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# ***Ludo Ergo Sum: Play, existentialism and the ludification of culture***

**Abstract:** This chapter aims to initiate a dialogue between semiotics of culture and existential semiotics about how to understand and conceptualise the changing role of games and play in contemporary society. Games have become the largest cultural industry in the World and their prestige is now exceeding their traditional borders and contaminates the languages of marketing, politics, art and many others. It is urgent, therefore, to acknowledge this change and to try to analyse it with the tools of semiotics. Cultural semiotics, hence, will allow us to conceptualise play as a *modelling system* and therefore to reconstruct its trajectory in the semiosphere. Existential semiotics, on the other hand, will help us outline the connection between the cultural evolution of games and the current global semiocrises and then to trace their effects on the individual level. In this chapter, then, we will first focus on the inner workings of play as a modelling system, then on its position in the semiosphere (in particular in relation to the concepts of *gamification* and *ludification*) and on the relationship between the ludification of culture and the global semiocrises brought by globalization. Finally, we will outline how, in this context, play and games have the semiotic potential to become tools of resistance and of individual expression.

**Keywords:** Semiotics of play, Ludification of Culture, Existentialism, Gamification

## **1 Introduction**

This chapter aims to investigate, from the perspective of semiotics, the changing position of games and play in our society, from their position in the semiosphere, to the role they play at the individual level. In the last decades games have become one of the main entertainment industries in the world. Activities that for a long time were thought to belong to small groups of users (like the nerd and geek sub-cultures) have since become mainstream. Many stories, characters or even platforms related to games have become cultural icons, while gaming itself could be

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described is a barthesian myth in today's society. The passion for digital games or more in general for play, has started to become an important personality trait in how many people think of themselves. Groups of people (and not necessarily young!) identify as "gamers", while academia started to analyze gaming culture as an important, contemporary (and sometimes problematic) phenomenon.

Games themselves, are often escaping the narrow role of products of entertainment and are increasingly employed in various non-ludic fields. Game-based learning, for example, is becoming a major trend in education. Similarly, so-called serious games (that is, games that deal with important real-life topics) have been used to raise awareness about many pressing ethical issues. Finally, "gamification" in the last ten years has become a real buzzword, and has given life to a plethora of applications, studies, theories, and strategies.

In order to account for this phenomenon, this paper tries to describe how games and play are becoming cardinal semiotic engines within our society and addresses them through a dialogue between semiotics of culture, and in particular a lotmanian approach to play (cf. Thibault 2016) and existential semiotics (cf. Tarasti 2015). This will allow us, on the one hand, to conceptualise play as a modelling system and to trace its trajectory in the semiosphere and, on the other hand, to connect its cultural evolution to global semiocrisis and back to the individual level. If semiotics of culture will help us to systematize how play is perceived in our society and what is its role in it, existential semiotics consists in a revalorization of subjectivity in semiotics.

In this paper then, we will first focus on the inner workings of play as a modeling system, then we will focus on its position in the semiosphere (in particular in relation to the concepts of Gamification and Ludification), finally we will deal with the relationship between ludification and the global semiocrisis brought by globalization and on how play can become a tool of resistance and of individual expression.

## 2 Play as a modelling system

Play is indeed something very difficult to define or to describe. Several academics have tried for years to find a satisfactory definition of play. We can think, for example, at the works of Huizinga (1938), Caillois (1967), and many others. Wittgenstein (1953) however argues that there is not unique definition of play. That, in fact, the different activities that we define as "play" do not have any characteristics that is common to all of them. these activities characterized from what it calls a "family resemblance".

From a semiotic perspective (Thibault 2020), more than defining play it is interesting to deal with the process of playing and on how this is a primarily semiotic act. Jurij Lotman (1967) defines playful behavior as the parallel existence of two kinds of interpretive behaviors. On the one hand, while we play, we follow a *conventional behavior*: we assign to the objects, spaces and subjects involved in the play activity new fictional meanings. On the other hand, we also observe a *practical behavior*: we remember and recognize the real meaning of these objects, spaces, and subjects. If, for example, we play with a doll, at the same time we pretend to react to it as with a real baby, but we are well aware that it is, after all, only a toy. Play therefore always involves some form of resemantisation, and therefore, before becoming a way of acting and behaving, it is first of all a specific form of interpretation.

