Marco Benoît Carbone, Paolo Ruffino, Stéphane Massonet

Introduction—The Other Caillois: the many masks of game studies

The legacy of the multi-faceted and complex work of Roger Caillois, the French scholar and intellectual, seems to have almost solely impinged on game studies through his most popular work, *Les Jeux et les Hommes* (1957). Translated in English as *Man, Play and Games* (1961), this text popularized Caillois' ideas, and is the one which most often appears in publications that attempt to historicize and introduce to the study of games—perhaps on a par with Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938). The purpose of this special issue is to shift the attention of game scholars towards a more nuanced and comprehensive view of Roger Caillois, encouraging ways of reading his work in ways that do more justice to his thought than the kind of textbook interpretations this important thinker has usually received in game studies over the last decade or so. Through superficial readings of *Man, Play, and Games*, Caillois has sometimes been selectively caricatured as a positivist, descriptive classifier of games, producing ossified categories that would overlook the complexity, nuances, and subjectivities at work in the dimension of play. Nothing could be farther from what Caillois has accomplished, and has been recognized for, through his many speculative routes. Caillois' interest in games is part of a broad, versatile, extremely curious, wide-ranging, ductile, and impactful intellectual enterprise, encompassing the dimensions of literature, the arts, religion, and philosophy, and focusing on phenomena as diverse as mythology, ritual masks, animal mimicry, and pareidolia.[1] A new approach to his work in relation to game studies should acknowledges the complex, varied, possibly even contradictory, but far from schematic thought a thinker that has been widely overlooked by contemporary game scholars.

For this task, it is particularly important to contextualize *Man, Play and Games* —the work through which Caillois' ideas would be mostly disseminated both at large and in game studies— in the philosophical and cultural context of Caillois' research at the time of its publication. This is a necessary endeavour to assess the impact of this nevertheless seminal work on game studies, for two reasons. Firstly, because *Les Jeux et les Hommes* preconized the dominant interpretation of Caillois as a schematic thinker in the much later-to-come disciplinary field of game studies. This happened through a selective process of interpretation, undoubtedly favoured by an inconsistent body of international translations available to the public—several of Caillois' works remain, *de facto*, fundamentally unknown to non-continental scholars. Secondly, because such a selective interpretation was favoured by Caillois himself, who, in *Les Jeux et les Hommes,* distanced himself from his previous works, deeming them as a cryptic and ineffective corpus of research for a study on play and games—a task that the French intellectual would set out to achieve systematically with his newer and more structured research, unwillingly paving the way for his future critics.

---

[1] See, in English, *Man and the Sacred*, 1960, translated from French edition (Caillois 1939), and *The Mask of Medusa,* 1964 (Fr. Ed., Caillois 1960). In French, see at least *Au cœur du fantastique* (1965), *L'Écriture des pierres* (1970), *La Dissymétrie* (1973) among the many. For a reader in English, see Caillois and Frank (2003). A broad body of Caillois' work is now collected in Gallimard's very comprehensive anthology *Œuvres* (2008).

Before *Les Jeux et les Hommes,* there was the Roger Caillois who authored *Le Mythe et L'Homme* (1938) and *L'Homme et le Sacrè* (1939). At the time, Caillois was a sociologist and anthropologist concerned mostly with the structures of myths and rituals. He sought to understand how these representations expressed grammatical structures that related not only to the social and cultural sphere, but could also be found in the animal kingdom and in nature. His interest in games could be traced to his early studies around mythology and the sociology of the sacred. The extension of game to these domains, and their metamorphoses throughout history and into modern societies, were the issues that attracted the attention of the French theorist around the sociology of play. Later on, games came to the forefront both a manifestation and a key to navigate seamlessly through cultural phenomena. It is at this point (Caillois 2001: 177-178), that previous studies now qualified as irrelevant, that the author renounced his early approaches to play, and that subsequent attempts attempted to systematize his thought. A closer inspection of *Man, Play and Games*, has been largely overlooked in his most recent reception. Caillois' book on play and games came out at a time in Caillois' life when he stepped out of the academia to embrace a career as an international affairs official at UNESCO. Repositioning himself through the concept of diagonal sciences in order to distance himself from his early sociological work, Caillois chose play as the logic behind a broader profile as a broadly encompassing humanist. The study of games and play became inextricably tied to a fascination for the complexities of life and imagination at large. Caillois was mesmerized not just by the patterns of human societies, but also by the laws of the natural world. He often assumed the working hypothesis that what could be observed in art and play surprisingly corresponded, or mimicked, structures at play in biology as well as in physics, and ultimately in the universe. Hence, Caillois' search for structures.

Nevertheless, such a transversal and often unabashedly creative philosophical research was not characterized by a grand, unified cosmology, or by a metaphysical ontology: rather, Caillois embraced the contradictory and ultimately unattainable notion of "reality", and was drawn to embrace aspects that a positivist thought would have rather ironed out, such as ambiguities and contradictions, dissymmetry and apparent inconsistencies. Insect mimicry – entomology being a long-time interest of Caillois- was not a "survivalist", means-to-an-end preservation tactics, but a convergence of patterns and shapes that obeyed the same rules in zoology and art. The narwhal's rostrum – again, part of his interest in the natural world -- was not a sagittal horn, but one the animal's left front tooth, and served Caillois to discuss the trade of mythical unicorn remains as well as asymmetry in nature. Caillois' humanism bore the historical marks of debates taking place at that time between Surrealists and the Collège de Sociologie.[2] For Caillois, man had no privileges. Humans were an intrinsic part of nature and shared the same laws as those of the other living creatures, and matter. Caillois relentlessly tried to think in terms of a diagonal relationships between the interplays of nature and human games. If one is to adventure back onto the path set by the earlier Caillois, it is his very rich and varied production that defines, redefines, and sometimes contradicts the statements of his work on games. Far from a positivist taxonomer, Caillois is the epitome of transversal, diagonal, sometimes poetic approaches to the relations between life and representations.

