

# Games and Culture

## Introduction. The Other Caillois: the many masks of game studies

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Abstract:	The legacy of the rich, stratified work of Roger Caillois, the multi-faceted and complex French scholar and intellectual, seems to have almost solely impinged on game studies through his most popular work, <i>Les Jeux et les Hommes</i> (1957). Translated in English as <i>Man, Play and Games</i> (1961), this is the text which popularized Caillois' ideas among those who do study and research on games and game cultures today, and 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 <i>Homo Ludens</i> (1938). The purpose of this paper is to introduce the papers and general purposes of a collected edition that aims to shift the attention of game scholars towards a more nuanced and comprehensive view of Roger Caillois, beyond the textbook interpretations usually received in game studies over the last decade or so.

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## 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 that 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*, scholars have sometimes selectively caricatured Caillois 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 widely 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.<sup>1</sup> A new approach to his work in relation to game studies should acknowledge 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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).

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

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

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58 <sup>2</sup> See Bataille, G. (1997), *Acéphale: Religion, sociologie, philosophie, 1936-1939*, Paris: Jean-Michel Place.

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

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26 A recurrent characteristic of many contributions to game studies is the resort to examples  
27 of studies of games that anticipate the inception of the discipline, or contemporary questions  
28 about the medium. Interestingly, game design approaches seem more conscious of the  
29 potential of his theories, while critical approaches would try to frame his contribution into a  
30 positivist, schematic outlook. An example of the first kind is an early collection of essays on  
31 game studies, *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*, edited by Salen and  
32 Zimmerman and published in 2006. This text offers the chapter "The Definition of Play: The  
33 Classification of Games", from *Man, Play and Games*, as a response to Huizinga's initial  
34 chapter of *Homo Ludens*: "Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon". The  
35 two "giants of play theory", as they are earlier defined by Salen and Zimmerman (2006: xvii),  
36 are proposed to introduce the reader to the theoretical and ontological question of what games  
37 and play are. The beginning of the same section explains that "[Caillois' categories] offer  
38 game designers a surprisingly useful conceptual toolbox with which to toy and tinker [and]  
39 can be used to analyse game experience, tune game designs in progress, or generate new  
40 game ideas" (84). In another contribution on game design, Salen and Zimmerman describe  
41 *Man, Play and Games* as a book that tries to "identify and analyse the general phenomenon  
42 of play and locate its larger significance within culture", and state that for their purpose of  
43 creating a game design anthology "his early chapters on defining and classifying games are  
44 the most useful" (2004: 82). Here, Caillois is again cited after Huizinga, as two early authors  
45 who defined the conceptualization of both games and play. For Salen and Zimmerman,  
46 Caillois and Huizinga operate as antecedents to the study of a phenomenon – video games –  
47 that is eminently new. At the same time, they offer inspirational tools for design. From a  
48 designer's approach, Caillois' work is a sandbox - a theme that resonates with this issue's  
49 suggestion that Caillois' theories work best in a generative, rather than normative way, or as a  
50 piece of pedigree for the study of games – as also noted by Gandolfi's paper in this  
51 collection.  
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3 An example of critical approaches that attempt to frame Caillois' work as a positivist,  
4 schematic contribution may be found in Juul (2005). Here, Caillois and Huizinga are  
5 dismissed as they cover an area which is too broad, thus unusable: "a broader area than  
6 *games* in that both discuss rule-based games as well as free-form play" (Juul 2005: 10). In  
7 this light, referencing Caillois merely provides a linear narrative for a particular evolutionary  
8 perspective in the study of games. Still, there are similarities in the ways in which Salen and  
9 Zimmerman (2004, 2006) and Juul (2005) look at Caillois. As already noted, both  
10 conceptualize these works as initial steps towards either the understanding of the medium or  
11 its formulation as an art and set of techniques and practices. Caillois author is seen as part of  
12 a canon of a supposed theory of play and games: he is in company with Huizinga (1938),  
