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Master's Thesis

By

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This thesis aims to answer the following question: to what extent do the analytical concepts of playfulness and playability allow us a better understanding of contemporary cultural practices? This question will be examined on the basis of a discourse analysis, literature review and a case study of YouTube. It will be argued that these concepts have the potential to shed new light on contemporary cultural practices.

*Key words: play, YouTube, cultural practices, playfulness, playability*



## **[WORLD AT PLAY]**

AN ARGUMENT FOR AN ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE  
OF PLAYFULNESS AND PLAYABILITY

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# **PART I**

## ***INTRODUCTION***

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# INTRODUCTION – GOAL, STRUCTURE & METHODOLOGY



Figure 1: Thesis outline (Jorge Cham, 2006).

In the past decade, several authors have observed that today's cultural practices, such as remixing music, appropriating and commenting on movies but also grassroots creativity and the production and distribution of do-it-yourself content, share a distinct playful quality.

The Spanish cultural scholar Antoni Roig observes that 'play is permeating media practices in many ways' (Roig, 2009: 94) Dutch media scholar Joost Raessens describes this phenomenon as the 'ludification of culture' (Raessens, 2006). If we are to believe cultural philosopher Jos de Mul, there even is a 'global ludification of culture' (De Mul, 2010).

## GOAL

The phenomenon of the ludification of culture as observed by De Mul and Raessens has triggered off this thesis. If it is assumed that a global ludification of culture is really at hand, what consequences will this assumption have for the existing analytical concepts to analyze these cultural practices? Can it mean that this ludification of culture has not been adequately theorized yet? To put it differently: might a theoretical perspective of play bring to the surface something that would remain hidden otherwise? These questions are the starting point of my thesis. Its goal is to investigate whether it is fruitful to incorporate this playful quality of cultural practices in analytical concepts. By doing this, this thesis seeks to justify further research into play and build a foundation upon which future research can formulate a fully-fledged theoretical framework, based on the analytical concepts of playfulness and playability that are introduced in this thesis.

This thesis does not seek to investigate the whole of cultural practices, but, instead, it will focus on the video sharing website YouTube, because it plays a pivotal role in today's cultural practices According to Henry Jenkins, YouTube is the 'epicenter of today's participatory culture' (Jenkins, 2009: 110).

In order to search for an answer to the questions mentioned above, the following research question will be deployed - in which the analytical tools used in this thesis are also introduced:

*To what extent do the analytical concepts of playfulness and playability allow us a better understanding of contemporary cultural practices?*

The concepts of playfulness and playability are crucial. They are discussed in detail in Part II. For now, a rough understanding will suffice: Playfulness refers to an *attitude* that promotes playful, spontaneous behavior – a certain state of mind, in other words. Playability, on the other hand, refers to the *interaction* between play design and the players. Play design is the system of guidelines (for example, rules or features) to stimulate and provoke a certain kind of play. How people engage with this play design, is conceptualized as playability.

To be clear this thesis is about play and not about games and this thesis does not seek to argue whether or not some media forms are games. It will focus solely on the question to what extent the incorporation of the notion of play in a analytical concepts allows us a better understanding of today's cultural practices.

As it will turn out, one of the most important benefits of using new concepts is that it forces scholars (and students, for that matter) to think differently about cultural practices.

## **STRUCTURE & METHODOLOGY**

On the basis of the goal and the research question formulated in the previous section, I will now outline the structure and methodology of this thesis.

In order to answer the research question formulated in the introduction, this thesis is split into two major parts; a discourse analysis (Part II), centered around literature surrounding the concept of play and contemporary cultural practices, and a case study of YouTube (Part III). The discourse analysis in Part II aims to embed this thesis in existing debates, discourses and contexts in order to investigate the relevance of this thesis. Furthermore, the concepts of playfulness and playability will be discussed in detail.

Part III consists of a thorough case study of YouTube and will start off with a short historical description of YouTube, before the analytical concepts will be put to the test in three different examples, on the basis of literature centered around YouTube.

Finally, part IV concludes this thesis. In this concluding part the research question will be answered, the results will be discussed and ideas for further research will be proposed.

Since it is the body of this thesis, I will first go more deeply into the discourse analysis (part II) and the case study (part III) and then conclude this introduction with a methodological approach.

## **DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

The Discourse Analysis aims to answer three questions: why is there a need for this thesis *now*? How does this thesis relate to existing research about play and cultural practices? What is new about the proposed concepts of playfulness and playability?

The Discourse Analysis is divided into two sections. In the first section 'Defining Play, Playfulness & Playability', the concept of play and the playful nature of mankind will be discussed as well as the vehement debate about the notion of play. Key authors in this section are historian Johan Huizinga, sociologist Roger Caillois, play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and contemporary media scholars such as Thomas Moore (of whom this thesis borrows a fruitful definition of play), Mia Consalvo, Jesper Juul, Aki Järvinen and Julian Kücklich.

The second section 'Changing Landscapes – Media, Play & Cultural Practices' aims to investigate why it is important *now* to analyze cultural practices from the perspective of playfulness and playability. Scholars have always refined their analytical concepts to match changing cultural practices. Although cultural practices have always been, to an extent, playful, there is something profoundly different about *today's* cultural practices – they afford play much more explicitly. Therefore, it may be about time that the concepts of playfulness and playability are introduced as analytical tools. Key authors in this second section are notable media scholar Henry Jenkins, lawyers Lawrence Lessig and Yorchai Benkler, play theorist Antoni Roig and psychologist James Gibson.

