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HUIZINGA AND “EVERYTHING IS PLAY”:

A THINLY VEILED FORMALIST
TEMPTATION. A CRITIQUE *

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* This article revises and develops a subchapter from this text: “Como Suits e Huizinga entendem o ‘play’, ou o ‘iluminismo lúdico’: notas para além do formalismo e o caso dos jogos de tabuleiro”. In C. P. Martins; L. Ávila da Costa (coord.). *Filosofia do Desporto*. Edição AFDLP, 2025, pp. 147-163. A version of it was presented in Portuguese as “Huizinga: tudo é ‘play’; ou de como o ‘sport’ pode ser ‘falso-play” at the Conference Da Luta/On Fight, on May 23-24, 2024, at Aberta University, Lisbon, and broadcast at the Federal University of Santa Catarina, Florianopolis, organized by IEF-Coimbra University, Federal University of Santa Catarina, Association for the Philosophy of Sport in Portuguese Language (AFDLP, Portuguese acronym), among others.

Abstract

This article critically examines the concept of *formalism* in game studies, with a particular focus on Johan Huizinga's notion of "play" and its relationship with "game." It argues that while Huizinga's concept has been influential in shaping the understanding of "play," it tends to prioritize formalistic and metaphysical interpretations over broader socio-cultural contexts. By conflating "play" and "game," Huizinga's framework overlooks important tensions between notions of freedom, historicity, and formalism within game studies. The article suggests that a more nuanced understanding of "play" is needed, one that integrates considerations of rules, themes, and contexts, moving beyond metaphysical categorizations. Through this critical analysis, the article aims to contribute to ongoing discussions in game studies and encourage further exploration of the multifaceted nature of games in contemporary society.

Keywords: "Formalism;" "Freedom;" "Game;" "Historicity;" "Metaphysics."

There is no single article that illustrates more aptly the playfulness of the cultural impulse than the periwig as worn in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Huizinga (1949, p. 183).

[...] ever since Huizinga began to find play under nearly every rock in the social landscape, quite a bit too much has been made of the notion.

Suits (1977, p. 117).

1. Ready, set, go!

While the title, concerning the realm of the “ludic” (for the term *play*), may appear somewhat extravagant for our field, philosophy (even though it is accustomed to addressing practically... theoretically all subjects), it is still predictable that it bears no resemblance to the “adventurous” Rocambole, by Ponson du Terrail (1910). Now, we must apologize for yet another digression—this time into literature, which may seem *prima facie* arbitrary.

Our departure from a character like the one mentioned, likely accustomed to other *games*, aims to shift the possible accusation of “adventurism” elsewhere, even though this work may not distance itself far enough from a philosophical

adventure. In other words, if we accept this condition as a kind of reckless behavior inclined to take risks, often poorly calculated, then we can understand that in the realm of philosophy, this may find its equivalent in the form of risk-taking philosophical propaedeutic: while initiating some questions and delving too deeply into others, there is little room for the necessary depth in addressing the issues raised.¹ In the end, it will serve us well not to confuse Rocambolesque practice with the *game*. Let us see.

Johan Huizinga (1872-1945), a Dutch historian and linguist, published his seminal work *Homo Ludens* in 1938, subtitled “Attempt at a Definition of the Play-Element of Culture” (*Proeve Eener Bepaling Van Het Spel-element Der Cultuur*), often referred to by the more interpretative title “A Study of the Play-element in Culture.” This book marked the pinnacle of his theoretical contributions. However, it is important to acknowledge the significance of his other writings, particularly in the field of history, which also greatly contributed to his scholarly reputation.

The objective of his seminal text was to present humans as “players,” or “*homo ludens*” (as he coined), and to underscore the pervasive and enduring role of “play” (as depicted in the English translation we are following²), or “*Spel*” (as it

1) To complement this, some works are cited, within the fields of philosophy or related disciplines, that have engaged in dialogue with the concepts of “play” and “ludicity,” and in some cases, directly with the authors who inspired this text: Eco, 1985; Henricks, 1988, 2006, pp. 9-26, 2015, *passim*; Duflo, 1997, pp. 35-46; Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 78 *et seq.*; Skweres, 2017; Ketchum, 2018; and the list could go on. For a critique of a similar nature to the one we are going to undertake over the next few pages, see Antunes, 2024a.