---

[2] See Bataille, G. (1997), *Acéphale: Religion, sociologie, philosophie, 1936-1939*, Paris: Jean-Michel Place.

In this issue, a dialogue between different positions and publications within Caillois' work is sought in order to disenfranchise him from one-sided interpretations, and to liberate the intellectual depth and generative power of his ideas. If game studies have an earnest interest in Caillois, these ideas—ranging from salutary warnings against the delusions of freedom and agency in play to the embracing of destabilizing, vertigo-inducing forms of exploration though art— could prove much more useful than face value, literal, or surface level interpretations that have so far been the dominant lens through which to approach his work. The contributions of this issue thus aim to stimulate a debate on the genealogy of game studies and on alternative paths of research in relation with Caillois' legacy. This introduction unpacks how Roger Caillois has appeared so far in the study of games; it then proceeds to present a contextual historical and intellectual background to Caillois' work; finally, it introduces the content of the papers composing the edited collection.

The tokenisation of Caillois

A recurrent characteristic of many contributions to game studies is the resort to examples of studies of games that anticipate the inception of the discipline, or contemporary questions about the medium. Interestingly, game design approaches seem more conscious of the potential of his theories, while critical approaches would try to frame his contribution into a positivist, schematic outlook. An example of the first kind is an early collection of essays on game studies, *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*, edited by Salen and Zimmerman and published in 2006. This text offers the chapter "The Definition of Play: The Classification of Games', from *Man, Play and Games*, as a response to Huizinga's initial chapter of *Homo Ludens*: "Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon". The two "giants of play theory", as they are earlier defined by Salen and Zimmerman (2006: xvii), are proposed to introduce the reader to the theoretical and ontological question of what games and play are. The beginning of the same section explains that "[Caillois' categories] offer game designers a surprisingly useful conceptual toolbox with which to toy and tinker [and] can be used to analyse game experience, tune game designs in progress, or generate new game ideas" (84). In another contribution on game design, Salen and Zimmerman describe *Man, Play and Games* as a book that tries to "identify and analyse the general phenomenon of play and locate its larger significance within culture", and state that for their purpose of creating a game design anthology "his early chapters on defining and classifying games are the most useful" (2004: 82). Here, Caillois is again cited after Huizinga, as two early authors who defined the conceptualization of both games and play. For Salen and Zimmerman, Caillois and Huizinga operate as antecedents to the study of a phenomenon – video games – that is eminently new. At the same time, they offer inspirational tools for design. From a designer's approach, Caillois' work is a sandbox - a theme that resonates with this issue's suggestion that Caillois' theories work best in a generative, rather than normative way, or as a piece of pedigree for the study of games – as also noted by Gandolfi's paper in this collection.

An example of critical approaches that attempt to frame Caillois' work as a positivist, schematic contribution may be found in Juul (2005). Here, Caillois and Huizinga are dismissed as they cover an area which is too broad, thus unusable: "a broader area than *games* in that both discuss rule-based games as well as free-form play" (Juul 2005: 10). In this light, referencing Caillois merely provides a linear narrative for a particular evolutionary perspective in the study of games. Still, there are similarities in the ways in which Salen and Zimmerman (2004, 2006) and Juul (2005) look at Caillois. As already noted, both conceptualize these works as initial steps towards either the understanding of the medium or its formulation as an art and set of techniques and practices. Caillois author is seen as part of a canon of a supposed theory of play and games: he is in company with Huizinga (1938), Bernard Suits (1978), Chris Crawford (1984) and Brian Sutton-Smith (1997), as a "classic" author who provides a legitimation for a study of games. *Man, Play and Games* becomes at the same time a canonical and an outdated text to confront oneself with when defining games.

In the early establishment of the ludological perspective (Frasca 2003; Juul 2005), such interpretation of Caillois worked well as a point of reference to justify the necessity of a study of games *per se* through a dedicated discipline. Seen as an author whose main concern has mostly been the definition of games and play, Caillois has been seen—perhaps sensibly—as an early ludologist. Ian Bogost (2006: xi) does so when he presents Caillois as one of the most relevant theorists for a ludological approach to game studies. However, in this approach games are intended as texts with clearly identifiable boundaries, outcomes and practices of consumption. This led to a very narrow interpretation of *Man, Play and Games* as a publication that provides guidelines on how to understand games as a specific kind of texts. For example, Costikyan (2013: 11-13) notices that while for Caillois games must have an uncertain outcome to be defined as games and to be enjoyable, games such as *Space Invaders* have always the same outcome (the "game over") and are still enjoyable, while others, such as *Dungeons and Dragons,* do not even have an outcome, and yet are played and commonly defined as games. This is, however, a very narrowed-down definition of games, for which counter-argument are potentially infinite, as well as an approach that is forcibly imposed on Caillois, for which the boundaries between play and life are much more permeable than a superficial reading of his work might seem to suggest —as discussed in Tom Brock's and Kristensen's contributions in this issue.

