

Taming Play: A Map of Play Ideologies in the West and in China¹

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the approaches to the utilitarian use of play and games in the West and in China. In order to do so, starting from examples pertaining to both cultures, it draws a map of the different ideologies of play, ranging from the idea that play is something silly and unimportant, to the more hostile reactions towards games portrayed as dangerous, to the enthusiastic idea — linked to gamification — of using play in every situation in order to boost engagement and participation. These ideologies are then situated around a semi-otic square based on their attitude towards play and it is suggested that a fourth position may exist, less easy to handle but possibly more objective.

KEYWORDS: Gamification; game-based learning; moral panic; mass-shooting; play; video games; ideology

Introduction

Gamification, a buzzword introduced in the context of marketing in 2008, is nowadays a global phenomenon: studied, tested and exploit-

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ed all around the World. Gamification can be defined as the attempt to design experiences or products so that they are more “game-like” to make them more attractive and engaging. To this end several strategies exist, some dealing with the implementation of game elements in non-game systems (Deterding *et al.*, 2011), others focusing on the user-experience (Huotari, Hamari, 2015) or underlining the importance of fun or excitement (Werbach, Hunter, 2012; McGonigal, 2011).

In either case, the concept of gamification is rooted, more or less consciously, in a specific, transcultural, *ideology of play*. In this paper I will attempt to situate gamification in its ideological background by outlining the main ideologies that surround play and its relationship with society. This should allow, on the one hand, a better understanding of the phenomenon of gamification, contextualised as a larger cross-cultural trend and, on the other hand, the postulation of a more objective perspective on the possibility of “taming” and using play for non-playful purposes.

1. From play to gamification: The ludicisation of culture

The relevance of play is not something new. Play is a fundamental aspect of the life and development both of human and non-human animals. The Greek philosopher Plato, in the second book of *Laws*, indicated as the first principle of play the desire of the younglings to leap about and make a noise, even though they were capable of staying still and being silent. More recently, Gregory Bateson (1956) claimed that every species of vertebrate engages in play, and that in fact, this is one of the most sophisticated activities undertaken by several of them. The ability to *metacommunicate* one’s playful intention — to “tell” other animals that their following actions should not be interpreted as a threat, but as playful — is not a trivial matter.

Play, then, finds its fundamental importance also in human culture. Huizinga (1949), the father of modern studies on play, identifies

several areas of culture that make very large use of play principles, mentioning, among others, religion, rituals and warfare. Bakhtin, in his study of Rabelais and of the carnivalesque (1988), underlines the fundamental role of play in appeasing social tensions. Carnivals allow participants, within a specific and rigid frame, to playfully challenge crucial social norms, permitting the members of a society to play out these tensions, without really endangering the social fabric of their society. Roger Caillois (1967), moreover, traces connections between his “forms of play” and phenomena such as drug addiction or the stock market. The list of works pointing out the importance of play in human cultures could very easily go on.

Nevertheless, in the last few decades, something has changed. Play and games — in particular digital games — have acquired a cultural prominence that seems to be unprecedented. If we look at it from a merely economic perspective, we can see that the Game Industry has become the fourth biggest entertainment industry on the planet, surpassing the revenues of the Film Industry³. To give an example, Rockstar’s game *Grand Theft Auto V* has been the fastest-selling entertainment product in history⁴, earning \$800 million in its first day and \$1 billion in its first three days, largely surpassing any blockbuster. This is a global trend: the top nations in terms of estimated video game revenues in 2018 were China (\$37 B), the United States (\$30B) and Japan and the EU (both circa \$19B)⁵.

The economic success of digital games is just a part of a larger cultural shift: that of the ludicisation of culture. This term, introduced by Bonenfant and Genvo (2014), along with others such as “ludification” or “gamification of culture”, indicates the growing importance and prestige of play in contemporary culture. In semiot-

3. The top three most lucrative entertainment industries remain, as of 2015, casinos and online gambling, TV, and books. Source: <https://businesstech.co.za/news/life-style/88472/the-biggest-entertainment-markets-in-the-world/>.

4. Source: <http://www.ign.com/articles/2013/10/09/gta-5-currently-holds-seven-guinness-world-records>.

5. Source: <https://newzoo.com/insights/rankings/top-100-countries-by-game-revenues/>.

ic terms it can be described as a movement of play towards the centre of the semiosphere (Thibault, 2016). Play is a modelling system that has always been common to all semiospheres, but nowadays, due to several factors, both social and technological (see, e.g., Ortoleva, 2012), is acquiring an unprecedented centrality.