## **CASE STUDY**

Part III of this thesis is where the analytical concepts of playfulness and playability are being put to the test through a case study of YouTube. Three aspects of cultural practices of YouTube are analyzed in this part through analysis of academic literature focused on YouTube, YouTube videos, YouTube's history and its features. Firstly, the much discussed dichotomy between so-called amateurs and professionals will be examined on the basis of the example of 'lonelygirl15', a popular YouTube user that later turned out to be an actress: her videos proved to be part of a scripted show (SiliconValleyWatcher, 2006). Secondly, it will be analyzed how people use YouTube as a platform for their playful cultural practices on the basis of the example of the Hitler Downfall Parodies (MOTURK49,

2007). Thirdly and finally, the way people playfully appropriate specific features of YouTube itself will be analyzed on the basis of the example of the Caption Fail video series (RhettandLink, 2011).

### ***MODES OF PARTICIPATION, NOT CATEGORIES OF INDIVIDUALS***

Examining a theoretical perspective of playfulness and playability calls for a methodological approach that is productive for this purpose. Media scholars Mizoku Ito et al., in their recent book *Hanging Out, Messing Around and Geeking Out*, formulate an approach that is fruitful for such a purpose. In their words, it is an approach that ‘emphasizes *modes of participation*, not categories of individuals’ (i.e. couch potatoes, fans, et cetera) (Ito, 2010: 36). There are two important reasons for such an approach: Firstly,

it enables us to move away from the assumption that individuals have stable media identities that are independent of context and situations. [They] craft multiple media identities that they mobilize selectively depending on context. (ibidem: 37)

The categorization of individuals is not at all productive for this analysis because fixed, stable identities and categories are not what characterizes contemporary cultural practices. Many people today seem to shift dynamically between identities and flow effortlessly from one role (video producer) to the other (fan fiction writer), as the case study of YouTube also illustrates. Antoni Roig underlines this: ‘the permeability of play in media culture makes the coexistence of different subjectivities inevitable’ (Roig, 2009: 94). What people *do* – their mode of participation – is more important than who they *are*. Secondly, Ito et al. continue:

[It] moves away from a focus on media platform (TV, computer, music, etc.) and shifts our attention to the crosscutting patterns that are evident in media content, technology design, as well as in the cultural referents that [people] mobilize in their everyday communication. (ibidem)

Just as it is not the best idea for this research to categorize people, it is equally pointless to focus solely on isolated media platforms. Content and design are targeted at a dynamic and interconnected web of media platforms, and people respond within this web in an equally dynamic and layered manner to culture and information. For example, the Hitler Downfall Parodies are a series of videos that are inspired by a motion picture, which has been appropriated and edited using personal computers and

editing software and then distributed using networking technologies like the internet and digital platforms such as YouTube.

However, for our purposes, this approach needs to be adapted. New media scholars sometimes have a tendency to downplay the technological aspect of the object of their research. In other words, downplay the code, algorithms and hardware that underpin new media phenomena (such as YouTube). Therefore Part III (the case study of YouTube) will incorporate some of the technological possibilities and restraints surrounding YouTube.



# **PART II**

***DISCOURSE ANALYSIS  
PLAY, PLAYFULNESS AND PLAYABILITY  
&  
CHANGING LANDSCAPES***

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# DEFINING PLAY, PLAYFULNESS & PLAYABILITY

*The opposite of play isn't work. It's depression. – Brian Sutton-Smith (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 198)*

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Since this thesis focuses on the concepts of playfulness and playability, it is important to investigate thoroughly the concepts of play, playfulness and playability. The first step in that process is a discourse analysis on how theorists have made sense of the concept of play. It is a given fact that many disciplines are involved in the study of play. As play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith states: 'some [academic disciplines] study the body, some study behavior, some study thinking, some study groups or individuals, some study experience, some study language – and they all use the word *play* for these quite different things' (Sutton-Smith, 1997: 6). It needs to be noted that this thesis, for reasons of scope and clarity, only focuses on how the concept of play is discussed within the field of the humanities.

The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga provided a good starting point for the study of play by stating that play presupposes culture and that true civilization cannot exist without play. To put it differently, play, according to Huizinga, has profound cultural relevance. In his own words: 'real civilization cannot exist in the absence of a certain play-element, for civilization presupposes limitation and the mastery of the self' (Huizinga, 1949: 211). However, it is impossible to understand the various dimensions of play – and related concepts such as playfulness playability – without tracking the analyses, critiques, additions and redefinitions of Huizinga's understanding of play throughout recent decades. In the end, one might even question whether a definition of 'play' is possible, or – to take it one step further – even wanted.