Still, such a normative interpretation of Caillois has proven particularly useful in justifying the study of video games as the study of their practices of production. Juul (2005) and Salen and Zimmerman (2004) take Caillois' four categories of *agon* (regulated competition), *alea* (chance), *ilinx* (vertigo) and *mimicry* (imitation or mimesis), developed in *Man, Play, and Games*, as examples of game principles, and mostly game *design* principles. Walz and Deterding (2015: 7), for instance, apply Caillois' notions of *paidia* and *ludus* to their understanding of the "ludification" of culture as it is happening through the phenomena of "serious games", "serious toys", "playful design" and "gamification". In this way, the study of the relation between games and culture provided by Caillois has been reinterpreted in light of the needs of new scholars to explain those games production in more recent times: classifying the modalities of game design, the purposes and outcomes of those games, and the experiences of play and interpretation. The reception of this ideas in the field of today's game studies is discussed at length in Vincenzo Idone Cassone's contribution to this issue.

We can already identify important aspects in this initial overview of the uses of Roger Caillois in game studies. First of all, *Man, Play and Games* is cited as a text that defines an ontology of games and provides us with the logic of their classifications. Secondly, the definition is evaluated as either "usable" (Salen and Zimmerman 2006) (Walz and Deterding 2014) or, as Costikyan (2013) explicitly writes, as "incorrect", almost as if responding to a binary logic. Thus, the critique of *Man, Play and Games* seems to evolve around two questions: is the classification of games offered by Caillois valid? And, if it is valid, is it of any use to the design and understanding of games? These are of course preliminary questions when deciding whether an author is of any relevance, and as a matter of fact Caillois is treated almost always as an *entrée* in the theoretical projects mentioned above. Further evidence is provided by a third and final trend emerging from the literature: Caillois appears in the very first pages of those publications—with the exception of *Rules of Play*, but those pages are from "Unit 1: Core Concepts; Part 7: Defining Games", which is indeed a preliminary section of the book. Caillois appears as a token to be cited at the beginning, when the authors need to define games and state what they believe games *are*—or, in contrast to the French author, to say what they think games *are not*. It is significant that, with almost no exceptions, *Man, Play and Games* is cited by texts on game studies mostly in such way, and almost never throughout the rest of the publications. It is a rather telling symptom of an approach that has looked at Caillois' work as an entry point into the study of games and culture, but rarely taking his actual work close to its full implications.

Caillois beyond game studies

While Caillois' tokenization misses the complexities of Caillois' theory, these emerge from a contextual reading of his work. Roger Caillois published *Les jeux et les hommes* (1958) in a famous collection of Gallimard generally reserved for literary works. The initial edition displayed on the cover a subtitle that has long been forgotten by more recent editions of this book. It reads "The mask and vertigo", two elements that played a central role to understand the role of mask, its fascination, and the way it ties into certain forms of play. It is important to understand where this interest for play came from, and how it is tied into a general theory of vertigo and imagination. This background also shows how Caillois' understanding of play was broad and fundamentally misunderstood by game studies as it would emerge in some of his later interpretations.

Shortly after the war, Roger Caillois published a second edition of "Man and sacred", a study had been published before the war, at the moment that Caillois left for Argentina to carry out research on the sociology of the sacred. This volume had been left to the care of Georges Dumezil during the last steps of the publication and reflected Caillois' learning during the lectures that he followed of Marcel Mauss, who was one of the founders of French ethnology and the nephew of French sociologist Emile Durkheim.[3] Studying the relation of

---

[3] Marcel Mauss, " Rapport des jeux et des rites ", *Socio-anthropologie* [Online], 13 | 2003, Online since 15 November 2004, connection on 02 July 2016. URL : http://socio-anthropologie.revues.org/172

the sacred and the profane, Caillois focused on the sacred, a dimension he though to oscillate between the respect and the transgression of norms, and regulated by the necessity for symbolic systems to alternate in order to maintain a balance in society. This element showcases Caillois' strong ties with French ethnology and the interrogations of play from a philosophical and ethnographic perspective. Not only did Caillois early writings reflects this direct influence of Mauss's theory, but his later interest on games was certainly triggered by a course that Marcel Mauss gave in 1937 at the Institute of Ethnology in Paris on the relation between game and ritual, at the time when Caillois was one of his students. Although Marcel Mauss focused mainly on the relation between play and his *cosmogonie* and *mythologie*, the lecture that he dedicated to the relationship between game and aesthetics and game and agonistic exchange, such as the *potlatch*, directly inspired Caillois classification of games.[4] Furthermore, Mauss gave several examples around kite flying and Polynesian maypole, which Caillois references throughout his study of games. The second edition of "Man and the Sacred" enabled Caillois to extend his field of research to the dimensions of sexuality and war. Sexuality was addressed through a discussion on the purification rituals of the Thonga, while another one titled "Game and sacred" (*Jeu et sacré*) was a critique of Huizinga's book *Homo Ludens* published in 1946. A final appendix was dedicated to the relation between war and the sacred, a domain that capture most of Caillois attention during the war years and that lead to his study *Bellone ou la pente de la guerre* in 1961.