This repositioning of play within the semiosphere entails a higher modelling ability, both in its descriptive and prescriptive dimension. On the one hand, then, play and games become a metalanguage used to describe other portions of the semiosphere. We can think of terms like “winners” and “losers”, that have become mainstream, but also of the discourses around politics or the economy, or ways of self-description (see Idone Cassone, 2017). On the other hand, games also become prescriptive: there is a general idea that things would be “better” if they were more game-like — it is the basis of the idea of gamification.

The fact that play has moved towards the centre of the semiosphere, however, does not mean that we play *more* than in the past, or that play was somewhat less crucial in past eras. Ludicisation has to do with the *prestige* with which play is invested within a certain culture. In other words, play has always been necessary for human life, but today we recognise in it something so prestigious that we tend to understand and shape according to its rules also things that are not playful at all.

In several cultures, the situation has often been radically different. Due to the difficulty of defining play, it has often been defined in opposition to things such as “work” or “seriousness” (Bateson, 1956), despite the fact that play can be extremely serious, and that people can make a living out of it. Play has often been dismissed as something silly and unimportant, innocuous and not worthy of attention. Play has been relegated to the outskirts of the semiosphere, despite its importance, and associated with children, savages, or other groups of “peripheral”⁶ people. This is a *first ideology* of play that,

6. Using, again, Lotman’s terminology.

even though it is slowly being replaced by others, is still well represented across different cultures and environments.

2. Hostility

The fact that games are now at the centre of the semiosphere also accounts for the need for new metalanguages to discuss it. The birth of disciplines such as Game Studies or of branches like the semiotics of games accounts for this need to “talk” about games, to understand them. At the same time, in parallel with its growing economic importance, the Power has also started to develop languages and regulations in regard to games.

Video game content rating systems have started to be created across the world, generally setting age limits for the use of certain products. In Europe, for example, since 2003 there has been the Pan European Game Information (PEGI) system. China also has numerous regulations. Yingrong Chen (2018) estimates that there are 94 regulation at national level and 2000 at local level (including also rules regarding lotteries and other forms of play). These regulations cover a variety of topics, including copyright, in-game transactions, the approval of game content — with rules to protect the youth from possibly dangerous content (addiction, porn, violence) — but also regulations regarding the role of games in society — that is, games have to be coherent with the national ideology and not offend the national image. Most of these regulations arise from practical and sensible concerns. Nevertheless, in others it is easy to spot traces of a form of distrust towards play that runs deep in human culture.

And that is because playfulness is scary. It is something powerful and uncontrollable. It questions the social order of everyday life, proposing new and alternative meanings to objects and spaces. For this reason, every culture tries to erect more or less strict boundaries around play. If banishing play is probably impossible, history is full

of attempts to regulate it, to contain its disruptive force within specific boundaries of time or space — let us think, again, of Bakhtin’s work on carnival.

One of the fiercest critics of play in history has often been religion. Play is sometimes perceived as *desecrating*, and its ability to evoke passions and to challenge the traditional meaning of things makes it, in some cases, an enemy of religions. In a paper entitled *La pallavolo sacra* (2016), Leone presented an interesting overview of the attitude of Abrahamic religions — especially Christianity and Islam — towards play, an attitude that often turned into open condemnation. Let us think of the “falò delle vanità” (bonfires of the vanities), which took place in Italy in the 15th century and involved the burning of game sets and playing cards because they were considered sinful.

Distrust and hostility towards games has continued until modern days, and new forms of play are often met with scepticism and fear. This happened, for example, with role-playing games (RPG) in the 1980s. *Dungeon and Dragons* was the first RPG ever created and faced a staggering amount of hostility. Published in 1973, it proposed a set of rules based on fantasy, pen and paper, in which each player impersonates a magical character (an elf wizard, a warrior dwarf and so on) and describes to the other players his or her character’s behaviour. Although it may seem difficult to find a more innocuous form of play than this form of collective story-telling, the game encountered a heated wave of moral panic.

