

# Japanese Ludiquity: spatial reframing of Play in Japan

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## Keywords

Play contexts, ludicization, frames, game centers, entertainment districts, theme parks.

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, many scholars highlighted the increasing permeation and mixing between the sphere of play and ordinary activities (Ortoleva 2012, Fuchs et al 2014, Frissens et al 2015, Deterding and Walz 2015), previously perceived as separated and even opposed (see Caillois 1958/2001). This phenomenon has been labelled in many ways: *ludification of culture*, *ludicization*, *cultural gamification*, or *gameful world*. Its manifestations include gamified apps (for fitness, productivity, learning etc); the use of games and play for social impact (*serious games*, flash mobs, game-based learning); the economisation of digital game goods (micro-transactions, *lootboxes* and NFTs); the rise of game-based entertainment (game streamers/influencers, eSports, game transmedia franchises); the playful behaviours of internet culture (e.g. trolling and memes) and more. As a whole, ludicization can be understood as a general process of reframing of the semiotic boundaries of Play, both internal and socio-cultural (Idone Cassone 2019).

Up to now, however, many scholars have been looking at ludicization as a fundamentally Western process, whose origins date back to twenty years at most. There is almost no research study on the influences or impact of Japanese culture on global ludicization (Idone Cassone 2020), despite its key role in the establishment of game industry and in many contemporary playful trends (*cosplay*, game shows, *gacha* culture, *otaku* behaviour; see Allison 2006, Consalvo 2017).

My proposal for DiGra 2022 focuses on the analysis of a specific aspect of these reframing processes: the changes in the spatial and temporal frames of Play which took place in Japan since the late '70s, in relation to the evolution of game systems (arcades, home consoles) and the transformation of play contexts (theme parks, entertainment districts, arcade venues). This proposal is part of a broader in-progress research period in Japan, dedicated to the analysis of the Japanese historical dynamics that contributed to the global development of ludicization.

In the last decade researchers discussed the rise of play as a pervasive and interstitial phenomenon, less and less confined by traditional social rules and norms, which limited the activity of playing according to certain context, spaces and times. For instance, Montola, Stenros and Waern (2009) or Taylor (2006) wrote about the rise of pervasive games, online MMOGs and critical play; all these play forms do not feature typical spatial or temporal boundaries, do not “end” in a traditional way, and can be played without explicit arenas or defined game time. Similarly, Poremba (2007) and Thibault (2017) discussed the new forms of interstitial play represented by social games or

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smartphone games; moments of play that are designed to fill the gaps between other activities (school, commuting, working) but often overlap with them, also sharing the technology and tools used for “serious” tasks (PC, smartphone). The weakening of traditional play boundaries and the overlapping between playfulness and seriousness in time, space and context is a significant cultural change for societies which considered play a separate, bounded and unproductive activity.

In the presentation, I will investigate how the historical changes in Japanese play contexts and boundaries since the ‘70s challenged the traditional play frames and perceived separatedness, leading to forms of autonomous playscapes, which will contribute to the rise of pervasive and interstitial play. To do so, I will discuss specifically the evolution of arcade venues, modern entertainment districts, theme parks and the home console boom. To discuss those changes, I will:

- Highlight the most notable historical changes in play contexts and play practices (space/time) since the ‘70s, namely the rise of modern entertainment districts, game centers and theme parks (Daliot-Bul 2014, Katō 2011, Raz 1999), the changes in arcade venues and home consoles context; (Uemura, Iwatani and Baba 2008, Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015, Kobayashi and Koyama 2019);
- Compare these changes with their media portrayal/representation, at the intersection between manga/animes (e.g. *Game Center Arashi*, *Arcade Girl*, *Destroy all Humanity: it can't be regenerated*) and the media self-representation in selected videogames series (e.g. *Boku no Natsuyasumi*, *Persona*, *Shenmue*, *Yakuza*, *The world ends with you* etc);

By doing so, I hope to highlight the importance of certain Japanese sociocultural processes, which made the sphere of play more self-sufficient and autonomous in time and space, paving the ground for successive global phenomena. Mostly, to show the sociocultural dynamics that made possible the development of a society in which the existence of play is recognised, grounded in space and given a specific autonomy.

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