2) It may be worth noting that the edition we predominantly rely on was prepared from the German edition published in Switzerland in 1944, as well as from the author’s own English translation completed shortly before his death. As stated by the final translator of this text (1949, p. xiii), comparing the two versions reveals several discrepancies and a noticeable difference in style. Nevertheless, Huizinga aspired to have achieved a “reasonable synthesis,” a sentiment which we acknowledge.

appeared in the original), in shaping civilization.³ Ultimately, Huizinga delves into the concept of “play,” or, as we better understand it within the context of his work, of “ludicity” or “playfulness.”⁴

Revisiting Huizinga’s work decades after its publication doesn’t appear to ascribe undue or exaggerated significance to the author. It is true, the reception of his *magnum opus* is certainly ambiguous, but the study of *Homo Ludens* has never truly ceased. His legacy stand on its own merits.

It is always good to keep in mind that some of the ideas presented there, whether better or worse, persist, and even if they may lose momentum, they are worth revisiting, even when in some cases it is known that they may have fallen short for their own time. This is especially true when *Homo Ludens* missed the chance to address, or Huizinga didn’t bother to acknowledge, other thinkers (e.g. Simmel, 1917; Buytendijk, 1933; etc.) who had already produced significant texts on the subject, directly or indirectly (Eco, 1985, p. 286; Steiner, 2003, p. 12).

In sum, while Huizinga’s exploration of “play” in *Homo Ludens* has left an indelible mark on our society understanding of human culture, it is imperative to question the underlying metaphysical assumptions embedded within his framework, particularly where lies a *thinly veiled formalist temptation*. This is especially evident when reconsidering a “play” that may

have unexpectedly veered into a “philosophical short-circuit,” contrary to the author’s own belief (1949, p. 211). Echoing one critic’s sentiment (Eco, 1985, p. 292) regarding Huizinga’s work falling short of expectations: “let us not miss our chance either.” With this in mind, our critique – to be developed in the following pages – aims to uncover the limitations of Huizinga’s conceptualization. By revisiting his discourse, we hope to shed new light on the complexities of “play” and its societal implications, paving the way for a more nuanced understanding of its role in contemporary society.

2. “Everything is play,” and how everything takes on the form of “game”

Huizinga is the foremost authority when it comes to recognizing “play” as a foundational element of civilization or human “culture.” In his work, he aimed to emphasize human being as “player,” “*ludens*,” and to elevate this concept to the same level as other designations, or rather above “*homo sapiens*” and “*homo faber*” (1949, p. ix).

It is true that in this article, we will not address the general “non-scientific” nature of *Homo Ludens*, nor the errors in some of its borderline definitions (Buytendijk *apud* Geyl, 1961, p. 239), nor the socio-political or ideological aspects of Huizinga’s thought (these have been covered in another work: Antunes, 2024b). However, it is important to note the hostility he devoted to his own time (Romein *apud* Geyl, 1961,

3) Or as Duflo (1997, p. 46) puts it: “[...] Huizinga’s true intention was not so much to define play [*jeu*] itself as to show how play, as he conceived it, extended to the entirety of social life.” - “[...] la véritable intention de Huizinga n’était pas tant définie le jeu proprement dit que de montrer comment le jeu tel qu’il le concevait s’étendait à l’ensemble de la vie sociale.”

4) Michael Ridge (forthcoming) will develop this term within the scope of game philosophy.

p. 258-259). Huizinga often railed against the modern world, massification, and the democratization of public space, which he believed signified total “plebeianization” (Geyl, 1961, p. 259).