The wave was born in response to the suicide of two 16-year-old Americans, James Dallas Egbert III and Irving Bink Pulling II, who killed themselves respectively in 1980 and 1982. Despite the presence of many psychological and social factors that potentially explained their gesture — chronic depression, drug abuse, bullying — the American media hypothesized that one of the main factors that had led them to suicide was their being D&D players (Waldron, 2005). This convinced Patricia Pulling, Irving’s mother, to denounce the company that produced the game — the TSR (“Tactical Stud-

ies Rules”) — as responsible for the death of her son. She lost the trial in 1984, and subsequently founded, together with psychiatrist Thomas Radecki, an organization named *Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons* (B.A.D.D.) to lobby against the game, finding support especially in the area of Christian fundamentalism. The game was accused of being the result of a demonic influence and connected to other phenomena perceived as threatening and satanic like Heavy Metal music.

The campaigns and lobbying against role-playing games carried out by B.A.D.D. continued for about a decade, with intermittent success, and can be articulated in three successive stages (*ibidem*). Initially the D&D players were accused of using the game to launch real curses on their peers, parents and teachers. This accusation was at the centre of Pulling’s complaint against TSR in which her son’s death was imputed to a curse that was (supposedly) thrown at him during the game. The second phase, begun in the mid-eighties, was characterized by an attempt to move more rational accusations against the game, mainly related to the influence it could have on its players. These allegations were based on the belief still widespread, but never proven, that the game can affect the players in a subtle and harmful way and therefore its contents should be carefully monitored. The third and final phase of the moral panic was centered on the idea that D&D could be a recruitment tool for Satanists and pagans and that therefore it would lead players to perform immoral or violent acts.

At first the arguments brought by the B.A.D.D. found fertile ground within the Christian and Republican communities in America. The game was banned in many schools and by many families, while several members of the clergy discouraged the use of the game. Some films dedicated to the alleged nefarious consequences of the game were produced in those years: the most famous is probably *Mazes and Monsters* (Stern, 1982), where a young Tom Hanks tries to jump off one of the twin towers of the World Trade Center after losing the ability to distinguish between his identity and that of his character.

The panic surrounding the role-playing games, however, soon began to lose its grip. The fact that all legal actions taken or supported by the B.A.D.D. proved to be a failure eroded the image and arguments of opponents of role-playing games. Furthermore, several studies (for example Simón, 1987; DeRenard, Klein, 1990) proved that there are no significant correlations between role-play, alienation and emotional instability. It would seem, on the contrary, that the players were statistically less likely to succumb to violence and depression than non-players (Waldrop, 2005). On Pulling's death in 1992, the B.A.D.D. was discontinued and the moral panic finally ended. Or, more probably, it found a new target and began to concentrate on video games.

Digital games have also been accused of several nefarious effects on the young. The most persistent accusation is that video games might be in some way related to mass shootings. Even if the scientific literature seems to indicate otherwise (Markey *et al.*, 2015), at almost every mass-shooting in the United States the point has been made that the killer was a gamer and that games were probably involved in his actions. This has also happened in Europe: in Germany, for example, after the Winnenden school shooting in March 2009, many accusations were made against violent video games. In that case the German rating system for video games was used to voluntarily restrict sales of certain video games by stores: the German retailer Galeria Kaufhof removed all video games rated 18+ from its shelves.

Some digital games have also been accused of being “addictive” or “poisonous” for the young. This has been the case with *Arena of Valor* (or *Honor of Kings*, in Chinese 傳說對決) a multiplayer online battle arena for smartphones developed and published in 2015 by Chinese tech giant Tencent Games. It is a rather interesting game for several reasons. First of all, with an estimated 200 million monthly players, *Honor of Kings* might well be the biggest game in the World, despite its mild success in the West. Secondly, it is estimated that more

than 50% of its players in China are females⁷, especially thanks to the integration of the game with WeChat, the most widely used instant messaging App in China, also developed by Tencent. Other MOBA games have typically a much lower percentage of female players, a maximum of around 35%. Nevertheless, in 2017 a commentary in the People's Daily newspaper, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, described *Arena of Valor* as being "poison" and a "drug" that was harming Chinese teenagers. Its success and ability to engage the youth were portrayed as somewhat unnatural and dangerous. This statement alone cost Tencent 17 billion dollars⁸, 5% of its total value, because of worried investors.

Finally, it is not unusual that games using new technologies are met with strong distrust or hostility. The first AR (augmented reality) game to enjoy real success, Nintac's *Pokémon Go*, was greeted with rather apocalyptic tones and ferocious criticism. In Europe it caused great debates about its possible harmfulness: players were often associated with zombies and every news item of players getting hit by a car while playing the game became immediately viral. In China the game was subjected to an evaluation of potential security and safety risks: the authorities were concerned about possible threats to geographical information security. In other words, they were concerned that the meaning proposed by the game would overshadow that of reality, encouraging players to wander in prohibited places in their Pokémon hunt.