Even though Caillois' later writing did not pursue the relation between the sacred and sexuality, as opposed to his friend Georges Bataille who would publish in 1957 his study on eroticism, these appendixes aimed to demonstrate the sociological transformation in the modern world between the domain of play and the phenomenon of war. Earlier studies of Caillois on primitive warfare concluded by showing that war was not much more than a form of hunting practice, almost a game where one would try to capture an enemy rather than to destroy it. Caillois also saw the domain of the sacred as open to violence and explosion of moments of exuberance. Such tensions were to find their momentum via generalized forms of transgression like sacrifices. By applying the study of sociology of the sacred to modern societies, Caillois tried to identify shifts and transformation between game and war. While "primitive" play (*la fête*) was an intense activity involving transgression and primitive war barely a hunting expedition, modern games lost their intensity : war started to involve more and more destructive capabilities and transgress the code of honor and rules found in classical warfare. Behind the mask and the feeling of vertigo (vertigo of game and vertigo of war) thus lied a sociological analysis of gaming and its structural variation that lead to the generation of a theory of civilization.

For Caillois, play, war, and the sacred could be conceptualized comparatively. Roger Caillois' initial interest in game was triggered by the strong correlation that Huizinga identified between game and the sacred, an identification that would be radicalized by

---

[4] A gift-giving feast practiced by indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast of Canada and the United States. Such winter ceremonies translates a primary economic system of the peoples of British Colombia and has attracted a lot of attention from anthropologist such as Franz Boas and Marcel Mauss, who described such ceremonies in his *Essai sur le don* (1925)— a study that inspired Roger Caillois and Georges Bataille's theory of the sacred and the logic of sacrifice.

Georges Bataille and his insistence on the exuberance of play. Caillois would be very critical of this thesis, considering that game can be defined as a convention in its purest arbitrary form, while a ritual convention is motivated by a transcendent content. Caillois echoed the study of Emile Benveniste (1947:161) on play, where he had also identified the dimension of games as a structure, defining it as an activity that has its means in itself and that aims in no way at altering reality. He also points out its intrinsic relation to imagination, simulation and the way that game only preserves a certain formalism of the sacred while projecting it outside of any form of reality. Philosophically, for Caillois, games combined the magical possibilities of unreality with personal myths and structures of fascination. Opposed to Bataille and Huizinga, Caillois argued that play is a pure, profane activity without content. Play is not a form of sacred but is an alternative to the profane utilitarian world of work (see the contribution by T. Brock in this issue, introduced *infra,* contextualizing this binary within game studies' reception of Caillois). This is the point where game encounters Caillois broad interest for the disorienting effects of vertigo, which he saw as a useful concept to discuss the mechanism of fascination underlying myths and their relations with play. In *Le mythe et l'homme* (1938), for Caillois, games fell under the same effect as mythologies that have lost their content by losing their ritual effectiveness.

A theory of the mask was also central to the argumentation of Roger Caillois in relation to his way to see games through syntax and grammatical rules —especially in relation to the structuralist experience.[5] While Claude Lévi-Strauss showed how the formal styles of masks of the Indians of British Columbia related to a combinatorial capability of their myths and their possible variation and interlocking,[6] Caillois insisted on the fact that the function of the mask has profoundly been modified between traditional society and the modern world. While the mask was to be a universal attribute found in all societies, like games, its power came from the form of the society itself. Whereas the mask was once used to inspire a form of terror, its powers had dissolved into a form of entertainment and intrigue in the modern world. And because Caillois' theory of the mask was intrinsically part of his game theory, he saw in them a theory of civilization, where open and transparent structure of governance replace old one based on a tool of freight and fascination. The interpretation of the strange objects was at the centre of long discussions that were held between Claude Levi-Strauss and the surrealist group while in exile in New York. At the time, the collection of masks gathered led to questioning the meaning of mask, their relationship between their forms and myths, the trigger of their fascination on the human imagination. Masks were effectively powerful objects that in ancient times embodied the power of rituals. To put on a mask was to transform the bearer of the mask into the totem or deity represented by the mask. Its powers were transformational. While in the modern world, masks generally have as function to hide the identity of its bearer, in traditional society the individual who wears a masks generally gives up his identity in order to embody the being of the mask.

---

[5] On the relations between Caillois and structuralism, see Strenski (1987).

[6] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Way of the Masks*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1982.

Caillois' specific positions on each of the phenomena he sought to explore should provide an idea of the complexity of the cultural and philosophical context in which he operated. The legacy of these ideas across different study traditions, his reflections provide a rich trove of inspirations and critiques to games in a certain historical context. Still, to follow in Caillois' wake would not mean to try and fit current video games in the shapes provided by Caillois' frame, or the mere experience of play in itself, but, rather, to critically analyse the social premises under which such virtualizations take place. In this light, Caillois' inspirations, and his views on the relation between play, society, and agency, could be deployed more sensibly, providing inspiring ways to look at how imagination and myth may lurk behind the surface of free play. Caillois' reflections on masks may be used as an example: the way he envisioned such objects in relation to games and play as both far removed from the context of game studies and avatars, and potentially fascinating for the critical approaches to current forms of embodiment and simulation. There is a clear loss of identity linked to the transformational power of the mask. Just as when we go online to play a game, we will choose a pseudo that in first instance hides our identity, but ultimately as we duplicate this and advance in play, the gamer can lose his identity. Could the use and abuse and psychological impact of having multiple identities on digital channels be compared with the situation of a shaman who loses his personality once he embodied his totem animal? It this dissolving process of identity behind the different personas that we create to go online that interested Roger Caillois when he studied myths related to animal mimesis and depersonalization. In a first person game, or in forms of embodiment already explored and yet to become established, one is not necessarily her or himself. Further extensions of Caillois theory of games could be put forward in the area of on-line community building, clans and the dynamic by which we play, or consider the increasingly uncanny plausibility of virtual worlds—an endeavour perhaps initiated by Jean Baudrillard's views on simulacra, notoriously inspired by Caillois' categories (Baudrillard 2004).