## DEFINING PLAY THROUGHOUT THE YEARS

*Homo Ludens* was published in Dutch in 1938 as *Homo Ludens: Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur*, only seven years before Huizinga died. It would have been hard to predict that, after 74 years, it would still be quoted worldwide and still be the object of vehement debate. It is much to Huizinga's credit that a debate has been opened up which has led to numerous important insights and has contributed greatly to the study of play. Generally speaking, it is probably Huizinga's biggest achievement that he demonstrated the importance of play in every culture and every civilization around the world. Of course, in order to stress the importance of the play element, Huizinga had to come up with a definition of 'play':

Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is “different” from “ordinary life”. (Huizinga, 1949: 28)

In addition to this rather complex definition, Huizinga famously elaborated on these ‘fixed limits of time and place’, which he described as an alternate and temporary reality, completely separated from the ordinary world. The act of playing happens in this alternate reality (for which he used numerous labels):

The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (ibidem: 10)

The concept’s definition is rather complicated considering the fact that it has played such a fundamental role in culture and has been so vital for civilization and the existence of societies. It is both vague – i.e. there are no categories, genres et cetera – and specific – there are lot of boxes to tick before something can be considered as true play. This seemingly paradoxical aspect has incited many scholars to criticize Huizinga’s definition of play – while at the same time praising him for creating a theoretical and cultural platform for the concept of play.

## **ROGER CAILLOIS**

One of the first severe critiques on *Homo Ludens* was formulated in *Man, Play and Games*, by the French philosopher Roger Caillois (originally published in French as *Les jeux et les hommes*). His criticism focuses on two aspects. Firstly, Caillois argues that Huizinga wrongfully declares play to have no material interest whatsoever – only an aim in itself. According to the French scholar, this ‘simply excludes bets and games of chance, [...] which, for better or worse, occupy an important part in the economy and daily life of various cultures’ (Caillois, 1958: 124). Games of chance often have high material interest, but are still an important form of play. This does not mean that Caillois considers these forms of play as productive, they remain utterly unproductive. Although Roger Caillois acknowledges that play can have material interest, he does not deny that play has an aim in itself, because he

unequivocally labels play as unproductive, or even as a 'pure waste (ibidem: 125).<sup>1</sup> We will later return to this discussion about play and productivity in the section 'Modern Interpretations'.

Secondly, in an attempt to overcome the vagueness of Huizinga's definition of play Caillois formulates categories. Even though he recognizes that there will always be 'a number of games and entertainments that still have imperfectly defined characteristics' (ibidem: 127), he comes up with a system to classify games. There are four forms of play: *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (mimesis) and *ilinx* (vertigo). These forms of play can thereafter be placed on a continuum, that ranges from *paidia* (free, experimental playing) to *ludus* (structured play) (see table 1).

	AGÔN (Competition)	ALEA (Chance)	MIMICRY (Simulation)	ILINX (Vertigo)
PAIDIA ↑ Tumult Agitation Immoderate laughter	Racing Wrestling } not regulated Etc. Athletics	Counting-out rhymes Heads or tails	Children's initiations Games of illusion Tag, Arms Masks, Disguises	Children "whirling" Horseback riding Swinging Waltzing
Kite-flying Solitaire Patience Crossword puzzles	Boxing, Billiards Fencing, Checkers Football, Chess	Betting Roulette	Theater Spectacles in general	Volador Traveling carnivals Skiing Mountain climbing Tightrope walking
LUDUS ↓	Contests, Sports in general	Simple, complex, and continuing lotteries*		

N.B. In each vertical column games are classified in such an order that the *paidia* element is constantly decreasing while the *ludus* element is ever increasing.

\* A simple lottery consists of the one basic drawing. In a complex lottery there are many possible combinations. A continuing lottery (e.g. Irish Sweepstakes) is one consisting of two or more stages, the winner of the first stage being granted the opportunity to participate in a second lottery. [From correspondence with Caillois. M.B.]

Table 1: The Classification of Games by Roger Caillois (1958)

Caillois' effort to formulate classifications through which we get a better idea of different forms of play is commendable, although it remains almost as problematic as Huizinga's vagueness. Forms of play and games are so dynamic in numerous ways, that it is virtually impossible to fit them in static categories like *agon* and *ilinx*. Furthermore, many forms of play overlap numerous categories. For example, how would one classify something like a World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) match using Caillois' categories? These shows (or spectacles) could arguably fit in *agon*, *mimicry* and *ilinx*. In the end, it is doubtful to what extent exactly these classifications explain what games and play are if the boundaries are so blurry. On the other hand, the distinction Caillois draws between *paidia* – or free, unstructured play –

<sup>1</sup> Even though Caillois is very straightforward in condemning play as a pure waste, he also admits 'the spirit of *agon* [and thus play, JZ] is found in other cultural phenomena' (Caillois, 1958: 132). He mentions duels, tournaments and war – are they a complete waste of time too?

and *ludus* – play structured by rules and tradition – is very useful, also for this thesis. I will return to this point later in the next section.

### **MODERN INTERPRETATIONS**

In recent years, a lot of new media scholars have also formulated their critiques and contributions to *Homo Ludens*. It is no surprise that a fifty year-old definition of something so dynamic as play needs to be debated and reformulated. For example, today, the ‘magic circle’ is the most well-known label to describe Huizinga’s play-element as always happening in an alternate reality (although Huizinga remains ambiguous about his, for he also states that culture, which is not an alternate reality, as a whole contains a certain play aspect). The notion of ‘magic circle’ has not been derived directly from Huizinga’s concept of play. Although it refers to Huizinga’s concept of an alternate, temporary reality of play, the much debated notion of the magic circle owes its popularity probably to its adoption in Salen & Zimmerman’s influential *Rules of Play* (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003). It does still mean the same: an alternate, temporary reality of play. This thesis will also use the label ‘magic circle’ to refer to this alternate reality, because it is a more established label in contemporary study of play than ‘alternate reality’.