Nevertheless, we must recognize that this absolute shift from “*homo*” to “*ludens*” occurs against the backdrop of a rejection of a society that allegedly prioritizes “*sapiens*” and, above all, “*faber*,” over all other aspects

As a result, “play” is a factor that Huizinga believes is often overlooked. Therefore, he proposes to *integrate* “culture” and “play,” not in a “psychological” or “biological” sense, but strictly in a “cultural” context. According to him, “play” precedes all culture, whether of knowledge or action; culture arises from society, with “play” laying its foundations.⁵

As Huizinga states (1949, p. 4): “[i]n culture we find play as a given magnitude existing before culture itself existed, accompanying it and pervading it from the earliest beginnings right up to the phase of civilization we are now living in.” Throughout the text (e.g. 1949, pp. 5 and 105), several examples arise that support the idea that, for Huizinga, a culture viewed through the lens of “play” is not mere rhetoric, but a fundamental aspect of understanding it. So, it is not by chance that concepts like “commerce and profit, craft and art,

poetry, wisdom and science” are deeply embedded in what the author (1949, p. 5) regards as the “*primaeva* soil of play.”

However, it is amid a more historiographical and anthropological exposition of “play,” interspersed with extensive etymological discussions, that Huizinga ultimately discovers a biblical and philosophical justification for the fundamental role of “play” in civilization. He (1949, p. 212) asserts this conclusion towards the end of the work: “[i]nstead of the old saw: ‘All is vanity,’ the more positive conclusion forces itself upon us that ‘all is play.’ [...] it is the wisdom Plato arrived at when he called man the plaything of the gods.”

Let us briefly delve into the more biblical sense, from which the reference presented as a proverbial saying (*Ecclesiastes* 1:2) does not disguise the author’s conclusion. Just a few lines below, he directly cites an excerpt from the *Book of Proverbs* (8:30-31), God: “[...] was delighted every day, [and so man] playing before him at all times; playing in the world. And my [God’s] delights were to be with the children of men”⁶.

Hence, the biblical theme not only moves us from excessive self-absorption – from sheer pedantry – to a comprehensive sense of playfulness but also inevitably directs us towards God, aiming to demonstrate how humans are “players” for His witness. However, despite this engagement, it is evident that

5) “The aim of the present full-length study is to try to integrate the concept of play into that of culture” (Huizinga, 1949, p. 4). As we noted from the epigraphic comment, he began to find “play” under “every rock.” As we will explore, Suits, the author of the comment and regarded as a pioneer of “formalism” in the discipline, might find a direct intellectual predecessor in Huizinga, particularly in relation to the formalist approach.

6) The author himself admits in a note (1949, p. 212 n.) that this is a translation from the *Vulgate* diverging from the more common English translation, which does not lead into this obvious way to the interpretation of “play.”

the author is already deeply entrenched in Platonism, which prompts us to delve into the philosophical sphere.

According to Huizinga, the Greek philosopher concluded that "man is made God's plaything [not toy]." Before this, he observed (1949, pp. 18-19) that for Plato, the connection between "play" and human rituals was already an established fact, as Plato did not hesitate to incorporate the "sacred" into the realm of "play."

If the highest aspiration for humans was indeed to be the "plaything" of God (or the gods), "[e]very man and woman should spend life in this way, playing the noblest possible games [...]" he asserted from Plato's *Laws* (1998, VII: 803c). Drawing from the same text, *Nomoi* in Greek, the Dutch scholar also concluded that "[l]ife must be lived as play, playing certain games, making sacrifices, singing and dancing, and then a man will be able to propitiate the gods, and defend himself against his enemies, and win in the contest" (Plato, 1998, VII: 803d-e, *apud*).

Following the same text by Plato, even before repeating himself (as these passages reappear alongside the one that justified this incursion, also appearing on page 212), Huizinga (1949, p. 37) arrives at the *purity* of "play" from observing children: "[...] the origin of play lies in the need of all young creatures, animal

and human, to leap."⁷ Later, towards the end, we are indeed invited to understand that "play," whether more *ideal* or more *formal*, should be seen as akin to childlike purity, "[r]eally to play, a man must play like a child" (1949, p. 199).⁸

Following this path, the human being is not only a "plaything" of God – in the "good" sense that the author assures – but is also, as we have seen, a "player" for His observation and pleasure, and this is how one should live.

In addition to its cultural, civilizational, or quasi-religious implications, where "play" is construed as the cornerstone and mantra of existence, there exists a more definitive formal aspect, which, contrary to the author's initial intentions (1949, p. ix), we view as a temptation, a metaphysical (non-theological) one. Along with a cultural tone, this tendency can already be discerned.

