



Bad players

Description

If a political party wins enough of the vote then they might just gain sufficient influence to adjust electoral boundaries and increase their chances of winning again. Gerrymandering is one example of stacking the odds in your favour. It's a big deal in the USA at the moment (e.g. see [Washington Post article](#)). Any competitor would like to manoeuvre themselves into a position of advantage. It's a common game, with hazy rules.



The early surrealist and exponent of play, Roger Caillois asserts four ideal game types (and their corruption): those that play on competition, chance, simulation and vertigo.

- **Competitive play** is obvious in sports. Economic competition and competitive exams are institutional examples
- **Games of chance** are found in activities that rely on the roll of the dice and gambling. Speculation on the stock market is an obvious example.
- **Games of simulation** are concerned with mimicry, theatre and the carnival. Ceremonial etiquette and the wearing of uniforms are formal examples.
- **Vertigo** concerns the thrill of speed, mountain climbing and fairground rides, which in turn find institutional expression in various dangerous occupations, like fire fighting and sea rescue.



For Caillois, â??games discipline instincts and institutionalize them.â?• On the other hand, according to Caillois, games can be corrupted. He shows that

- Our tendency towards **competition** can lead to violence, power mongering and trickery.
- **Chance** can lead to superstition and speculations on astrology (according to him).
- **Simulation** can produce alienation and split personality syndromes.
- Tests of endurance under extremes of space and time (**vertigo**) can give way to the thrill of â??chemical excess,â?• that is, alcoholism and drug addiction.

Stacking the odds

But if we take into account the nature of the meta-game (see [previous post](#)) then we see that games can be played in this space between the institutional and the deviant. Sport is not only playing with a ball or against a team, but playing with advantage (and handicaps), assembling the best team, and taking risks with the prospect of injury, both on and off the field. Some nefarious meta-gamers try to win another game â?? with bookmakers â?? by bribing or blackmailing players to lose! Itâ??s complicated.

The world of economics involves a play between healthy competition and cunning coercion of oneâ??s customers and denigrating the competition. In the moral domain, where one draws the line is always contested. The line is â?? in play.

Rescuing play

The character of the game is well represented in Cailloisâ?? attempt to rescue the game from inauthenticity, which appears on a chart, a five by four game board, with the column of authentic game categories on the left and their supposed corruption on the right.

	Cultural forms found at the margins of the social order	Institutional forms integrated into social life	Corruption
Agon (Competition)	Sports	Economic competition Competitive examinations	Violence Will to power Trickery
Alea (Chance)	Lotteries Casinos Hippodromes Pari-mutuels	Speculation on the stock market	Superstition Astrology, etc
Mimicry (Simulation)	Carnival Theatre Cinema Hero-worship	Uniforms Ceremonial etiquette	Alienation Split personality
Ilinx (Vertigo)	Mountain climbing Skiing Tightrope walking Speed	Professions requiring control of vertigo	Alcoholism and drugs

We gamers are apparently drawn by our base instincts from the left to the right, only to be persuaded by Caillouisâ?? reflections to consider the quest for the authentic game, the restored game. Caillouis suggests a balance along the axis of institutions.

It transpires that the authentic game is more a quest than an actuality. A game skeptic could say that sports are already corrupted by the impetus for violence, lotteries are a form of superstition harking back to ancient augury, schizophrenia is the basis of carnival, and extreme sports are a means of overdosing on endorphins and adrenaline.

This is not to exclude a certain preference for one side or the other of the game table, nor to exclude one extreme as more socially favourable than the other, but to show that the categories are in play, and to suggest that the playing of the game (football, roulette, dressing up, car racing, Fortnite) already depends on, and derives from, a larger arena of meta-play.

Mystery

Torturing the game taxonomy further exposes the quest for the ideal game. Games already lend themselves to the mysterious, irrespective of the â??narrative contentâ?• of the game. They have uncertain outcomes, which games of chance make explicit. Games also have rules and instructions, which, to the uninitiated, appear mysterious. The skills of the player who wins more often than loses also constitute a mystery. Furthermore, like those other great metonyms, the machine and the book, the

game readily serves as a metaphor for the world, the rules of which we are trying to discover.

This post is adapted from the chapter on Play in Coyne, Richard. 2005. *Cornucopia Limited: Design and Dissent on the Internet*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

References

- Caillois, Roger. 1961. *Man, Play, and Games*. New York, NY: The Free Press of Glencoe.
- Huizinga, Johan. 1955. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press

Note

- Images: The Ferris wheel is in the never-used and derelict fair ground at Pripyat in Chernobyl, Ukraine. The bungee jumper is at Scheveningen, The Netherlands. The skateboarders are by the river, Bratislava.



Category

1. Play

Tags

1. bias
2. game
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