Regardless of the viability of any application of Caillois' theory, it is probably important for game theorists to understand the historical context of Caillois writings on games, whereas his categories often appear to have been used uncritically. Rather than merely make use of oversimplified categories from Caillois' thought, a meta-theoretical analysis should consider strengths and weaknesses of such ideas, and above all the plausibility to use them for the task at hand. Consider *Majora's Mask*,[10] a game in which the main character/player transforms in other creatures by wearing masks bearing their insignia: rather than borrowing Caillois' category of mimicry to categorize the game in a taxonomy, Caillois' notion of mimicry as being lost in otherness should be employed as a hypothesis on the illusionistic potential of the medium, would entail a new place for the specific player in her or his context—possibly, with a reflection on how that context produced the opportunity for such an escape. An example of how Caillois' philosophy could also be used to explore games may come from his conceptualization of computer science, which was merely at its inception when he began writing about play. One of the first applications was English computer scientist Alan Turing's attempt to imagine how to build a machine that could play chess against a human being. Chess was also a fundamental metaphor for Roger Caillois, an image of the universe where the rules of progression on

---

[10] *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, Nintendo, Japan, 2000.

the board was decides by the logic of each piece on the board. At the end of his study, Caillois added two complementary studies where he discusses the impact of psychology and statistical analyses in the world of game. Caillois was referring more specifically to the work of Von Neumann and indirectly to Alan Turing's approach to computation, stating that mathematical efforts had been made to model *alea* as an attempt to take out any aspect of chance or luck out of the game.[11] In fact, Caillois considers these models to be external and circumstantial to the intrinsic nature of game, since they would exist even if games did not exist. His image of games became cosmic, because play was not just some arbitrary rule invented by men, but quickly became a law of nature and of the universe, a way that matter way organized. In hindsight, Caillois' seemingly grand and sweeping theorization stems from the attempt to capture contradictions and limits in our ability to provide a grid for reality's still —ultimately— ineffable nature. Still, *mutatis mutandis,* Caillois' ideas still sound inspiring to explore critically a world in which gamification and dataification have become so pervasive as to suggest gamified models of research as well as inspire models of the cosmos as a simulation—provided a philosophical conceptualization is provided.

Another important issue is the divide that Caillois put forward between work and play, or productive and non-productive activity. Excavating in Caillois' more complex ideas means to be able to read him notwithstanding some of the binaries he himself produced in his work, and in the context of the world he faced. Today, we use the same machine for both activities that constantly overlap in our day to day activity. Our productive lives may become gradually invaded by a dataification process, of which gamification, where users get points and badges as you go along shopping (hunting) or simply progress through a process, is a specific example. Is Caillois' theory invalid or irrelevant in this contexts? It would be fairly unlikely to claim so. The dataification of everyday life, and the fact that we live in an information-driven society, drive us to consider issues of power that were at the core of Caillois' work. In a world where computers will integrate our cloths, our bodies and the matter that surrounds us, making the digital experience totally ubiquitous with reality, morphing both of them into a new cognitive and gaming paradigm, computers will cease to exist as we know them, and gaming will not be a specific activity, but a hybrid one that morphs with everything that we do. In this futuristic scenario, the chances that man will keep on playing games that are still identifiable to Caillois' categories and gaming theory, and the latter, in spite of emerging in a different world, may still resonate with current developments far more the critiques that treated such ideas as ossified categories.

"A perspective that seems fantastic to me"

On the basis of this excursus and pertinentization of Caillois' research on the dimension of play, it is clear that some of the ways in which his thought has been presented so far in game studies appear reductive. Caillois' place in the field of game studies has been packaged in such a way that it would seem to inhabit a dead end path, serving as pedigree or as an initial, positivist idea to categorize genres and forms of play. In fact, Caillois' intellectual

---

[11] Roger Caillois, Les jeux et les hommes, Dossier section II " De la pédagogie aux mathématiques ", p. 253 and following.

