a player's actions are geared towards the perpetuation of the

¹² Frasca 9.

activity while in a ludus activity a player's actions are quantified towards a designated outcome as defined by a zero-sum rule or set of rules.

As we now understand ludus, we can formally define it as an activity that is the product of a system, which facilitates the play concept and contains a zero-sum rule or set of rules. How is this construct then escalated to a superlative form? Ludus activities are homogenous in that they all lead to state of victory. However they distinguish themselves as singular entities by the actions their rules quantify in order to reach that state. *Basketball* quantifies some but not all possible actions in determining how victory is achieved, and that limited sample of actions is unique when compared to the set of actions quantified by *Chess* to determine victory. To paraphrase an old coaches' adage, "Winning is winning- no matter what game you are playing."

If typical ludus activities quantify some, but not all, actions in order to determine victory, then absolute ludus would theoretically quantify all actions in an effort to determine victory. Questions of possibility and plausibility are immediate. As with pure paidia, it is not imperative that we are able to arrive at these superlative forms. It is, however, critical that we understand the ends to which we aspire.

Visualizing an absolute ludus system is a far simpler feat than visualizing a pure paidia system. In fact, large portions of the world's population live their lives as if they were absolute ludus systems. The framing of life through the lens of religion reveals absolute ludus in its visceral beauty. For example in the general Christian belief system, all of an individual's thoughts and actions during

life are quantified towards the determination of whether or not they are ultimately granted admittance to Heaven. While many will vehemently disagree with the experience of being admitted to Heaven with that of winning a game of *Pong*, the pursuit of success and victory within a given system is a common motivation.

Utilizing the paidia / ludus continuum provides us with a comparative context within which can locate and examine any paidia or ludus activity. For example we can analyze *Sim City* and say that it is an activity with relatively complex rules, but does not contain a zero-sum rule. Therefore we can locate *Sim City* near the middle of the continuum due to its complexity, yet solidly on the side of paidia. This placement is further supported by the fact that our actions as players in *Sim City* are geared towards the perpetuation of the activity as opposed to the outcome-based actions of ludus activities.

While comprehensive, this theory is far from complete. There are more questions to be asked regarding the basic ontology of what we popularly refer to as games. The paidia / ludus continuum is an introductory attempt at establishing a unified context for what Caillois called the *universe of play*¹³. Recent history has taught us that games are an expressive medium beyond all expectations, now we have only need to teach ourselves to talk about them.

¹³ Caillois 12-13.

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