Furthermore, the advent of mobile devices, digital games and network technologies has profoundly changed the nature of play, and its place in society. There are two areas in particular that new media scholars have targeted in recent years: the above mentioned idea of the magic circle and the impossibility of productive play.

For example, game scholar Mia Consalvo criticizes the ‘formalist, structuralist perspective’ (Consalvo, 2009: 412) of the magic circle. It is outdated in an era of digital games, cheating and modding: ‘when Huizinga wrote about the magic circle, our sense of space and place was radically different from what it is now’ (ibidem: 410). According to her, using the magic circle as a tool for analyzing play limits our understanding severely. It cannot incorporate contextual playful behavior, such as (online) discussions about the act of playing, modding and even watch trailers of digital games. All in all,

we cannot say that games are magic circles, where the ordinary rules of life do not apply. Of course they apply, but in addition to, in competition with, other rules and in relation to multiple contexts, across varying cultures, and into different groups, legal situations, and homes. (ibidem: 416).

In other words, defining play as something that happens completely outside of the real-world context, fails to address the context in which play happens and with which play intertwines.

In an effort to solve this problem, many scholars have worked towards a redefined understanding of the magic circle. Jesper Juul, for example, uses a different metaphor of play: a puzzle piece. A puzzle piece is something that can be separated from its context (thus still recognizing that play and non-play are not exactly the same), but it still exist by virtue of its context (the puzzle, or the real world) (Juul: 2008)

Redefining the magic circle in these ways acknowledges that it is part of a bigger context, but it is less useful to define and to explain the fact that there is a two-way interaction between the act of playing and the real world. 'What is needed is a theory that allows for fluid transitions between the inside and the outside of the circle' (Pargman, 2008: 237). Pargman and Jakobsson agree that the strict boundaries suggested by Huizinga are problematic. Their solution is a redefined notion of the magic circle: the weak-boundary model. The benefits of this concept over Huizinga's are clear: firstly, it still allows for different, specific frames ('person-player-character') while, secondly, at the same time allowing for fluid transitions between those frames, potentially even mixing them. '[T]he boundaries between the different frames are permeable and it is possible (but not necessary) to move between them effortlessly' (ibidem: 238). Understanding the magic circle as a weak-boundary model is relevant for this thesis, because it echoes the methodological approach discussed in the introduction. It allows us to think of dynamic identities, and fluid transitions between the boundaries of alternative realities, instead of stable and static categories.

As said before, another point of debate is the autotelic nature of Huizinga's definition of play – play only has an aim in itself. Even today, play is often described as the exact opposite of productiveness: '[play] seems to be a part of life that resists serious consideration' (Lastowka, 2009: 384). Thomas Malaby affirms this: 'the history of Western thought has constructed a distinction between productive action as a contribution to society [...] and unproductive action, or play' (Malaby, 2007: 100). In times in which play can lead to an important publication in *Nature* about AIDS<sup>2</sup>, one simply cannot continue to label play as autotelic, unproductive and a waste of time. Instead, one must acknowledge that play does 'have important consequences, not only materially, but also socially and culturally' (ibidem: 98). Especially this acknowledgement that play can have important *cultural* consequences is relevant for this thesis. If play is so crucial, it only seems logical that specific analytical concepts are formulated to fruitfully analyze these playful cultural practices.

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<sup>2</sup> The result of millions of gamers playing the game Fold It, which 'allows users to predict the shape of a protein and map it, using a game-like structure. The better the model, the more points you get' (Huffington Post, 2011).

## **No DEFINITION?**

Having covered the attempts to define, discuss and reformulate the concept of play, one question lingers. Is it possible to define properly concepts like 'play'? Considering the seemingly endless debates, one is tempted to think it is, indeed, impossible to come up with a conclusive definition. The vagueness of Huizinga's perception of play does not make it much easier for us to explain to someone exactly the essential features of play. Caillois' classifications are useful, but encounter a different problem: static classifications that try to classify a highly dynamic concept are at risk of becoming outdated quite fast. This is even true for Huizinga's definition as well, as the modern discussions concerning the magic circle and productive play illustrate.

In this case, philosophy may be of help. For it is the Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, working primarily in the philosophy of mathematics, logic and language, who has not so much solved this fundamental issue of defining meaning, but rather accepted the inevitable vagueness and moved on. In his view, it is impossible to define words such as 'play', or, in Wittgenstein's own example, 'game', because their meanings are subject to continual change. Wittgenstein compares meanings of words with members of a family: I may still share my last name and certain features with other members of my family but there are as many differences as there are similarities: 'we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail' (Wittgenstein, 1953:32). In other words, because of the similarities – whether in general or in detail – we recognize play just like we recognize different members of the same family, but because there is nothing 'common to all' (ibidem: 31), we struggle to verbalize a conclusive definition: 'we do not know the boundaries because none have been drawn' (ibidem: 33).

Although, Wittgenstein's work is mainly focused on the concept of a game, the same problem seems to arise with the concept of play, as is shown in the previous sections. Wittgenstein's line of thinking might thus still be of great use. Within the science of logic it is possible to come to conclusive definitions, but not within language: old meanings die and new meanings are added due to continually changing contexts.