Huizinga (1949, p. 13) introduces a definition, or attempts to summarize what he was already composing in the early pages, as follows: "*play*" presents itself as a free activity, consciously situated outside of so-called "normal" life, with its goal being in itself (*autotelic*) and accompanied by a feeling of tension and joy, an activity that is "not serious," yet intensely and completely absorbing the player, all of this, more formally speaking, within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to freely accepted

7) Huizinga may have missed the opportunity to compare these Platonic passages with what Plato (1991, p. 102, 424-425a) has Socrates say in *The Republic (Politeia)*: it is necessary for the young to play with the laws or the game of laws, lest they grow up without laws. In other words, here "play" is highlighted for its *functionality*, which is not quite considered by the Dutch author, who is more inclined to think of it as an activity *in itself*, although the way he conceptualizes the *form* of "play" might still align with that idea. We will get to that shortly.

8) Flanagan (2009, p. 5) highlights that Huizinga focuses on adult play, despite having this issue in mind and contrary to what the commentator finds in Sutton-Smith, who focuses on children.

(*mandatory, fixed, and orderly*) rules. The complement to this is as follows (1949, p. 28):

Thus defined, the concept seemed capable of embracing everything we call “play” in animals, children and grown-ups: games of strength and skill, inventing games, guessing games, games of chance, exhibitions and performances of all kinds. *We ventured to call the category “play” one of the most fundamental in life (emphasis ours).*

With the remaining material surrounding the descriptive framework, what was already being presented is derived: “play” will be “one of the most fundamental categories in life,” among other things, because it should provide the human being (without the functional dimension it seems to acquire) with a preliminary space for establishing rules and learning to respect them, for creating bonds and associations.⁹ Therefore, “play” is defined as a free, voluntary activity, conducted with rules within spatial and temporal limits, even when it is nothing more than guessing, playfulness among animals, etc.

In “play,” the objective is contained within *itself*, and therefore serves as an escape from “normal” life, laden with “utility” and “materialism,” ceasing to be framed as a “serious” activity, even when the author acknowledges “seriousness” (*earnest*) in “play” (e.g., in the case of chess, 1949, p. 197). Indeed, for

Huizinga (1949, pp. 44-45), one of the necessary conditions for civilization not to lose its capacity for “play” is the possibility of not always taking things so “seriously”: excessive “seriousness” justified political, sporting, etc., phenomena that deviated from “play” (the author even speaks of a “false-play”).¹⁰

The shift towards formality, considering the incorporation of what is more typical of a game, results from the merging of the recreational aspect with the institutionalized game, a game that has become a reference: sports, board games, card games, etc. (Suits, 1978, p. 94). This occurs regardless of the degree of “seriousness” attributed to them since “play” adopts the *form* of “game” – as the author sees it. For example, rules are freely accepted in art, politics, and other domains.

In summary, while “everything is play,” there exists a dual nature. On one hand, there’s a conscious, voluntary, and free “play” that transcends everyday life, entering a “magic circle” (where the ludic activity imposes its rules), when engaged in playful, gaming activity, capable of conveying “joy and tension” while strictly adhering to rules. On the other hand, there exists a pervasive condition of “play” that extends to human activity in general, serving as a prelude to the former, albeit in a less voluntary manner. But Huizinga’s duality of freedom faces a tension: when the condition of “play” is *seriously* threatened, not everything qualifies as “game.” It seems that there is also the freedom to “false-play,” as well as the “false-freedom” to

9) Henricks (2006: 13) rightly points out that for Huizinga, “play” is an activity that creates order, which, according to Skweres (2017: 9), allows one to take control of the chaotic situation in which those involved may find themselves.

10) Among other things, the Dutch scholar (1949, pp. 197 and 205, for instance) had in mind, albeit not explicitly, the events in Nazi Germany, hence his pessimism regarding “play,” which he saw as distorted in the 20th century. He was also convinced that professional sports, due to their excessive “seriousness,” material interest, and profit, ceased to be “play.”

“play”, you may say, as happens with children and animals. Nevertheless, every aspect remains directly, indirectly, or in negation related to the “play” condition, and this, ultimately, is what matters to our historian.