13 Bernard Suits (1978), Chris Crawford (1984) and Brian Sutton-Smith (1997), as a "classic"  
14 author who provides a legitimation for a study of games. *Man, Play and Games* becomes at  
15 the same time a canonical and an outdated text to confront oneself with when defining games.  
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18 In the early establishment of the ludological perspective (Frasca 2003; Juul 2005), such  
19 interpretation of Caillois worked well as a point of reference to justify the necessity of a study  
20 of games *per se* through a dedicated discipline. Seen as an author whose main concern has  
21 mostly been the definition of games and play, Caillois has been seen—perhaps sensibly—as  
22 an early ludologist. Ian Bogost (2006: xi) does so when he presents Caillois as one of the  
23 most relevant theorists for a ludological approach to game studies. However, in this approach  
24 games are intended as texts with clearly identifiable boundaries, outcomes and practices of  
25 consumption. This led to a very narrow interpretation of *Man, Play and Games* as a  
26 publication that provides guidelines on how to understand games as a specific kind of texts.  
27 For example, Costikyan (2013: 11-13) notices that while for Caillois games must have an  
28 uncertain outcome to be defined as games and to be enjoyable, games such as *Space Invaders*  
29 have always the same outcome (the "game over") and are still enjoyable, while others, such  
30 as *Dungeons and Dragons*, do not even have an outcome, and yet are played and commonly  
31 defined as games. This is, however, a very narrowed-down definition of games, for which  
32 counter-argument are potentially infinite, as well as an approach that is forcibly imposed on  
33 Caillois, for which the boundaries between play and life are much more permeable than a  
34 superficial reading of his work might seem to suggest—as discussed in Tom Brock's and  
35 Kristensen's contributions in this issue.  
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38 Still, such a normative interpretation of Caillois has proven particularly useful in  
39 justifying the study of video games as the study of their practices of production. Juul (2005)  
40 and Salen and Zimmerman (2004) take Caillois' four categories of *agon* (regulated  
41 competition), *alea* (chance), *ilinx* (vertigo) and *mimicry* (imitation or mimesis), developed in  
42 *Man, Play, and Games*, as examples of game principles, and mostly game *design* principles.  
43 Walz and Deterding (2015: 7), for instance, apply Caillois' notions of *paidia* and *ludus* to  
44 their understanding of the "ludification" of culture as it is happening through the phenomena  
45 of "serious games", "serious toys", "playful design" and "gamification". In this way, the  
46 study of the relation between games and culture provided by Caillois has been reinterpreted  
47 in light of the needs of new scholars to explain those games production in more recent times:  
48 classifying the modalities of game design, the purposes and outcomes of those games, and the  
49 experiences of play and interpretation. The reception of this ideas in the field of today's game  
50 studies is discussed at length in Vincenzo Idone Cassone's contribution to this issue.  
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3 We can already identify important aspects in this initial overview of the uses of Roger  
4 Caillois in game studies. First of all, *Man, Play and Games* is cited as a text that defines an  
5 ontology of games and provides us with the logic of their classifications. Secondly, the  
6 definition is evaluated as either “usable” (Salen and Zimmerman 2006) (Walz and Deterding  
7 2014) or, as Costikyan (2013) explicitly writes, as “incorrect”, almost as if responding to a  
8 binary logic. Thus, the critique of *Man, Play and Games* seems to evolve around two  
9 questions: is the classification of games offered by Caillois valid? And, if it is valid, is it of  
10 any use to the design and understanding of games? These are of course preliminary questions  
11 when deciding whether an author is of any relevance, and as a matter of fact Caillois is  
12 treated almost always as an *entrée* in the theoretical projects mentioned above. Further  
13 evidence is provided by a third and final trend emerging from the literature: Caillois appears  
14 in the very first pages of those publications—with the exception of *Rules of Play*, but those  
15 pages are from “Unit 1: Core Concepts; Part 7: Defining Games”, which is indeed a  
16 preliminary section of the book. Caillois appears as a token to be cited at the beginning, when  
17 the authors need to define games and state what they believe games *are*—or, in contrast to  
18 the French author, to say what they think games *are not*. It is significant that, with almost no  
19 exceptions, *Man, Play and Games* is cited by texts on game studies mostly in such way, and  
20 almost never throughout the rest of the publications. It is a rather telling symptom of an  
21 approach that has looked at Caillois’ work as an entry point into the study of games and  
22 culture, but rarely taking his actual work close to its full implications.  
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### 31 Caillois beyond game studies