Now, the following question seems to be the most logical: is it a problem not to come to a conclusive definition of play? Should we not accept the solution offered by Wittgenstein? He dismisses the predictable criticism that a general definition is better than recognizing similarities, for 'any general definition can be misunderstood too' (ibidem: 34). Wittgenstein elaborates on whether a 'blurred concept' is useful:

“But is a blurred concept a concept at all?” Is an indistinct photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn't the indistinct one often exactly what we need? (ibidem)

In other words, the urge to come to a conclusive definition of 'play' runs the risk to be pseudo- scientific and, above that, runs the risk to be unworkable. Therefore, Wittgenstein's indistinct concept may be the solution. Analyzing the struggles with defining 'play', an indistinct understanding seems to be exactly what is needed for this thesis, because it reflects the same kind of flexibility that characterizes the concept of play,

This thus leads to the following definition of play I will use throughout this thesis. Abandoning the paradoxical opposition between vagueness and specificity in Huizinga's definition, as well as the over-classification in Caillois' definition, let us turn to new media scholar and games scholar Christopher Moore of Deakin University, Australia, for a fruitful, productive (and indistinct!) definition of play, which will be used throughout this thesis:

*Play is a processual mode of experience, a cultural creativity that recontextualizes the frames and boundaries of play as part of an ongoing, always changing expression. (Moore, 2011: 384)*

This understanding of play arises from Moore's critique of the magic circle. This is what he means with 'processual mode of experience'. Play is an ongoing process of experience, which is not limited to a magic circle. Furthermore, it acknowledges that play is an act of cultural creativity. It also underlines its fluid and ever-changing nature, and defining it as a mode of experience resembles the weak-boundary model – a mode of experience is a somewhat different state of mind, but embedded within the real world and open to a two-way interaction between that real world and the state of mind.

In the next section I will explain why this understanding of play, combined with the analytical concepts of playfulness and playability, may lead to new understandings about cultural phenomena.

## **PLAYFULNESS AND PLAYABILITY**

Against the backdrop of the definition of 'play' used for this thesis, it is still vital to formulate analytical concepts that are operational for a playful analysis of contemporary cultural practices.

I will deploy two concepts here to cover both the playful 'mode of expression' within individuals, as well as their two-way relationship with technology and media. The first analytical concept, playfulness, covers the individual playful mode of expressions (or of a group of people). Playfulness as



an analytical concept is widely used within the field of human-computer interaction, where it 'refers to an individual's tendency to interact spontaneously with a computer' (Hackbarth et al., 2003: 222). More generally, 'it can be regarded as an attitude that promotes playability' (Kücklich, 2004: 23).

This directly leads to my second analytical concept, playability. According to Järvinen et al., it 'refers [...] to the guidelines regarding how to implement the necessary elements (such as rules) to give birth to a desired sort of play' (Järvinen et al., 2002: 17). This is a relatively technology-centered definition from a perspective of play design. I agree with Kücklich that it needs to be adapted in order to cover the interaction with individuals or groups of individuals:

Järvinen et al. stress the possibilities of using the term 'playability' in the production of media, while I would put equal emphasis on consumption. [...] I regard playability also as a function of the player's attitude and the specific features of the game. (Kücklich, 2004: 22)

The difference between Järvinen's playability and Kücklich's, lies in the role of the user. The way Järvinen defines playability (guidelines) relates heavily to game design: implementing which elements in what way results in what kind of gameplay. Kücklich broadens the definition to the user and its attitude (and thus also relating it to playfulness). In other words, Kücklich's definition of playability incorporates the relationship between the guidelines underpinning specific kinds of play and how they relate to the ways users engage with them. Thus, playability and playfulness are related to each other. Playfulness focuses on the attitude, state of mind, or mode expressions of the individual, while playability deals with the interaction between technology, design and the individual.

How do these concepts relate to the earlier discussion about play? While it is important to have a thorough understanding of the importance of the concept of play and how it is defined within the humanities throughout the years, the concept of play itself needs additional analytical tools. Analyzing YouTube, for example, using only the concept of play, would be difficult. Playability and playfulness are concepts that scholars can use to operationalize a theoretical framework inspired by play. It allows them to fruitfully analyze objects – that is what they can add.

Building upon earlier research into the concept of play and by highlighting the importance of the concept of play I have tried to outline the relevance of the analytical concepts of playfulness and playability. In the next section, I will further illustrate why this thesis is important *now* and how this thesis relates to existing discourses and debates about cultural practices and media.

# CHANGING LANDSCAPES – MEDIA, PLAY & CULTURAL PRACTICES

*The Internet is the first thing humanity has built that humanity doesn't understand; the largest experiment in anarchy that we have ever had. – Eric Schmidt (CBS Interactive, 1997)*

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Besides the importance of the concept of play, as discussed in the previous chapter, this thesis is relevant for another reason. Throughout the years, scholars have always come up with new insights and created new concepts, analytical tools and frameworks to understand changes in media and cultural practices. This thesis is rooted in that tradition, and embedded in existing discourses surrounding new media and cultural practices. In this chapter, I will outline and discuss a few of these theoretical frameworks scholars have developed and relate them to the impetus of a theoretical framework formulated in this thesis. Furthermore, this chapter will argue that today's media provoke play in a more explicit way than they did before,

## THE ADVENT OF THE INTERNET

There are arguably two technologies that, for the past two decades, have played a major role in the formation and transformation of our current media ecology. Both of these technologies have been fueled by the constantly increased computational power – and the means to relate that power to increasingly smaller surfaces.