The diffidence towards play, therefore, gives birth to a second ideology, one that sees play as something dangerous, destructive, a menace to the social order and to the integrity of our symbolic universe. Play is criticised as capable of destroying meaning, of making players lose their identities or the sense of their surroundings. The barriers around play are described as fragile, in constant need of

7. Source: <https://www.thestar.com/business/2017/08/05/how-wechat-is-helping-attract-chinas-female-gamers-play-tencents-honour-of-kings.html>.

8. Source: <https://www.scmp.com/business/china-business/article/2101210/tencent-loses-us175-billion-market-value-after-peoples-daily>.

being reinforced, to prevent playfulness from invading reality and bringing with it insanity and confusion.

3. Enthusiasm

Interestingly enough, a radically different attitude towards play runs parallel to that based on distrust: a utilitarian one. Attempts to enthusiastically harness play's might can be found throughout history. From Rome's *panem et circenses*, to the Olympics, to the works of educators and psychologists such as Montessori or Piaget, play has been seen as a tool that can be used for creating social stability and healthy individuals.

In the last decade, this tendency became even stronger, as new concepts arose such as gamification and *game-based learning* — i.e. the creation of educational activities that make use of full-fledged games in order to transfer knowledge. Gamification and game-based learning both have to be understood as an effect of ludicisation: as play has a new centrality in the semiosphere, its modelling ability increases, and its prestige encourages people to try to exploit it.

The use of games or gamified activities for serious purposes has been adopted by various agents, and some of them might seem unexpected. Several national armies, for example, use games or gamified systems. “Propaganda games” financed with public money have been developed in some countries. Already in 2002, for example, the US Army published *America's Army*, a game meant to acquaint US citizens with the Army itself. Similarly, the Communist Party of China is sponsoring the development of a game — not released yet — entitled *Chinese Heroes* which is intended to infuse patriotism in the players.

Several games and gamified applications have also been designed for creating a better society, at least in the intentions of their developers. One rather famous case within gamification studies is Jane McGonigal's *Superbetter*. It is a free-to-use application meant to help

people suffering from traumas, illness and injuries by gamifying their recovery experience. With the help of the application, users can select some “bad guys” (such as the “sticky chair” symbolising sedentariness), use some “power ups” (like drinking a glass of water), complete daily challenges (going out for a walk, taking some time to be grateful about something and similar) and earn points and levels in the meantime. It is a handbook case of gamification, and it is driven by a clear ideological and political objective: that of using games to make the World a better place (McGonigal, 2011).

In China, national hero Lei Feng has been used in several games as an example to follow to be better citizens and improve society. *Learning from Lei Feng*, for example, is the title of a game that finds its place in the Museum of Shanghai (Chen, 2018). Aimed at primary school students, it tasks them with collecting trash and keeping the city clean. In March 2006, furthermore, a Chinese organization released an online game called *Learn From Lei Feng Online* (学雷锋) in which the player has to perform good deeds, fight spies and so on, in order to meet Chinese leader Mao Zedong.

Finally, in the West there has also been a real buzz about the Chinese government’s intention to create a social credit system (社会信用体系) using big data to assess how “good” a citizen is (Botsman, 2017). Most of the accounts have been in some measure incorrect, often confusing the project with *Sesame Credit* (which instead is a private credit scoring application and loyalty program by Alibaba Group) or basing their arguments primarily on speculation about what *might* happen. Nevertheless, while we wait for the implementation of the social credit system in 2020, we can point out that, from the preliminary descriptions, it might indeed seem a way of gamifying loyalty to the State — or to the Government.

Despite the enthusiasm in its implementation, however, the actual effectiveness of gamification is still debated. An interesting study (Hamari *et al.*, 2014) proposes a meta-analysis showing that gamification is not always the most effective choice for creating engagement: in fact, its efficacy depends a great deal on the users and

on the context of its use. Moreover, another criticism comes from a rather funny article entitled *Games against health* (Linehan et alii 2015). The paper is a parody of the “Games for Health” movement and proposes the realization of games having detrimental effects on their players’ health: games that reward them when they eat snacks or sit for hours in front of the screen. The authors, in this way, are trying to make the point that several gamification attempts are in fact highly manipulative, patronizing and top down: the designers *just know* what is best for their players and they try to trick them into doing it. In this way, furthermore, the activities themselves are less and less playful, the gamification consisting merely in adding a superficial game-like layer onto the activity, based on behaviourist theories.