legacy is likely to transcend this limited view, and one potential direction in which this could happen was suggested by Caillois himself in *Man, Play and Games*. In an already discussed passage in the second chapter ("The Classification of Games"), on page 20, in the fifth footnote, Caillois comments on his own notion of *mimicry* and once again offers contradictories to his own statements. He clarifies that his current understanding is in opposition to how he intended the concept in the previous publication—namely, "Mimetisme et psychastenie", published in *Le Mythe et L'Homme* (1938). Caillois writes: "unfortunately, this study treats the problem with a perspective that today seems fantastic to me. Indeed, I no longer view mimicry as a disturbance of space perception and a tendency to return to the inanimate, but rather, as herein proposed, as the insect equivalent of human games of simulation" (2001: 177-178).[12] Such a "fantastic" perspective, as well as a generative way to look at his ideas, represents an overlooked perspective which the interventions of this special issue of *Games and Culture* seeks to address in relation to Caillois' more notorious work. The reason for a turn towards the "fantastic" is to reclaim a possible genealogy of game studies which favours approaches that are, first and foremost, properly contextualized and, secondly, not immediately identifiable as "usable", "valid" or "correct". Caillois' diagonal readings, his intuitive movements across different forms of culture and life (or even the fascinations for the inorganic), his investigations on the instincts and forces that create and annihilate life—those truly fantastical flights that he offered in the rest of his production are, we believe, relevant to the construction of an alternative way of looking at games and play. In this other way of looking at Caillois, game studies would profit immensely by refraining from pigeonholing Caillois into a misplaced pedigree token, and recognizing him instead as major contributor to the research questions of our field, as a legitimate "giant" or beacon whose work is of course open to legitimate criticisms, and as an inspirational muse, not just for designers, but also for forward-looking speculation and critique.

The contributions to this issue

The contributions to this issue focus on specific aspect in which Caillois' work still resonates with on-going questions about the dimensions of play and, specifically, with today's digital games. In spite of their different aims – interrogating gamification or dissymmetry, looking at Marxism and ideology through Caillois – and disciplinary approaches – from sociology to semiotics –all contributions make similar efforts to develop explanatory frameworks that are more developed than what is presented in *Man, Play and Games* and, above all, from its so far limited reception in game studies.

Vincenzo Idone Cassone's paper, *Mimicking Gamers. Understanding Gamification through Roger Caillois,* examines the much-debated "gamification" paradigm within game studies and some of the ways in which the French author has been understood within it.

---

[12] While Caillois' early studies around animal mimicry were heavily influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis, such as it was understood in the surrealist milieu — his earlier text "Mimetisme et psychastenie" was initially published in the review *Minotaure*—he openly criticized psychoanalysis as a false science. Caillois operated an attempt to open up the perspective by showing that humans and animal shared the same logic of mimicry, through a generalization and extension of the notion of play from the human realm into a general law of nature.

Looking at Caillois' theories, Idone Cassone suggests that contemporary conceptualization have tended mostly to establish illustrious antecedents rather than delving more finely into the meaning and aims of Caillois' (and other philosophers of play's) work in their time and disciplinary contexts. Since the current landscape of game studies obviously involves method and frameworks that are distant from the origin of the discipline, both theoretically and epistemologically, more attention has been paid to criticize work from 20th century thinkers than to assess their contexts in order to then benefit from their enduring intellectual value. Idone Cassone's paper thus aims to reassess Caillois's theories on the relationships between games and society, suggesting ways in which they can contribute to the understanding of gamification today. The paper uses platforms like Steam and FourSquare/Swarm as examples of systems combining elements of gamification such as point-system to measure user progress, achievement systems, dynamics involving real world money, meta-ludic social interaction, and articulations of agency and meaningfulness on and off-game. Conceptualizing those who have approached gamification as Evangelists, Promoters, and Designers, and the different ways they approach a critical attitude towards ludic and social dynamics, Idone Cassone argues that game studies focus on short term external contaminations between play and real life. Caillois envisaged long term analogies between the two spheres. This can be taken as an example of how different disciplinary and intellectual projects can be sensibly related not to flatten out previous traditions into a prehistory of current game studies, but to assess the most fruitful areas of validity of those ideas today. In a society dominated by design mechanics in media, social networking and dataification, Steam is taken by Idone Cassone as an emblematic platform that, while targeting gamers, is built to make them believe that they are not actually buyers. Borrowing Caillois's notion of mimicry, Idone Cassone offers examples of how this notion can be used in different ways: he shows that the so-called "positivist" Caillois, for which mimicry would equate to a category in which to fit games of character and context embodiment, is, in fact, more the result of the use made of his classification outside the framework of his theory. On the other hand, any reading of Caillois should consider how the French thinker tried to combine methodological rigor with the necessity of imaginative interpretation. Caillois' intellectual legacy implies a recognition of its being characterized by the several attempts to transform early twentieth-century surrealist programme into a theoretical project, through a cross-bordering of taxonomies and a "monstrous", liberating, empowering analogical thinking. In this sense, the category of mimicry becomes a nuanced philosophical tool through which to tackle ambiguities and short-circuits in the percolations between leisure and work. Gamification emerges in some cases as a process designed to make users mimic players and act as players, consistently with an understanding of Caillois' notion of mimicry as a tool to adapt and confirm our identities in the context of commoditized experiences—marking a decisive rift with how Caillois actually conceived of the notion: that is, as an ambiguous movement of fascination to otherness, of continuous fabulation towards otherness and freedom.