The first is the rise of mobile devices, in particular smartphones, which has significantly increased over the last decade (for example, in 2011 alone 472 million smartphones were sold (Gartner, 2012)). These devices have provided us with numerous possibilities for participating in cultural practices, all in the palm of our hands.

The second is the proliferation of network technologies that has characterized the 90's (see for example sociologist Manuel Castells' *The Rise of the Network Society*, 1996). In this period, networks both digital and physical became globally interconnected, resulting in a 'pervasive network' (Russel, 2008: 43). Ito concludes: 'young people [...] today are growing up in a media ecology where digital and networked media are playing an increasingly central role' (Ito, 2010: 30).

The most famous and influential examples of such a pervasive network are the Internet (adopted worldwide throughout the 80's and 90's) and the World Wide Web (1991).<sup>3</sup> The ubiquitous

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<sup>3</sup> Both the internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) can be described as systems that have technology (network cables and servers for example) and protocol (TCP/IP being one of the most important protocols) at their core. The internet can be seen

presence of the internet in developed countries is acknowledged in different studies. For example, the Pew Internet & American Life Project concludes that '94 percent of all American teenagers – which it defines as twelve- to seventeen-year-olds – now use the internet, 89 percent have Internet access in the home, and 66 percent have broadband Internet access in the home' (Lenhart et al., 2008). The Netherlands is currently the country with the highest adoption of "high broadband" (over 5mbps) in the world: high broadband is currently available in 68% of the Dutch households (Belson, 2011: 5).

Does this continuous and strong growth of the internet also lead to a decline in the amount of time spent watching television? Media scholar Clay Shirky obviously thinks so:

But now, for the first time in the history of television, some cohorts of young people are watching TV less than their elders. [...] Young populations with access to fast, interactive media are shifting their behavior away from media that presupposes pure consumption. (Shirky, 2010: 11)

Such a statement is problematic. It cannot be denied that young people are changing their behavior, but the implication that television is rapidly declining seems a little premature. Cultural anthropologist Mizuko Ito, for example, points out that 'while new media have increased in popularity, they have not [...] displaced other types of media. [...] Youth engage[s] with more than one type of media at the same time (Ito, 2010: 33).

That is undoubtedly true, but there is another factor. The advent of the internet and, more recently, mobile devices with internet access (such as smartphones and tablets) have led to a transformation in the act of watching television itself. Although Shirky seems to presuppose that watching television is a static practice, this is not the case. Consider, for example, Ex Machina's (a Dutch games and software developer) *PlayToTv* (see figure 2), a platform that allows 'consumers to play along with their favorite TV-programs [...] while competing against friends and other people sharing the experience' (Ex Machina, 2011). Would it not be more fair to say that watching television is not so much declining as it is transforming? If so, it proves to be relevant to formulate new analytical tools to be able to fruitfully analyze transforming cultural practices. And after all, reasoning analogously, we still listen to music and read books, only the act of doing has undergone a transformation.

As this short discussion of the advent of the Internet illustrates, media studies tries to make sense out of one of the most dynamic, fast changing fields out there. It is for this reason media scholars need to create new analytical tools now and then – as this thesis also does –, for they too need to be

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as a global system of interconnected computers ('a network of networks') while the WWW is a system of interconnected documents (such as web pages) within the internet.

dynamic and able to adapt to new trends, phenomena and cultural artifacts. This observation underlines the purpose of this thesis.

The next section will demonstrate how a few important scholars have tried to come up with new ways of thinking to be able to analyze these dynamic cultural practices.



Figure 2: PlayToTV enables users to engage with television shows on various platforms, in various ways (Ex Machina, 2011)

## SEARCHING FOR WORDS

Most scholars agree that the rise of new media and network technologies has led to increasingly and fundamentally different cultural practices, relating to many aspects of culture, like knowledge, music or art. If we are to believe the Dutch philosopher Jos de Mul, these transformations are intertwined with the way we, as a species, interact with the world around us, the people in it and, ultimately, ourselves: 'changes in [...] mediating structures reflect changes in the relationship between us and our world, in our social relationships, and in our self-conception' (De Mul, 2005: 251). While this is undoubtedly true (once you are entangled in the world of Facebook, you understand why), it is important not to exaggerate the impact of new media and technology. As Osgerby states, echoing authors like Jenkins and Bolter and Grusin (Jenkins, 2006: 13; Bolter, Grusin, 2000):

It is possible to exaggerate the social and cultural impact of the 'new' media. New technologies have supplemented rather than replaced 'old' media forms and, instead of heralding a quantum shift into an era of innovative social practices and cultural identities, new media technologies have been integrated within existing cultural contexts and relationships. In these terms, rather than laying the basis for a qualitatively unique 'digital' [...] culture, emergent media forms and

technologies have been shaped by [...] people and incorporated into existing cultural relationships and everyday lives. (Osgerby, 2004: 215)

In short, while there may not (and probably never will) be a qualitatively unique new culture, the mere incorporation of new media and technology into existing culture has changed it fundamentally. As Russel states, it is 'about adding a new set of communicative and expressive modes to the mix' (Russel, 2008: 72). This section seeks to illustrate, by giving a few examples, that these new sets of communicative and expressive modes have inspired numerous scholars to formulate new theoretical frameworks and analytical concepts.