The objects that we use during play, regardless of if there are crafted to be used in that way, become part of new sign functions (Thibault 2020). We could call these playful signs “as-if signs”, that is: “signs that must not be taken quite literally in the *Dasein*, but rather as kinds of metaphors” (Tarasti 2015: 16). This kind of signs can also be found, for example, in cinema or theater (Ibid.), but the nature of their creation is that of play.

The as-if signs that are produced during play, however, are not in any way random, but very often create some kind of system. Starting from the first resemantisation, all the following will be determined from one another. If a child has a toy sword, they will look for an enemy to battle against or a monster to slay. If they have a doll, instead, they will look for something that can work as a cradle, or something to feed them, and so on. The resematisations, then will create a system of as-if signs, based on a specific theme and a series of scripts (Thibault 2020). This, however, is not typical only of child-play, and happens in games as well. It is very well possible to play draughts using, for example, bottle caps. In this case, all is needed is to find enough bottle caps of two different colors, and something that could work as a chess board. In this case, then, the system that emerges will have an actantial nature, as the meaning of the different pieces will be determined by their reciprocate relationships and their possible interactions in the game.

Every playful activity, then, creates its own set of signs – which, combined with a series of constraints (in some cases stable and predetermined, like in chess, in other cases created on the spot, like in child-play), will give structure and meaning to the activity itself. In this sense, play works as a secondary modeling system. While it creates a series of idiolects more than a single language, its structures and workings are stable and well-known enough to make of play a specific form of communication and meaning making.

### 3 Play in the semiosphere: Gamification and ludification

Since the Enlightenment, the common perception of games and playfulness has been evolving towards a position of prestige. Rousseau's and Schiller's works on education inaugurated a change in the rhetorics of play: the latter is seen less and less as "frivolity" (to borrow a term from Sutton-Smith 1997) and increasingly as an important, and sometimes "productive" facet of culture. With the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, new interest on the study of play arose, in cardinal theoretical works as those by Huizinga (1938) and Caillois (1967) soon fuelled by the birth and success of digital gaming. Already in 1990 Ernst Lurker predicted that some major transformations would take place in society's attitude towards play. Later, Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) noted how the world was becoming more play-oriented and stated that the "ludic turn" of Western societies is modifying the way in which society expects products and services to cater for its needs (Sutton-Smith, in Henricks, 2017). Twenty years later, Sicart claims that, in current society, "play has become a cultural, social and economic centerpiece" (Sicart, 2018, 262).

Recently, this cultural shift in the perception of play has been named the "ludification of culture" (Raessens 2006), or sometimes "emergent gamification" (Hamari 2019), "gamification of culture" or "ludification" (Bonenfant and Genvo 2014). This shift caused a redefinition of the contexts in which playful behaviour is considered acceptable (Idone Cassone 2017).

From the perspective of semiotics of culture, we can define the ludification of culture as a movement of play within the semiosphere. Play, in Lotman's terminology, is a *secondary modelling system*, which has been present in the semiosphere of all cultures throughout history. In the last centuries, however, due to several factors, both social and technological (see, e.g., Ortoleva, 2012), this specific modelling systems has been accelerating towards the centre of our semiosphere.

While some forms of play have always more or less been hegemonic in Western culture (for example sports, or hunting), the larger context of play has often been relegated to the periphery of the semiosphere. Play has been deemed childish – and child culture has often been deemed as separate from the adult's (Crawford 2009). Play has been opposed to values such as seriousness and productivity, and therefore considered sinful (Leone 2016) or silly – hence attempts to transform it in a tool to "tame" children and young people, as lamented by Barthes (1957).