The ideology of play at the basis of gamification, then, appears as narrow as the one that sees play mainly as a danger. Games are presented as a sort of panacea, using their current prestige for claims that are not supported by evidence.

Conclusions: a map of play ideologies

This brings us back to the opening question of this paper: is it really possible to “tame” play, to exploit it in a safe and efficient way? In order to answer this question, let us try to map the different ideas and ideologies of play that we have encountered until now. To do so, let us start from a basic opposition: constructive vs destructive. We have seen that play can be seen both as a way of creating meaning and engagement, and as something that destroys the meaning of everyday life and endangers our symbolic universe.

This opposition can be used as a base to build a semiotic square, as seen in Fig. 1.

The idea of play being at the same time *non destructive* and *non constructive* gives birth to an ideology that sees play as “neutral”. It is the first ideology that we encountered, the one that dismisses play as

something silly or childish, opposed to work and to seriousness. An ideology certainly weakened by the movement of play towards the center of the semiosphere, but still present in contemporary society.

If, on the other hand, play is seen as something *destructive* and *non constructive*, then it is portrayed as something “detrimental”. This is the ideology of distrust and hostility, generating moral panic around different forms of play perceived as endangering the meaning of everyday life, without offering any valuable alternative.

On the opposite side, there is play regarded as something both *constructive* and *non destructive*, a utopian view of play seen as purely “beneficial”. Gamification and game-based learning are rooted in this ideology, that often propounds an uncritical and unjustified, enthusiastic use of games and gamification.

There is, however, a fourth possibility: that of recognizing that play can be, at the same time, *constructive* and *destructive*. In other words, an ideology that accepts the fact that playfulness is “ambiguous”, it is something that can be tamed and controlled but only up to a certain point. Play cannot be seen (only) as a chthonian and destructive force to be contained, while, on the other hand, excessive control will destroy the freedom that lies at the heart of a playful behavior (Thibault, 2016). Play, then, has to be wild, indeterminate, uncontrollable. It can be directed, but never strictly controlled, otherwise we will be left with a mere husk of rules and game elements that will not have anything playful inside it any more.

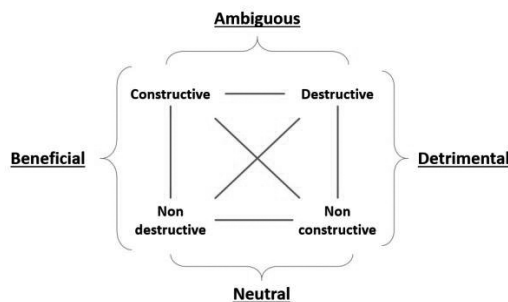


Figure 1.

Interestingly enough, the ambiguity of play is also central in Brian Sutton-Smith's works (1997). Sutton-Smith, in his book dedicated to the topic, describes the seven rhetorics of play: distinct ways in which play has been understood and described. He distinguishes between the rhetorics of play as *fate* (articulated in the various theories of luck and chance, but also in the idea of gods controlling and playing with human life), play as *power* (that usually draws links to warfare, athletics, competitions and contests), play as *identity* (when used to confirm communal identities through rituals and celebrations), play as *frivolity* (that concentrates on the subversive and carnivalesque potentials of play), play as *progress* (that sees in play a path towards growth and evolution, and a key to learning for children and animals), play as the *imaginary* (that relates play to art and insists on its separation from reality) and finally, play as the *self* (focusing on the fun and relaxing features of these activities and on the balance between skills and challenges that they imply). This distinction should not be seen as in competition with our map of the ideologies of play, but as complementary to it. The seven rhetorics can be articulated according to our four ideologies and vice versa. The rhetoric of play as fate, for example, could be used to describe play as a consolation for the disappointed (play as neutral), as an addictive vice (play as detrimental) or as a positive take on life, in a "fortune favours the brave" sort of way (play as beneficial). Similarly play as power could be described as a mere reflection of "real-life struggles" (play as neutral), as a way of provoking heated and mindless competition (play as detrimental) or as a way of challenging players to exit their comfort zone and grow (play as beneficial). This operation could be repeated for every one of the rhetorics highlighted by Sutton-Smith. The result would be a complex net, in which every position consists in a possible idea of play. The aim of this paper, then, is to urge that we should not limit our understanding of play to one of these positions, nor to one of the opposed ideologies of play (detrimental vs beneficial), but to keep in mind that play is something complex, paradoxical and variable enough to contain all of them.

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