For example, lawyer and political activist Lawrence Lessig wrote several books about what he terms read-write culture (RW culture) – a culture where 'ordinary citizens "read" their culture by listening to it or by reading representations of it [...]. This reading, however, is not enough. Instead, [people] add to the culture they read by creating and re-creating the culture around them' (Lessig, 2008: 28). For Lessig, read-write culture is opposed to read-only (RO culture) culture, 'a culture less practiced in performance, or amateur creativity, and more comfortable (think: couch), with simple consumption' (ibidem). It is important to understand that it is highly unlikely that there has been an absolute RO culture. The same goes for RW culture. Lessig argues, however, that RW culture is gaining more and more importance over the last decade, thanks to new media and technology, which have 'democratized almost every form of writing'<sup>4</sup> (ibidem: 107). Examples Lessig mentions include video editing software, the digitization of music and YouTube (which will be elaborately discussed in this thesis). According to Lessig, it is important to stimulate RW culture, or at least a hybrid between RW and RO culture, for two main reasons. Firstly, writing is 'a critical expression of creative freedom that [...] no free society should restrict' (ibidem: 56). Secondly, writing is educational, and Lessig cites Jenkins: 'enacting, reciting, and appropriating elements from preexisting stories is a valuable and organic part of the process by which children develop cultural literacy' (Jenkins, 2006, cited in Lessig, 2008: 81).

Lessig analyzes new media, technology and RW culture from a legal perspective, arguing that the law should stimulate practices like amateur production and remixing, rather than restrict it. Henry Jenkins uses a more cultural studies-inspired approach in analyzing these new forms of cultural production, sharing and consumption, which he brings together under the concept of participatory culture.

Jenkins has described participatory culture, which celebrates grassroots and bottom-up creativity, in multiple books and articles, among which *Convergence Culture* is the most well-known and most cited. Participatory culture, according to Jenkins,

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<sup>4</sup> And with "writing", Lessig does not only mean the literal act of writing, but also writing as producing culture and knowledge.

is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another. (Jenkins, 2006a: 3)

The increasing participatory part of today's culture roughly correlates with Lessig's description of the return of a read-write culture. While the latter uses a cultural legal approach, Jenkins is, above all, interested in the grassroots production (in particular fan production) and its struggle with top-down, corporate production. This includes clashes between Harry Potter fan fiction writers and J.K. Rowling and the impact of new media tools like Photoshop on the relationship between popular culture and politics (Jenkins, 2006b).

These conflicts between grassroots and top-down efforts relate to questions of ownership, control and, eventually, power. Some scholars have described the changing nature of contemporary culture from a perspective of power. Yochai Benkler, a colleague of Lessig, uses a political economy framework to describe what he calls a 'networked information society' (Benkler, 2006). According to Benkler, there are two shifts in modern economies that fuel the rising of this networked information society: 'the first move [...] is to an economy centered on information, [...] and cultural [...] production, and manipulations of symbols' (ibidem: 3). Benkler affirms earlier observations made in this thesis about the increase of cultural and informational production, as well as the manipulation of those two (see again figure 2). The second shift is technological: 'the move to a communications environment built on cheap processors with high computation capabilities, interconnected in a pervasive network' (ibidem). This second shift, which also corroborates with three defining technologies mentioned earlier<sup>5</sup>, is what allows for much more decentralized production of culture and information, and in turn decentralized individual actions and identities. Following this logic, Benkler describes a struggle of power and control between nonmarket production<sup>6</sup> and market production, decentralized individual power and centralized, corporate control.

In this section I have demonstrated that the transformations and transitions in the 21st century's cultural practices, although they do not completely break with the "old" ways, are significant and relevant enough for numerous scholars to formulate theoretical frameworks and new analytical concepts. Of

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<sup>5</sup> Network technologies, mobile devices and increased computational power, see also page 9 (OR X)

<sup>6</sup> In this light, one should also consider Maurizio Lazzarato's concept immaterial labor. This kind of labor requires a different skillset (geared more towards computer control and cybernetics), and can be defined as 'the activity that produces the 'cultural content' of the commodity (Lazzarato, 1996).

course, Lessig, Jenkins and Benkler are not the only ones to analyze this (see also, for a more critical discourse, Terranova, 2004). Comparing these three thinkers does, however, highlight the complexity of these changes. They have inspired a variety of points of view and frameworks, which all lead to different results, even though they largely focus on the same phenomena

This short meta-analysis of recent research into changing cultural practices reveals the diverging points of view and results. This should stimulate us to investigate cultural practices from yet another perspective: that of playfulness and playability, for it is the aspect of play in cultural practices that needs further attention.

To underline this statement I will examine, in the next section, the intrinsic playful quality in today's dominant media and technologies.

## **AN ERA OF PLAY – AFFORDANCE AND PLAYFUL NEW MEDIA**

As is described in the previous section, cultural practices are subject to a lot of changes, due to a mix of technological innovation, cultural evolution and economic prosperity. Scholars, as I have explained, try to analyze and think about these changes in meaningful ways, and are often required to define new analytical concepts to come to a richer understanding of the objects of their study. In this thesis it will be argued that today's cultural practices may require scholars to take into account the concepts of playfulness and playability.

Arguing that there is a need to take play into consideration within analytical concepts, implies that today's technology and media intrinsically afford play, and, moreover, that mankind has a playful nature. I will argue that both these implications are true, but before doing so, it is vital to explore the concept of affordance in relation to today's cultural practices.