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35 While Caillois’ tokenization misses the complexities of Caillois’ theory, these emerge  
36 from a contextual reading of his work. Roger Caillois published *Les jeux et les hommes*  
37 (1958) in a famous collection of Gallimard generally reserved for literary works. The initial  
38 edition displayed on the cover a subtitle that has long been forgotten by more recent editions  
39 of this book. It reads “The mask and vertigo”, two elements that played a central role to  
40 understand the role of mask, its fascination, and the way it ties into certain forms of play. It is  
41 important to understand where this interest for play came from, and how it is tied into a  
42 general theory of vertigo and imagination. This background also shows how Caillois’  
43 understanding of play was broad and fundamentally misunderstood by game studies as it  
44 would emerge in some of his later interpretations.  
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48 Shortly after the war, Roger Caillois published a second edition of “Man and sacred”, a  
49 study had been published before the war, at the moment that Caillois left for Argentina to  
50 carry out research on the sociology of the sacred. This volume had been left to the care of  
51 Georges Dumézil during the last steps of the publication and reflected Caillois’ learning  
52 during the lectures that he followed of Marcel Mauss, who was one of the founders of French  
53 ethnology and the nephew of French sociologist Emile Durkheim.<sup>3</sup> Studying the relation of  
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56 <sup>3</sup> Marcel Mauss, “ Rapport des jeux et des rites ”, *Socio-anthropologie* [Online], 13 | 2003, Online since 15  
57 November 2004, connection on 02 July 2016. URL : <http://socio-anthropologie.revues.org/172>  
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3 the sacred and the profane, Caillois focused on the sacred, a dimension he though to oscillate  
4 between the respect and the transgression of norms, and regulated by the necessity for  
5 symbolic systems to alternate in order to maintain a balance in society. This element  
6 showcases Caillois' strong ties with French ethnology and the interrogations of play from a  
7 philosophical and ethnographic perspective. Not only did Caillois early writings reflects this  
8 direct influence of Mauss's theory, but his later interest on games was certainly triggered by a  
9 course that Marcel Mauss gave in 1937 at the Institute of Ethnology in Paris on the relation  
10 between game and ritual, at the time when Caillois was one of his students. Although Marcel  
11 Mauss focused mainly on the relation between play and his *cosmogonie* and *mythologie*, the  
12 lecture that he dedicated to the relationship between game and aesthetics and game and  
13 agonistic exchange, such as the *potlatch*, directly inspired Caillois classification of games.<sup>4</sup>  
14 Furthermore, Mauss gave several examples around kite flying and Polynesian maypole,  
15 which Caillois references throughout his study of games. The second edition of "Man and the  
16 Sacred" enabled Caillois to extend his field of research to the dimensions of sexuality and  
17 war. Sexuality was addressed through a discussion on the purification rituals of the Thonga,  
18 while another one titled "Game and sacred" (*Jeu et sacré*) was a critique of Huizinga's book  
19 *Homo Ludens* published in 1946. A final appendix was dedicated to the relation between war  
20 and the sacred, a domain that capture most of Caillois attention during the war years and that  
21 lead to his study *Bellone ou la pente de la guerre* in 1961.

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

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

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

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

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21 A theory of the mask was also central to the argumentation of Roger Caillois in relation to his  
22 way to see games through syntax and grammatical rules —especially in relation to the  
23 structuralist experience.<sup>5</sup> While Claude Lévi-Strauss showed how the formal styles of masks  
24 of the Indians of British Columbia related to a combinatorial capability of their myths and  
25 their possible variation and interlocking,<sup>6</sup> Caillois insisted on the fact that the function of the  
26 mask has profoundly been modified between traditional society and the modern world. While  
27 the mask was to be a universal attribute found in all societies, like games, its power came  
28 from the form of the society itself. Whereas the mask was once used to inspire a form of  
29 terror, its powers had dissolved into a form of entertainment and intrigue in the modern  
30 world. And because Caillois' theory of the mask was intrinsically part of his game theory, he  
31 saw in them a theory of civilization, where open and transparent structure of governance  
32 replace old one based on a tool of freight and fascination. The interpretation of the strange  
33 objects was at the centre of long discussions that were held between Claude Levi-Strauss and  
34 the surrealist group while in exile in New York. At the time, the collection of masks gathered  
35 led to questioning the meaning of mask, their relationship between their forms and myths, the  
36 trigger of their fascination on the human imagination. Masks were effectively powerful  
37 objects that in ancient times embodied the power of rituals. To put on a mask was to  
38 transform the bearer of the mask into the totem or deity represented by the mask. Its powers  
39 were transformational. While in the modern world, masks generally have as function to hide  
40 the identity of its bearer, in traditional society the individual who wears a masks generally  
41 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.