3. “Everything Everywhere All at Once”: Critique of the “Metaphysics of Play”

The critique of a “metaphysics of play” doesn’t arise solely from the detection of a biblical and/or Platonic foundation.¹¹ There is more in *Homo Ludens* to account for “metaphysical” aspects.¹² Similarly, it is unsatisfactory to point out, as some authors (e.g., Henriot cited in Duflo, 1997, pp. 44-45), the insufficiency of the Huizingian definition since the “voluntary character,” “spatio-temporal separation,” and “rules” are not distinctive features of “play,” since each of them can be found in other social activities, such as fictional literature, law, among others. But it is not the comparison of the characteristics of “play” that motivates our critique; we must move to another level.

Given the caveats, it is important to consider, right away, the elephant in the room – the way in which “play” and “game” have been conflated by Huizinga, integrated, beyond what an all-encompassing scope of “play” already hinted at. This “conflation” (Carlson, 2011) – which materializes when Huizinga’s explanation transitions from a more cultural tone to a definitional-formal one – will, in its own way, solidify what is, in fact, a metaphysical proposal of culture, of the ludic.¹³

While Huizinga certainly sees “play” as the meeting point for all other social factors, ranging from law to literature, *inter alia*, he regards it at least as a *pre-form*. It is when he incorporates children’s games, animal play, and even activities like wearing a periwig (as observed in the epigraph), into the realm of “play-element,” that the convergence of “play” and “game” solidifies into a distinct *form*.

However, it is not the same to speak of an activity that is “regulated by freely accepted rules” as it is to refer to something common among animals and children, or to strategic games

11) For all intents and purposes, we will assume these traits as self-explanatory – given the theoretical connection between metaphysics, theology, and Platonism – without requiring further elaboration on their metaphysical content, leaving that for another occasion.

12) Caillois (1958, p. 160), one of his critics, generously states that Huizinga has only “derives from the spirit of play [*esprit de jeu*] most of the institutions that order societies or the disciplines that contribute to their glory.” - “[...] dérive de l’esprit de jeu la plupart des institutions qui ordonnent les sociétés ou des disciplines qui contribuent à leur gloire” (*emphasis ours*), meaning he does not derive all of them *metaphysically*.

13) Let us clarify how we perceive it: our understanding of metaphysics doesn’t solely draw from Kant’s admonition (1788, p. 156 [121]), urging not to “transcend the limits of reason” by speculating. It also stems from Hegelian criticism, wherein anything that refuses to consider the historical and relational relations that develop and constrain reason, in short, dialectics, is equally metaphysical. Concerning the term used to describe what we are thinking, Hegel (1819-1983, p. 223) denounced that “metaphysizing empiricism” (*metaphysizierender Empirismus*) had become the ultimate mode of contemplation, cognition in England, and Europe in general. Despite this underlying lineage, we hold dear Marx’s resolution (& Engels, 1845-1846, e.g.), as reason alone doesn’t suffice for an understanding of becoming; it needs to be resolved in the materiality of becoming, that is, in real (dialectical) relations of objective foundation, not ideal or idealized. Considering this, we are far from understanding “metaphysics” as a redeemable discipline, as when it is allegedly understood to be purged of “logical errors” or confined to the “limits of experience.”

and “performances of all kinds.” With this contrast, we are not stating that these are two completely separate fields, no, but they are not the same. Perhaps playing, experimenting, discovering – in summary, the more general “play” – may indeed represent a primitive function underlying both, but it does not encompass the entirety of *ludere* or playing as such, nor all social factors.

This Huizingian description, although culturally guided and primarily recreational, as had been observed previously, does not evade a “formalism” – a viewpoint asserting an essential nature of the game as a set of rules (typically unshakable), and that correct participation in a game entails strict adherence to that (Suits, 1978, p. 45; Nguyen, 2017, p. 9) – thus defining an original “play.”

Huizinga’s problems begin to emerge when he fails to clarify what constitutes a more recreational, natural, spontaneous dimension of human activity. Furthermore, he not only conflates this with the animal realm but also extends to all this a decidedly less spontaneous, and even more voluntary dimension: that of *suspending time and place* to act according to a specific system of rules that cannot be broken without risking the complete ruin of what is understood as a game (at least what one is playing at the moment).