While some ludophobic attitudes persist, (Thibault 2019b) the movement of play in the semiosphere has changed much of this mentality. This does not mean that we play more, or that play was less of cultural importance in the past, but that we recognise more openly its value. Today play enjoys an unprecedented

prestige, and its semiospheric centrality entails a new dimension of modelling ability. Play is increasingly taken as a model in other contexts and for other modelling systems, both in a descriptive and prescriptive sense.

On the one hand, according to Lotman, every movement towards the centre of the semiosphere is accompanied by an increase of self-awareness, so that the modelling system is then proposed as a metalanguage to describe the whole semiosphere (Lotman 1990: 135). Play and games become a universal metaphor (Idone Cassone, 2017), used to describe political dynamics (made up of “winners” and “losers”), economic competition (populated by “players”) and even our very relationship to our lives (for whose we need a “life coach”).

On the other hand, play becomes also a prescriptive model, a blueprint to be used in the design of all sort of systems and activities. This is the idea behind the concept of “gamification” (Hamari 2019), based on the claim that things would be “better” if they were more game-like.

The increase of modelling ability and of prestige of play, finally, triggers a dialogue with the other sign systems of the central area of the semiosphere (Lotman 1990: 143–150). These systems start to develop metalanguages to describe play and games, resulting in the proliferation of academic research, documentaries, fiction (novels, comics, films) dedicated to them.

This movement throughout the semiosphere, however is also reflected on the individual level. While it is easy to imagine culture as something abstract, the semiosphere only exists in the actual texts circulating and on the encyclopedias of the people belonging to it.

In order to consider this new centrality of play on the individual level we will make use of the Zemic model presented in Tarasti (2015), one of the most famous concepts of existential semiotics. Briefly, it is a model based on the confluence of Greimas’ modalities, the concepts of *moi* and *soi* elaborated in Fontanille (2004) and the Hegelian being-in-itself and being-for-itself (Tarasti 2015). It is a modified version of the semiotic square used in existential semiotics to make ontological investigations. The name “Zemic” comes from the “Z” shaped path that it draws and from the fact that it focuses on the inner movements of the subject (and therefore it is “emic” and not “etic”) (Tarasti 2015). It is articulated in four steps, the first two related to the sensible and the other related to the intelligible.

The first step is “*Moi 1*” or *être en moi* and it deals with the physical qualities of the subject, its body and *chora* (the pre-lingual stage pre-lingual stage of development, dominated by a chaotic mix of perceptions and needs, introduced by Kristeva and Derrida). To this step Tarasti assigns the modality of wanting-to or *vouloir*. The second step, “*Moi 2*” is devoted to the *être pour moi* and therefore to the personality of the subject, its inner characteristics and abilities and is related to *pouvoir*, being-able-to.

“*Soi 2*” is the third step and it means *être pour soi*. The subject is now integrated in the social institutions, where its modality of *savoir*, knowing-to, is fundamental. The last step is “*Soi 1*” or *être en soi*. It is on a higher level and deals with cultural values and axiologies. The subject is now confronted with the modality of duty: *devoir* (having-to).

Even if these four concepts are called steps, they are not alternate in time or necessarily subsequent: the subject is simultaneously immersed in all of them, even if it is generally more committed or focused on one of them. If we apply the Zemic model to analyse play as an practice and a cultural element, we can distinguish the following steps:

M1 *être en moi (vouloir)* – play is a naturally emerging phenomenon that, since infancy, guides our actions and our ways of learning and making sense of the world around us. Its modality is that of wanting to-do or to-be, as play is a voluntary action that responds to the needs and desired of the players.

M2 *être pour moi (pouvoir)* – shifts to transcendence as the individuals observes themselves and what they are lacking. Being becomes existing. In this case the fact of playing, of being a player becomes the testimony that one exists: *Ludo ergo sum*. We have countless texts that testimony this sort of identification, including fictional representations that equate the loss in a game to death we can think of the long lasting trope of the gladiators’ fights, as well as contemporary depictions such as in Altman’s *Quintet* or Hwang Dong-hyuk’s *Squid Game*. The possibility (*pouvoir*) of playing, in this cases, is linked to one’s existence.