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

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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*,<sup>7</sup> 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

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<sup>7</sup> *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, Nintendo, Japan, 2000.

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3 the board was decided by the logic of each piece on the board. At the end of his study, Caillois  
4 added two complementary studies where he discusses the impact of psychology and statistical  
5 analyses in the world of game. Caillois was referring more specifically to the work of Von  
6 Neumann and indirectly to Alan Turing's approach to computation, stating that mathematical  
7 efforts had been made to model *alea* as an attempt to take out any aspect of chance or luck  
8 out of the game.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Caillois considers these models to be external and circumstantial to  
9 the intrinsic nature of game, since they would exist even if games did not exist. His image of  
10 games became cosmic, because play was not just some arbitrary rule invented by men, but quickly  
11 became a law of nature and of the universe, a way that matter was organized. In hindsight, Caillois'  
12 seemingly grand and sweeping theorization stems from the attempt to capture contradictions  
13 and limits in our ability to provide a grid for reality's still —ultimately— ineffable nature.  
14 Still, *mutatis mutandis*, Caillois' ideas still sound inspiring to explore critically a world in  
15 which gamification and datafication have become so pervasive as to suggest gamified  
16 models of research as well as inspire models of the cosmos as a simulation—provided a  
17 philosophical conceptualization is provided.

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

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46 “A perspective that seems fantastic to me”  
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49 On the basis of this excursus and pertinentization of Caillois' research on the dimension  
50 of play, it is clear that some of the ways in which his thought has been presented so far in  
51 game studies appear reductive. Caillois' place in the field of game studies has been packaged  
52 in such a way that it would seem to inhabit a dead end path, serving as pedigree or as an  
53 initial, positivist idea to categorize genres and forms of play. In fact, Caillois' intellectual  
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57 <sup>8</sup> Roger Caillois, *Les jeux et les hommes*, Dossier section II “ De la pédagogie aux mathématiques ”, p. 253 and  
58 following.  
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3 legacy is likely to transcend this limited view, and one potential direction in which this could  
4 happen was suggested by Caillois himself in *Man, Play and Games*. In an already discussed  
5 passage in the second chapter (“The Classification of Games”), on page 20, in the fifth  
6 footnote, Caillois comments on his own notion of *mimicry* and once again offers  
7 contradictories to his own statements. He clarifies that his current understanding is in  
8 opposition to how he intended the concept in the previous publication—namely, “Mimetisme  
9 et psychasténie”, published in *Le Mythe et L’Homme* (1938). Caillois writes: “unfortunately,  
10 this study treats the problem with a perspective that today seems fantastic to me. Indeed, I no  
11 longer view mimicry as a disturbance of space perception and a tendency to return to the  
12 inanimate, but rather, as herein proposed, as the insect equivalent of human games of  
13 simulation” (2001: 177-178).<sup>9</sup> Such a “fantastic” perspective, as well as a generative way to  
14 look at his ideas, represents an overlooked perspective which the interventions of this special  
15 issue of *Games and Culture* seeks to address in relation to Caillois’ more notorious work. The  
16 reason for a turn towards the “fantastic” is to reclaim a possible genealogy of game studies  
17 which favours approaches that are, first and foremost, properly contextualized and, secondly,  
18 not immediately identifiable as “usable”, “valid” or “correct”. Caillois’ diagonal readings, his  
19 intuitive movements across different forms of culture and life (or even the fascinations for the  
20 inorganic), his investigations on the instincts and forces that create and annihilate life—those  
21 truly fantastical flights that he offered in the rest of his production are, we believe, relevant to  
22 the construction of an alternative way of looking at games and play. In this other way of  
23 looking at Caillois, game studies would profit immensely by refraining from pigeonholing  
24 Caillois into a misplaced pedigree token, and recognizing him instead as major contributor to  
25 the research questions of our field, as a legitimate “giant” or beacon whose work is of course  
26 open to legitimate criticisms, and as an inspirational muse, not just for designers, but also for  
27 forward-looking speculation and critique.