In the broader context of *Homo Ludens*, this situation was unavoidable in order to enable the “integration,” as the author himself terms it, of “play” and “culture.” If one serves as the bedrock of civilization, the other ensures its structure.

Otherwise, it wouldn’t make much sense, in the manner he intended, to acknowledge that “play” forms the basis of culture, being *integral* to it, and on the flip side that something else could arise primitively after all. Moreover, “play” can blend with “game” unlike any other social factor.

Thus, one of the metaphysical branches, the one that tends to seek an *essence* detached from the historical context (and idealized ¹⁴), becomes evident even through arguments that purportedly rely on empirical evidence, such as the revival of a universal “play attitude” across diverse civilizations. This involves abstracting an idealized concept of “play,” which is then *essentialized* and applied universally according to formal regulations.

Huizinga intertwines all these elements when it wasn’t necessary to merge “play” and “game” to support the concept of an all-encompassing “play.” He could have done so without such exaggeration, nor did such a notion require the amalgamation of the two, which ended up causing a series of problems with the subsumption of one into the other.

Furthermore, the justification for “play” *itself* doesn’t stem from being the foundation of everything, but rather from a privileged perspective. That is, when the conditions for someone’s survival are already met socially and economically, allowing a “non-serious” outlook to gain general prominence.

Both “play” and “rules” lose their contextual and historical significance, with the shift to formalism serving as the final

14) There is no doubt that there is a repulsion towards “materiality,” as we can see from the very beginning: “[...] play has a meaning implies a nonmaterialistic quality in the nature of the thing itself” (Huizinga, 1949, p. 1).

touch that solidifies this loss. This shift, which emphasizes abstract structures over cultural or historical context, diminishes the deeper meanings and nuances that these concepts once held. By prioritizing a rigid, formal approach, the richness of how “play” and “rules” operate in specific historical and cultural settings is overlooked, ultimately stripping them of their true significance. The move to formalism, therefore, acts as the final step in erasing the broader, more dynamic understanding of these elements.

Yet, there’s more: within these two metaphysical axes – the all-encompassing “play” and its specific formalistic conflation with “game”, implying the abstraction of one of its features, such as the rules – a contradiction arises. It is not just that one presupposes culture and, to some extent, history while the other abstracts it in favor of a *form*, but also that the concept of “freedom” doesn’t align perfectly in both.

On one hand, one can sense, not far off, the notion of the “creative genius” attributed to Kant, which connects art with originality, a “free play” of forms or beauty, thus privileging the position of the artist as an exceptional individual endowed with an innate gift to channel the *transcendent* (God, divine inspiration, or the *original*), for instance, even when “ordering” the chaotic. On the other hand, there’s a trace from Schiller (a reader of Kant) to the Dadaists through Nietzschean Dionysianism, to the surrealists, who criticized Kant’s “specialist” version, relying on “*homo ludens*” against modern “*faber*” (Pederson, 2021, pp. 11-12 e 17 n.).

In any case, the type of freedom proposed by Huizinga can disrupt the “normality” of life, engaging in freely accepted rules, entering the “magic circle,” and suspending time and place. This freedom ultimately appears as “voluntary” (with all that subjectivity entails), with a particular focus on “play,” in areas such as education, psychology, anthropology, behavioral studies, and folklore, reducing it to a kind of “[...] triumph of personal motivation over public constraints” (Henricks, 2006, pp. 7-8).

Huizinga’s conceptualization of “play” is complex, encompassing both voluntary and non-voluntary aspects. While individuals may engage in “play” voluntarily, the presence of voluntariness doesn’t solely define the activity. “Play” can occur even without being a deliberate choice of the participants.¹⁵ This nuanced understanding challenges the notion that “play” is solely driven by personal motivation and choice, highlighting its broader societal and cultural dimensions. What was obscured in Huizinga’s elaboration and led towards contradiction, in addition to the tension indicated above.

The proposal of a “free” conduct in and about the game results in an “idealized view of play” (we add, *metaphysicized*) in Huizinga, as *necessarily* voluntary, conflating a freedom within a framework of cultural constraints with practically unrestricted freedom. And if in a game one is not *unrestrictedly* free, from a metaphysical point of view, it is not quite so.