S2 *être pour soi (savoir)* – the transcendent category originated around this step is that of the “gamer” (generally related to those of nerd or geek). Being a gamer is related to specific competences (expert knowledge on games) that are somewhat proof of passion and commitment (cf Greimas & Fontanille 1991). This sort of *thematic role* has several representations in media (the most famous of which is probably TV series *The Big Bang Theory* by Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady).

S1 *être en soi (devoir)* – in *Dasein*, people want to belong to this category, to be recognised a gamer. The “have-to” modality proves their competence to other gamers signaling the belonging to the group and the sharing of interests and passions. This, in turn, can give rise to activities of gatekeeping and often toxic behaviours intended to exclude certain individuals (or categories of individuals, such as “noobs” or unexperienced players) from the group (Nieborg & Sihvonen 2009).

From our application of the Zemic model we can see how the different steps present different degrees of generalisability. While M1 can be considered universal – as play is a constant throughout cultures and times – the importance of the next steps (and therefore play’s movement towards transcendence and towards the *soi*) are related to a specific cultural predicament. In particular, they can be

interpreted as the practical reflection on the individual level of the semiospheric dynamics that have invested play (i.e. of the ludification of culture). If the lotmanian model helped us to map how the role of play is changing within our society, the Zemic model allowed us to trace its movement within the inwardness of the individual.

## 4 Ludification in the global semicrisis and gamification as a force of resistance

We have briefly described the mutations caused by ludification in the semiosphere as well as on an individual level. But why this cultural change happened in the first place? Ortoleva (2012) tries to answer this question and links it to a larger cultural trend that sees a massive shift of values in Western culture. In particular, Ortoleva claims that playfulness may be taking the place of sexuality as our cultural “obsession”. He states that, in the last century, many cultural areas like economy and entertainment have undergone a progressive “sexualisation”. This “century-lasting strip tease” is almost come to completion (the sexual taboos are almost completely gone, with the important exception of pedophilia) and therefore the efficacy of eroticism as a cultural tool is decreasing. A new model will soon have to replace it and, according to Ortoleva, it will probably be playfulness – and, in particular, games. The Homo Ludens described by Huizinga (1938) is now becoming a Homo Ludicos (Ortoleva 2012): a real play-obsessed being. Play is no more only a fundamental aspect of culture, but it could be slowly becoming one of the main ones.

According to Volli (2016), instead, the success of play as a universal metaphor is due to the fact that contemporary society suffers of a lack of stimuli or, in semiotic terms, a deficiency in the ability of creating or choosing *objects of value*. Play is able to create values that are not rooted on anthropological and psychological grounds but are proper only to the play itself. This is one of the most important features of play and, according to Volli, it may explain why the latter is so important today: as the fulfilment of basic needs is taken for granted, individuals need new motivations to pursue their activities. Play provides such motivations – it is the principle behind both gamification (that explicitly use play values as lures for non-playful tasks) and ludification (through which society rethinks itself as play-oriented).

In the context of existential semiotics, however, we could also connect ludification with the challenges brought about by globalisation. According to Tarasti (2015), globalisation tends to annihilate the past and the future in favour of an

eternal present. It moves production (both of signs and of goods) on a metalevel, and it restricts the emotional spectrum to modes such as greed or fear etc.

