

# Huizinga's *Lila*: Game Studies and Indian Concepts of Play

**Souvik Mukherjee**

Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta  
Kolkata 700094, India  
prosperoscell@gmail.com

## **Keywords**

Huizinga, Lila, game concepts, performance, India, ritual, orientalism

## **INTRODUCTION**

Johan Huizinga, despite becoming extremely popular in Games Studies' discussions of play, is relatively less carefully studied in the wider context of his research. One of the often ignored areas is his scholarship on India and how his doctoral thesis (published in 1897) on the *Vidusaka* (loosely translated as the jester-figure) in Sanskrit drama may have influenced his ludic thinking. Many examples in *Homo Ludens* are drawn from the two Indian epics, the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharat*, the dice-game in the latter being a particular point of interest for Huizinga. In Game Studies criticism, so far, this is a little explored connection and can be viewed as being on the margins of the existing discourse for a number of reasons, including the fact that this is a non-Western perspective in what is, so far, largely a Euro-American conception of play. Tara Fickle in her recent book identifies the Indian connection as the 'orientalist roots of Game Studies' (Fickle 2019: 118). Fickle deploys the term 'orientalism' in the sense of Edward Said's famous formulation wherein 'the Orient was Orientalised not only because it was discovered to be "Oriental" in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it *could be* - that is, submitted to being - *made* Oriental' (Said 1978: 14). While agreeing with Fickle's argument to an extent, I submit that it is imperative to re-read Huizinga through his scholarship on play in Sanskrit texts because dismissing his fundamental contribution as mere Orientalism would leave many possible avenues of rethinking play unexplored. Following Huizinga's connection with the conceptions of play in Indian philosophy and drama, this paper concentrates on the Indian concept of play, *lila* or 'divine play', which is also an important concept in the two Indian epics. and how it significantly reshapes notions of play in both traditional and digital games, in terms of its ontology, experience and the process of identity-formation through play.

*Lila* is an often-used word even in Western contexts and in its original Hindu contexts it means a variety of things ranging from the effortless and playful relation between the Absolute and the contingent world to the erotic play of Krishna with his consort Radha. It also forms the basis of the dramatic and festive events in Indian culture such as the *Ras Lila* or the *Ramleela*, even in far-flung parts of the world as the author Derek Walcott (1992) describes the latter in his Nobel speech. Combining the ludic with the divine, *lila* is

an extremely complex concept and often the outcome of the play between gods can upset the cosmos. The divine *lila* can also be in some cases a part of *maya* or illusion (the ludic connection of the latter word has already been pointed out in Game Studies research<sup>1</sup>). Sibaji Bandopadhyay notes how Huizinga did not find it ‘at all astonishing that ‘ritual’ and ‘play’ were substantively similar in constitution: in essence, every ritual was legitimately reducible to an irreducible play-concept [...] that, for example, found in Vedic sacrificial rites which aimed to represent “a certain desired cosmic event”’ (Bandopadhyay 2014: 22). In their seminal study on divine play in Indian philosophy and mythology, Don Handelman and Daniel Shulman, write at length on the game of dice played by the gods, Shiva and Parvati, where the winning and the losing have a direct impact on the cosmos. As they say, ‘Siva, drawn into the dice game, is taken apart during the game—engendered, stripped naked, diminished, objectified, overwhelmed by time. The process turns him, as it were, inside out, thereby creating discontinuities in his being, empty spaces, black holes, whereas once—before the game—there was continuous, dense simultaneity of self and the cosmos’ (Handelman and Shulman 1997: 96). The sense that emerges from the deep analyses of *lila* is that it is difficult to distinguish between when the gods control their play and when play controls the gods themselves; the latter is perhaps an influence on Huizinga’s description of culture as *sub specie ludii* (loosely translated as ‘in the form of play’) and could also be compared to Gadamerian notions of play on how the game plays the player.<sup>2</sup>

Moving beyond the set conceptions of play that have been followed in Games Studies, this paper explores the possibility-space of thinking about play and its ontology from a specific non-Western angle on play theory. Thereby, it will also hint at further reappraisals of play from other cultures, such as the Chinese notion of *wan*. The main focus here, however, is *lila* and how its multiple connotations can further complicate how games are understood. Especially, taking the case of videogames, which, besides being games, are performances, story-experiences, pedagogic tools and simulations of serious philosophical and ethical situations, one can see a more apposite scenario using the framework of *lila*, where again culture exists *sub specie ludi* in that the play-concept is very obviously multiple and versatile and even cosmic in its significance. Here, the object is to deliberately not attempt an oversimplification of a complex and multifaceted concept. Looking back at the ways in which videogames research has woven its foundational thinking around concepts of play, this paper points out the influences of *lila* on Huizinga and by extension on the way the play experience in videogames can be better comprehended perhaps, even in comparison with concepts such as *Paidia* and *Ludus* as described by Roger Caillois and used widely in Game Studies so far.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Atkins, Barry. 2003. *More Than a Game: The Computer Game as Fictional Form*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> Barry Atkins (2004) and later Souvik Mukherjee (2015) write about the ‘illusion of agency’ in videogames. The Latin etymology of ‘illusion’, *illudere*, already shares its roots with the ludic.

<sup>2</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer follows Huizinga’s formulation of play closely in *Truth and Method* (2004). Discussions of *Lila* would connect very usefully to current debates regarding Game hermeneutics.

Bandyopadhyay, Sibaji. 2014. : “: A Few Lessons from the Mahābhārata.” In *Mahabharata Now*, edited by Sibaji Bandyopadhyay and Arindam Chakrabarti. Routledge India.

Caillois, Roger. 2001. *Man, Play and Games*. Translated by Meyer Barash. Reprint edition. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Fickle, Tara. 2019. *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities*. New York: NYU Press.

Handelman, Don, and David Shulman. 1997. *God Inside Out: 'Siva's Game of Dice*. Oxford UK; New York: Oxford University Press.

Huizinga, Johan. 1897. “De Vidusaka in Het Indisch Tooneel.” University of Groningen.

———. 1971. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Mukherjee, Souvik. 2015. *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Walcott, Derek. 1992. “Nobel Lecture: The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory.” *Nobelprize.Org*. [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1992/walcott-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1992/walcott-lecture.html).