Following on the theme of agency, Thomas Brock's *Roger Caillois and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming: A Critical Realist Perspective* discusses the case of e-sports, in which computer game players compete for money and prizes in a professionalized context—along with the expectations that govern their activity and the financial investments

and corporate sponsorship that structure and underpin their work. Brock looks at how, for these gamers, resources of play and leisure start to work differently than to normal audiences as, deceptively, play becomes work and work becomes play. Borrowing Caillois' notion of *agòn*, Brock analyses cases in which not only the principle of free play becomes corrupted, but even the rules of games are thwarted: fixed matches, gambling and corruption show how games, only ideally separate from life, may percolate ambiguously into the latter through the vested interests of sponsors, fans, managers, and players themselves. Brock uses this example to discuss Caillois' peculiar conceptualization of the relations between structure, agency and culture, providing a theoretical defence from critiques of essentialism that overlooked his play/reality dichotomy and his explanatory framework in and beyond *Man, Play and Games*. Brock argues that critiques to Caillois as an "essentialist" (Juul, 2005, Frasca, 2003) and to his models as "untenable" (Taylor, 2012) due to the French author's alleged artificial separation from game play and experience, seem to operate on the basis of conceptual confusion. Caillois' critics, notes Brock, seem more often inclined to offer examples which "disprove his rules" at textbook level: the fact that forms of play are fluid and cannot be fixed into categories does not mean that Caillois' categorization can make sense of social phenomena. Moreover, critics do not recognize his sociological project, underwritten by a salutary pessimism on some of the possible intersections between games and society: for some, the lines between fantasy and reality may become blurred, and pleasures obsessions, as play becomes institutionalized or corrupted. Underwriting Caillois' classification of games overlooks his social realism and functionalist approach to social anomie: above all, the ontological status of play was, for Caillois, a socio-political device intended to warn us about the alignment of play with working life.

Reading Caillois' approach to the relations between social structures and individuals in depth, Brock shows in what sense Caillois was interested in the dualism between play as structure and players as agents. Caillois does not deny the role of subjectivity. However, he does often present structure and agency as elided together, overlooking a reflexive conception of personhood. Brock thus injects his understanding of Caillois with Archer's views on agency —seen as the exercising of subjects' ability to consider themselves critically in relation to circumstances through reflexive, subjective deliberations. This provides a fuller opportunity to consider the "casually efficacious relations that emerge from the way games structure agency and give rise to alienating cultures" in e-sports through Caillois' original warnings. Brock's paper shows e-sports as a field in which subjective skills and autonomy are constructed within broader socio-economic contexts and necessities that are entirely complimentary to capitalism: professional players are oriented towards an autonomous and seemingly self-directed sense of entrepreneurialism, but may find the establishment of their careers leading them to unexpected, extreme lengths that were captured by Caillois' cautionary treatment of alienated, institutionalized forms of *agòn*.

The following papers offer further applications of theories and concept from Roger Caillois to examples of video game contexts. Enrico Gandolfi's *Beyond Diagonal Sciences* offers an analysis of the much-discussed video game *Journey,* based on Caillois' various strata of conceptual discussion of symmetry and dissymmetry. Gandolfi begins by acknowledging that Caillois' segmentation of play *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry* and *ilinx*, his most

discussed work within games studies, should be considered as part of a much broader interest not only in the relation between games and society, but also between sociology, natural sciences, imagination, surrealism and politics. In this less narrowly conceived space of interpretation of the French author, Gandolfi describes accurately Caillois' work on dissymmetry and symmetry as a recursive dialectic to read the natural and social world. The paper thus presents an open question on if and how it makes sense to apply Caillois' categories to the critical analysis of video games. The paper argues that, so far, most interpretations of games operating on the basis of an understanding of Caillois have been grounded on static applications of these concepts. This has led to an interpretation of the French author's work as a positivist scheme. This, argues Gandolfi, fundamentally misreads Caillois' diagonal approach. To provide an example of different applications of Caillois' theories, Gandolfi brings his analysis to the level of video game criticism and audience reception. He suggests that particular video games, such as *Journey,* could be seen as resonating with Caillois' dissymmetry as a concept through which to understand disruption and uncertainty. Still, Caillois' most famous typologies should always be approached not in order to fit games into these categories, but in conjunction with a more nuanced and self-reflexive approach. As tempting as it may be to look at *Journey* as a games that unsettles players' expectations through unexpected or unconventional textual strategies, the game's resonance with Caillois' *diagonal* sciences and dissymmetry is always reliant on the critical disposition of the observer and will produce an imposition of categories from another system of thought to the interpretation of a game today. Both on a theoretical and critical level, the application of categories from as complex a system of thought as Caillois' cannot but rest on the foundations of a self-reflexive critical attitude. Considering Caillois' generative, creative power as a thinker, it is fair to acknowledge that readings of the French intellectual's categories as positivist and static fundamentally distort Caillois' scheme. It is much more critically and theoretically productive, argues Gandolfi, to take well-assessed, consciously interpretative risks, harnessing the strength of Caillois's often visionary concepts as a platform for novel, progressive hypotheses on gaming. In this light, *Journey*'s accomplishments as an eccentric take on interaction only represents a slight hint at how games could be challenging our perceptions of entertainment and reality.