Here, let us delve deeper into the meaning of the English sentence that headlines this subsection – “Everything

15) For instance, Kreider (2011, p. 64) draws attention to the excessive weight attributed to the player’s condition through the emphasis on the voluntary aspect, as it implies total adherence and full awareness on the part of the player.

Everywhere All at Once.” It is not just the title of a 2022 movie; it also encapsulates Huizinga’s perspective succinctly. While the sentence may not directly relate to cinematic content – though, it’s worth noting the movie insights for other philosophical inquiries – it effectively conveys the idea that “play” permeates all aspects of existence simultaneously. Indeed, Huizinga (1949, p. 4) himself affirms this notion from the outset: “[w]e find play present everywhere”. As we progress through his exposition, this idea becomes more apparent, albeit in a *formalized* manner.

Having said that, Huizinga ultimately couldn’t avoid the “short circuit” associated with philosophy or metaphysics – the tendency to abstract one feature, and a network of interrelationships, and to make some factor all-encompassing and the basis of all human action, which in its case is “play.” He ended up succumbing to it (perhaps not entirely consciously).

In a nutshell, *Homo Ludens* presents a metaphysical ideal that manifests dually as “play” and “game,” “childlike purity” and “macro-social play,” a “guiding thread” for the history of humanity and “freedom.” However, ultimately, there prevails a “play” as an *essence* that not only reflects on human beings but also unveils the obscure meaning of Divine Providence (as seen in Plato). There is a sort of “philosophy (metaphysics) of history,” as if an *Idea* – perhaps ludic – sometimes not far from a “theodicy of play” (with the necessary “justification of evil,” given that “play” encompasses the violence of the past).¹⁶ Such a grandiose endeavor may have birthed

the plethora of historiographical studies that Huizinga published, in tension – contradiction – with his *formal* demands: “*play*” encompasses the institutionalized games and ultimately imposes this form on everything else, even in the way history unfolds.

4. Conclusion: Blowing the Final (provisional) Whistle

The critique of a “metaphysics of play” aims to point out aspects that some authors overlook or neglect, and sometimes even celebrate. A distinct neo-Huizingian approach has emerged in recent years (Feezell, 2010, p. 150; Lecuppre-Desjardin, 2021), which adopts Huizinga’s celebration of “play” while often leaving the foundational assumptions unexamined. Proponents of this perspective frequently overlook how the conceptual elements of play, culture, and structure interrelate, resulting in an analysis that risks reifying Huizinga’s ideas rather than critically engaging with them.

As we have seen, Huizinga (1949, p. 18) made an error, ironically going as far as to say that one would only be playing with words if the concept of “play” were misunderstood. So, there was no reason to him to believe that he was falling into that when characterizing “ritual” as “play.” There are moments when he (1949, p. 51) even seems to recognize that there is a difference between “playing” (recreating, etc.) and “game” (e.g., when he says that tension increases the importance of a game, understanding that “play” is something that can be added), but it is not decisive.

16) According to Huizinga himself (1949, p. 211), “play” may manifest in a “violent,” “false” manner, yet it remains “play.” However, it is recognized that the agonistic aspect can be found more frequently in games than in recreation (Lugones, 1987, p. 15), if the two are not conflated.

The problems continue to appear scattered throughout the work; Huizinga (1949, p. 156) even uses Erasmus to illustrate someone who criticized the unnecessary restriction imposed by rules in education, without understanding what that meant for his definition of "play," namely, that it does not always imply rules, and not everything that has rules necessarily qualifies as "play." This happens because, for him (1949, p. 89, here illustrated with war), the issue of rules essentially boils down to the *formal* character of "play" (the conflation being a necessary part) and not to something that can be qualitatively distinct in some cases.

The criticism of Huizinga's "metaphysics" is twofold, targeting two metaphysical aspects of his work that were not inherently interdependent. However, within the specificity of his proposal, they both constitute its coherence and, simultaneously, its contradiction. Here, the holistic nature of "play," the potential "metaphysics of history" it may imply, and the conflation between "play" and "game" intersect and relate, extending the *formalized rule structure* of the latter to the former. This does not reconcile the space that can be allotted to "history" and "freedom" in each.