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37 The contributions to this issue

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

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

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55 <sup>9</sup> While Caillois’ early studies around animal mimicry were heavily influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis,  
56 such as it was understood in the surrealist milieu — his earlier text “Mimetisme et psychasténie” was initially  
57 published in the review *Minotaure*—he openly criticized psychoanalysis as a false science. Caillois operated an  
58 attempt to open up the perspective by showing that humans and animal shared the same logic of mimicry,  
59 through a generalization and extension of the notion of play from the human realm into a general law of nature.

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

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54 Following on the theme of agency, Thomas Brock's *Roger Caillois and the*  
55 *Professionalization of Computer Gaming: A Critical Realist Perspective* discusses the case of  
56 e-sports, in which computer game players compete for money and prizes in a professionalized  
57 context—along with the expectations that govern their activity and the financial investments  
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3 and corporate sponsorship that structure and underpin their work. Brock looks at how, for  
4 these gamers, resources of play and leisure start to work differently than to normal audiences  
5 as, deceptively, play becomes work and work becomes play. Borrowing Caillois' notion of  
6 *agòn*, Brock analyses cases in which not only the principle of free play becomes corrupted,  
7 but even the rules of games are thwarted: fixed matches, gambling and corruption show how  
8 games, only ideally separate from life, may percolate ambiguously into the latter through the  
9 vested interests of sponsors, fans, managers, and players themselves. Brock uses this example  
10 to discuss Caillois' peculiar conceptualization of the relations between structure, agency and  
11 culture, providing a theoretical defence from critiques of essentialism that overlooked his  
12 play/reality dichotomy and his explanatory framework in and beyond *Man, Play and Games*.  
13 Brock argues that critiques to Caillois as an "essentialist" (Juul, 2005, Frasca, 2003) and to  
14 his models as "untenable" (Taylor, 2012) due to the French author's alleged artificial  
15 separation from game play and experience, seem to operate on the basis of conceptual  
16 confusion. Caillois' critics, notes Brock, seem more often inclined to offer examples which  
17 "disprove his rules" at textbook level: the fact that forms of play are fluid and cannot be fixed  
18 into categories does not mean that Caillois' categorization can make sense of social  
19 phenomena. Moreover, critics do not recognize his sociological project, underwritten by a  
20 salutary pessimism on some of the possible intersections between games and society: for  
21 some, the lines between fantasy and reality may become blurred, and pleasures obsessions, as  
22 play becomes institutionalized or corrupted. Underwriting Caillois' classification of games  
23 overlooks his social realism and functionalist approach to social anomie: above all, the  
24 ontological status of play was, for Caillois, a socio-political device intended to warn us about  
25 the alignment of play with working life.