Some of the problematic characteristics that, according to Tarasti, are typical of globalisation, find some interesting echoes in the ludification of culture. Tarasti mentions, for example, the importance of the categories of “winners” and “losers”, borrowed from sports and digital games, and today widely used, even at the highest levels of political life. Similarly, Tarasti mentions the perpetual assessment of quality in all domains. While this particular aspect might not sound very playful at a first sight, it is a strategy that is very often used in gamification techniques. The latter tend to use metrics to measure several aspects of performance, and then use these values in a game system. Reframing assessment within a game might make it less heavy, perhaps even enjoyable, but it stems from the same cultural and ideological premises that other forms of continuous tracking and assessment. Ludification, then, would appear to be an effect, or a concurrence, of globalisation. Strategies making use of the new prestige of play such as gamification or game-based learning have indeed been criticised in the past for the fact that they have sometimes been used for exploitation or for their ability to naturalise all sorts of processes and therefore to hinder critical thinking (Thibault 2019a). However, we believe that the ludification of culture offers, at the same time, some tools of resistance against globalisation and, in particular, against the naturalisation of transcendence.

Globalisation indeed naturalises transcendence: the rich communication processes of their *Dasein* blind people who cling to them as to the true semiosis of ideas and acts and significations. Embodied by the Internet (Tarasti 2015: 160), this process makes transcendence look empty – and this apparent emptiness encourages us to refuse it altogether.

As global culture advances on all fronts, making struggle and tensions emerge everywhere, in every aspect of everyday life, strategies of resistance need to be equally ubiquitous. These are based on *negation* a spiritual and pragmatic operation, at the very hearth of existential semiotics, that questions the *Dasein* and the supposed emptiness of transcendence (Tarasti 2015: 160).

Using negation as a form of resistance, therefore, means looking for alternatives, progressing in a different direction than that of globalisation. In other words, it entails an exploration of what could have happened and of what could happen still.

Counterfactuality, that is at the centre of this process, is, in fact, a playful way of dealing with history. According to Lotman, the work of the historian itself is partially playful, as “The historian may be compared with the theatrical spectator



who watches a play for the second time: on the one hand, he knows how it will end and there is nothing unpredictable about it for him. The play, for him, takes place, as it were, in the past from which he extracts his knowledge of the matter. But, simultaneously, as a spectator who looks upon the scene, he finds himself once again in the present and experiences a feeling of uncertainty, an alleged “ignorance” of how play will end” (Lotman [2004] 2009: 126). This way of dealing with history is similar to the so-called “what if. . .?” games and is typical of several forms of childish play. Playing with history, looking at the possible alternatives, imagining different outcomes, questioning its narratives is a dynamic already present in many games (Idone Cassone & Thibault 2016), but at the same time it could become a way of resisting globalisation.

The goal of resistance is to grant freedom to the individuals: this means that they need to realise that “the course of the subject is not predetermined, but that an energetic action can take place by the subject, which, through its acts, moulds its reality” (Tarasti 2015). According to Lotman, play has a similar need: it must be unpredictable, as “the moment when the player has no more choices, the game has lost its meaning” (Lotman [1967] 2011: 159).

Additionally, play by definition questions the ordinary signifiers of everyday life (Thibault 2020). If games have been used to reinforce the naturalising narratives and myths that justify certain forms of civilization, play can be indeed also a tool to deconstruct them. Play can induce us to defamiliarize the objects of everyday life so to eventually challenge the status quo (Dunne 2005), To question power and power structures, To laugh at the *Dasein*, and therefore to open new horizons for retrieving a sense of transcendence.

To conclude, we have seen that the ludification of culture can be understood as a process that proceeds parallel to that of globalisation. On the one hand, the latter can appropriate this cultural change and make it its own tool of control and assessment. On the other hand, however, ludification has also a lot to offer to those that wish to resist the values of globalisation, providing them with a tool to challenge the status quo and imagine possible, sometime radical, alternatives to globalisation.

In this chapter we have established a dialogue between existential and cultural semiotics, as a methodological approach to the ludification of culture. This allowed us to take in consideration both the effects of the increased prestige of play on society at large and on the individual level. It is at the interface between these two dimensions, between the cultural and the personal, that playfulness can then become a tool of resistance, a tool fight the homogenisation brough by globalisation and contrast the semiocrisis it entails.

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