The pervasive nature of "play" rests on its exclusive emphasis and its overlap with other social factors. While we do not deny the possibility of some factor ultimately being decisive in human relations, such as the material aspects of life – since it is impossible for the human species to survive without basic necessities like food, clothing, shelter, etc., and without interaction among individuals to fulfill these needs, historically leading to different ways of doing so and consequently different

ways of being conceptualized (Marx; Engels, 1845-1846, p. 28 ff.) – Huizinga's approach was an arbitrary idealization. This pattern of reasoning is often seen when selecting a derived social factor as determinative, as it risks overemphasizing a single dimension while overlooking the broader interplay of social, historical, and material contexts that shape human experiences.

Regarding the other axis – the conflation between "play" and "game" – it ultimately steers its proposal towards *formalism*, abstracting the different contexts "play" have altogether to attain its most pristine contours. This transforms what could have been a nuanced ludic-recreative dimension into a regulated structure, etc., extending it to the whole of civilization.

After considering all this, it should be advanced as follows in conclusion: a "metaphysics of play", at least as based on Huizinga's work (as critiquing others would be another project), must involve some elaboration around "play," or "playing," and aiming for an all-embracing nature of it that is *formally* adaptable to any new social factor or new example.

To avoid being formalist and metaphysical, a theory of play/game should consider the inter-relational character between different social factors (given the materiality of the human condition and beyond) and historicity. This approach ensures that "play" is not treated abstractly but is understood within the context in which it is developed. Additionally, it prevents an inherent formality of rules and the freedom to accept them. "Play" and "game" have their own historical context; they do not define every context, and that's how we should approach them.

To conclude, it seems fitting to adapt Augustine's reflections (1891: XIV, 17, p. 301) on "time" to illustrate the challenge inherent in Huizinga's conceptualization of "play." While Augustine wrestled with the elusive nature of time, we might similarly contend that relying solely on Huizinga's notion of "play" – given the exploratory tone suggested earlier – leaves us in a comparable predicament: "[i]f no one asks me [about 'play'], I know; if I wish to explain to him who asks, I know not [or perhaps, as Huizinga might suggest, it is everything!]." This underscores the difficulty of pinning down such a multifaceted concept while engaging critically with Huizinga's adventurous framing. In fact, since we don't adhere to Huizinga's proposal and won't stop at just this critique, future work – especially with the aim of exploring what a *theory of play* might entail that doesn't align with the issues criticized here – will need to delve deeper into the insights gathered for alternative interpretations. For instance, there is room to explore how historical and cultural contexts might reshape or challenge Huizinga's definitions: how would the evolution of board and digital games influence the "magic circle" concept?

Post-scriptum: given the specificity of the journal in which we are being published, let us briefly address the final issue. It is evident that our critique of formalism, for instance, regarding board games, would not be solely aimed at contrasting thematic board games such as "Ameritrash" with Euro or German-style games (Woods, 2012). Instead, we are heading

towards a more holistic understanding of what defines a game and the process of creating one, especially in the context of contemporary societies (Brown; MacCallum-Stewart, 2020). We are interested in delving deeper into how games contribute to our society and vice versa. This entails reflecting on and integrating aspects such as rules, themes, and the broader context (see Malaby's processual games, 2007). While there is already growing recognition of the importance of this reflection and integration within the contemporary board game community, there is still much ground to cover to achieve a more profound understanding of the entire process and its implications for board games. It took a specific context (the European one) to bring the formality of the rules to the pinnacle of what a board game is or should be. However, what makes a board game truly great is always more than just its rules, even if the player or designer focuses solely on them.¹⁷

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17) A possible criticism of the article could be the lack of a more detailed exposition of alternative theoretical perspectives on the theme of "play" and metaphysics, as well as a deeper analysis of the practical consequences of the conclusions drawn. Additionally, it could be useful to more broadly explore the philosophical and social implications of the issues raised, providing concrete examples to illustrate the arguments presented. Nevertheless, this was not the place for such an in-depth exploration, but rather a quick overview aimed at also establishing this call to attention for the universe of board games.

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