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

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53 The following papers offer further applications of theories and concept from Roger  
54 Caillois to examples of video game contexts. Enrico Gandolfi's *Beyond Diagonal Sciences*  
55 offers an analysis of the much-discussed video game *Journey*, based on Caillois' various  
56 strata of conceptual discussion of symmetry and dissymmetry. Gandolfi begins by  
57 acknowledging that Caillois' segmentation of play *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry* and *ilinx*, his most  
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3 discussed work within games studies, should be considered as part of a much broader interest  
4 not only in the relation between games and society, but also between sociology, natural  
5 sciences, imagination, surrealism and politics. In this less narrowly conceived space of  
6 interpretation of the French author, Gandolfi describes accurately Caillois' work on  
7 dissymmetry and symmetry as a recursive dialectic to read the natural and social world. The  
8 paper thus presents an open question on if and how it makes sense to apply Caillois'  
9 categories to the critical analysis of video games. The paper argues that, so far, most  
10 interpretations of games operating on the basis of an understanding of Caillois have been  
11 grounded on static applications of these concepts. This has led to an interpretation of the  
12 French author's work as a positivist scheme. This, argues Gandolfi, fundamentally misreads  
13 Caillois' diagonal approach. To provide an example of different applications of Caillois'  
14 theories, Gandolfi brings his analysis to the level of video game criticism and audience  
15 reception. He suggests that particular video games, such as *Journey*, could be seen as  
16 resonating with Caillois' dissymmetry as a concept through which to understand disruption  
17 and uncertainty. Still, Caillois' most famous typologies should always be approached not in  
18 order to fit games into these categories, but in conjunction with a more nuanced and self-  
19 reflexive approach. As tempting as it may be to look at *Journey* as a games that unsettles  
20 players' expectations through unexpected or unconventional textual strategies, the game's  
21 resonance with Caillois' *diagonal* sciences and dissymmetry is always reliant on the critical  
22 disposition of the observer and will produce an imposition of categories from another system  
23 of thought to the interpretation of a game today. Both on a theoretical and critical level, the  
24 application of categories from as complex a system of thought as Caillois' cannot but rest on  
25 the foundations of a self-reflexive critical attitude. Considering Caillois' generative, creative  
26 power as a thinker, it is fair to acknowledge that readings of the French intellectual's  
27 categories as positivist and static fundamentally distort Caillois' scheme. It is much more  
28 critically and theoretically productive, argues Gandolfi, to take well-assessed, consciously  
29 interpretative risks, harnessing the strength of Caillois's often visionary concepts as a  
30 platform for novel, progressive hypotheses on gaming. In this light, *Journey's*  
31 accomplishments as an eccentric take on interaction only represents a slight hint at how  
32 games could be challenging our perceptions of entertainment and reality.

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41 Kristensen's paper looks at Caillois' reflections on the conceptual sociological dichotomy  
42 between work and leisure in relation to Marxism, whose dialectics are shown to influence the  
43 milieu under which Caillois developed his ideas. Kristensen interrogates this labour/play  
44 dialectic while looking at recent critical literature on games being produced within the current  
45 capitalist and neoliberal system, focusing on phenomena like "playbour" (Kücklich 2005) and  
46 on key elements discussed in these theories, from the affordances and limitations of  
47 technology to the immaterial technological tools used by gamers and game-makers. Kristensen  
48 argues that looking at Caillois in relation to Marxism would provide an interesting  
49 critical perspective, one that has been under-explored by current approaches. In order to do  
50 so, he looks back at Caillois' ideas on the differentiation between *ludus* and *paidia* as,  
51 respectively, a form of structured and free play, and at their reception in some readings of the  
52 French scholars in the recent game studies field. Kristensen suggests that some critiques of  
53 Caillois have regarded the author's distinction between free play and work as arbitrary and  
54 trenchant, and the notion of voluntariness that ensued as a consequently unexplorable and  
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3 therefore useless dimension of analysis. Brock argues that this perspective presents two  
4 problems. Firstly, it conceptualises as a strict binary what was in fact a much more nuanced  
5 interest of Caillois in the anthropological and psychological dimension of play, and in the  
6 way players made sense of and took part of games in society. Secondly, such a reading of  
7 Caillois' categories in strict taxonomic perspective would be the result of an attempt to make  
8 sense of his thought within a perspective interested in game rules and design, chiefly  
9 concerned with how computer codes control the interaction, in fact appropriating the binary  
10 to distinguish an operative distinction between game rules and societal interaction. Kristensen  
11 argues that this use of Caillois' theory only apparently exposes the weaknesses of his binary,  
12 but in fact simplifies the philosophical issue at stake: seen in this way, computer interaction  
13 would not be seen or analysed as a way of detecting the underlying structures of society, and  
14 computer games analysis ends up being separated from what happens in society. Kristensen  
15 notes that contemporary concerns on capitalism and games in fact are far from being at odds  
16 with Caillois' insistence on the blurred nature of the lines between labour and play, and  
17 suggests that the influence of Marxism on Caillois' writings would provide an interesting  
18 terrain of further discussion on these issues.  
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