Kristensen's paper looks at Caillois' reflections on the conceptual sociological dichotomy between work and leisure in relation to Marxism, whose dialectics are shown to influence the milieu under which Caillois developed his ideas. Kristensen interrogates this labour/play dialectic while looking at recent critical literature on games being produced within the current capitalist and neoliberal system, focusing on phenomena like "playbour" (Kücklich 2005) and on key elements discussed in these theories, from the affordances and limitations of technology to the immaterial technological tools used by gamers and game-makers. Kristensen argues that looking at Caillois in relation to Marxism would provide an interesting critical perspective, one that has been under-explored by current approaches. In order to do so, he looks back at Caillois' ideas on the differentiation between *ludus* and *paidia* as, respectively, a form of structured and free play, and at their reception in some readings of the French scholars in the recent game studies field. Kristensen suggests that some critiques of Caillois have regarded the author's distinction between free play and work as arbitrary and trenchant, and the notion of voluntariness that ensued as a consequently unexplorable and

therefore useless dimension of analysis. Brock argues that this perspective presents two problems. Firstly, it conceptualises as a strict binary what was in fact a much more nuanced interest of Caillois in the anthropological and psychological dimension of play, and in the way players made sense of and took part of games in society. Secondly, such a reading of Caillois' categories in strict taxonomic perspective would be the result of an attempt to make sense of his thought within a perspective interested in game rules and design, chiefly concerned with how computer codes control the interaction, in fact appropriating the binary to distinguish an operative distinction between game rules and societal interaction. Kristensen argues that this use of Caillois' theory only apparently exposes the weaknesses of his binary, but in fact simplifies the philosophical issue at stake: seen in this way, computer interaction would not be seen or analysed as a way of detecting the underlying structures of society, and computer games analysis ends up being separated from what happens in society. Kristensen notes that contemporary concerns on capitalism and games in fact are far from being at odds with Caillois' insistence on the blurred nature of the lines between labour and play, and suggests that the influence of Marxism on Caillois' writings would provide an interesting terrain of further discussion on these issues.

Works cited

Bataille, G. (1997), *Acéphale: Religion, sociologie, philosophie, 1936-1939*, Paris: Jean-Michel Place.

Baudrillard, J. (2004), *Le Pacte de lucidité ou l'intelligence du Mal*, Paris: Gallimard.

Benveniste, E. (1947*)*, "Le jeu comme structure", in *Deucalion*, n°2, Paris: Editions de la revue Fontaine.

Bogost, I. (2006), *Unit Operations: An Approach to Video Game Criticism,* Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press

Caillois, R. (1939), *L'Homme et le Sacré*, Paris: Presses Universitaire de France (*Man and the Sacred*, 1960, trans. by M. Barash. New York: Free Press of Glencoe).

Caillois, R. (1950), *Bellone ou la pente de la guerre*, Paris: Flammarion.

Caillois, R. (1960), *Méduse et Cie,* Paris: Gallimard. (*The Mask of Medusa*, 1960, New York: C.N. Potter).

Caillois, R. (1965), *Au cœur du fantastique*. Paris: Gallimard.

Caillois, R. (1970), *Cases d'un échiquier*, Paris: Gallimard.

Caillois, R. (1973), *La Dissymétrie* (1973), Paris: Gallimard.

Caillois, R. (2001), *Man, Play and Games,* University of Illinois Press (reprint of 1961 Ed., tr. by M. Barash; first edition: *Les Jeux et les Hommes*, 1957, Paris: Gallimard).

Caillois, R. (2003), *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader* (edited and with an introduction by Claudine Frank; trans. by F. and C. Naish), Durham: Duke University Press.

Caillois, R., *Œuvres* (2008)*, Précédé de L'homme qui aimait les pierres par Marguerite Yourcenar, Vie et œuvre par Odile Felgine et d'Itinéraire de Roger Caillois par Dominique Rabourdin,* Édition de Dominique Rabourdin, Collection Quarto, Paris: Gallimard.

Costikyan, G. (2013), *Uncertainty in Games*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press.

Crawford, C. (1984), *The Art of Computer Game Design: Reflections of a Master Game Designer*, New York: Osborne/McGraw Hill.

Dumézil, G. (1987), *Entretiens avec Didier Eribon*, Paris: Gallimard.

Frasca, G. (2003), "Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology", in M/ J. P. Wolf and B. Perron (eds), *Video/Game/Theory,* London and New York: Routledge, pp. 221-236.

Huizinga, J. (1938), *Homo Ludens: Proeve Ener Bepaling Van Het Spelelement Der Cultuur*, Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff (Eng. Edition: *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, 1949, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).

Juul, J. (2005), *Half Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press.

Lévi-Strauss, C. (1958), *Anthropologie Structurale,* Paris: Plon.

Mauss, M. (1925), "Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques", *L'Année Sociologique* (Eng. Tr. By Ian Cunnison, *The Gift,* London : Cohen & West, 1954).

Mauss, M. (2004), "Rapport des jeux et des rites", *Socio-anthropologie* [Online], 13 | 2003, Online since 15 November 2004, connection on 02 July 2016. URL : http://socio-anthropologie.revues.org/172

Panoff, M. (1995), *Les frères ennemis, Roger Caillois et Claude Lévi-Strauss,* Paris: Payot.

Salen, K., Zimmerman, E. (2004), *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press.

Salen, K. Zimmerman, E. (2006), *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press.

Strenski, I. (1987), *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History. Cassirer, Eliade, Lévi-Strauss and Malinowski*, Houndmills, Hampshire and London: The MacMillan Press.

Suits, B. (1978), *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Sutton-Smith, B. (1997), *The Ambiguity of Play,* Cambridge (MA) and London: Harvard University Press.

Walz, S. P., Deterding, S. (2014), "An Introduction to the Gameful World", in S. P. Walz and S. Deterding (eds), *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, pp. 1-14.

Wendling, T. (2010), "Une joute intellectuelle au detriment du jeu?, Claude Lévi-Strauss et Roger Caillois (1954-1974", *Ethnologies,* vol. 32, n° 1, pp. 29-49.