### ***THE PROBLEM WITH AFFORDANCE***

Concerning the relationship between affordance and cultural practices, it is important to mention Norman's concept of affordance (although Norman borrowed it from Gibson and redefined the term) (Gibson, 1977). Originally coined within the discourse of human-computer interaction, Norman's affordance refers to the likely actions that are possible, when an actor is confronted with an object. For example, when you are confronted with a chair, it is likely for you to sit on it because you know this is where a chair is made for, but it is also possible (although not recommended) to throw it at somebody's face. This is a crucial aspect of affordance: while Norman's definition *suggests* likely actions, this does not mean that it *prescribes* a set number of actions (Norman, 1988).



Looking at the technologies that have defined the last decades – network technologies (such as the internet) and mobile devices – it might even be too far-fetched to ‘suggest’ likely actions. Suggesting likely actions for an object like a table is easier, for a table is already limited by its physical characteristics: weight, size, and shape. Suggesting likely actions for an object like the Internet is somewhat harder. What exactly does it afford? Literature shows that it is hard to point to specific affordances. Rather, general uses are proposed: ‘pervasive networks have lowered the threshold for producing, publishing, and disseminating knowledge and culture’ (Russel, 2008: 43), ‘digital technologies seem to stimulate “playful goals” or “the play element in culture”’ (Raessens, 2006: 53), ‘digital technologies opened new avenues for the accumulation, appropriation and rearticulation of media content [...]. The wide availability of new technology also facilitated a wave of DIY subcultural creativity’ (Osgerby, 2004: 213).

It seems more fruitful to abandon Norman’s definition of affordance and return to its original definition by psychologist James Gibson. Gibson’s notion of affordance did not suggest likely uses, but rather all possibilities of use, as long as it was within the range of the actor’s capabilities. Therefore, Gibson’s understanding of affordance is not only more productive with respect to complex, networked objects like the internet, but it also suits play better, for play is all about experimenting with possibilities without suggestions.

### ***PLAYFUL MEDIA, OR PLAYFUL MANKIND?***

Do today’s new media somehow invite or provoke play? There are some reasons to believe this is indeed the case. Firstly, the rise of mobile devices has placed new media and the means of playful cultural practices into the palm of our hand. In other words, ‘we are now enclosed in the media sphere almost constantly’ (Kückland, 2004: 32). This statement fits our definition of play as a processual mode of experience. Play is a process, not a single event. This processuality is strengthened by the fact that we are almost constantly enclosed within a media sphere. Media cannot provoke this processual mode of experience if they are limited to strict boundaries of space and time. And with today’s new media, that seems to be less the case than – for example – with television.

Secondly, the relationship between freedom and rules (a paradoxical relationship central in many forms of play) is changing rapidly and radically due to the rise of networked technologies and increased computational power. There is in many ways more freedom: the tools for cultural production are much more accessible for a very large amount of people and allow for sharing with the same amount of people. In other words; the boundaries for participation have lowered and the possibilities for creativity have risen. This fuels a kind of spontaneous and experimental play that resembles Caillois’



notion of *paidia*, or unstructured play. At the same time, there are more rules, both explicit (laws) and implicit (social constructs). The interaction between these two is a characteristic of play, and is more explicitly present within contemporary cultural practices. This is not to say that the whole of new media and cultural practices is playful, but that it invites play in a more explicit manner than it did before.

Finally, network technologies and mobile devices allow for cultural practices with rapidly increasing possibilities for social interaction. As Järvinen et al. states: 'the enjoyment and pleasure rises from interacting not only with the product [...], but also with other users and the meanings and interpretations that each user/player invests into the product' (Järvinen et al., 2002: 15).

So it seems that the advance in mobile technology and pervasive networks indeed afford more playful cultural practices. An important, yet complicated question that relates to that observation, lingers: are we, as a species, inherently playful (regardless of the cultural, economic and technological context)? Or, is it *because* of the context in which we live that we act (or do not act) in a playful manner? For matters of scope and space, this thesis cannot pretend to formulate a detailed and thorough answer to this question, because it, in principle, involves the entire history of the *homo sapiens* as a species. However, it is possible to scratch the surface of this issue, and what it reveals seems to point in the direction of an inherently playful species. Huizinga for example implies that play is universal and timeless: 'law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science. All are rooted in the primeval soil of play' (Huizinga, 1949: 5). Lessig more explicitly hints that we might be playful by nature: 'we are seeing the return of something we were before' (Lessig, 2008: 18).

There is something peculiar about Lessig's statement that we are seeing the return of something we were before. It suggests that we, or mankind, possesses a certain spontaneous creativity ('the nature of creativity' (ibidem: 19)). But it also implies that this creativity had disappeared or had been suppressed, for some time. Multiple scholars and thinkers seem to agree with this implication. Jos de Mul states, as mentioned before, that, currently, there is a 'global ludification of culture' (De Mul, 2010), but that this is far from new and unique. According to De Mul, our history shows that our natural tendency towards play is alternately suppressed and nourished. For example, De Mul explains that the Age of Enlightenment was characterized by seriousness, whereas the following Romantic Period foregrounded play, which then again was suppressed during the Industrial Revolution and the two World Wars (ibidem).

If one were to follow De Mul's argument that our tendency towards play is at turns nourished and smothered, one has to conclude that the current ludification of culture is the result of the above mentioned developments, which fuel a natural drive for play within mankind, that flourishes or falters according to its context. When one zooms in at the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, one is able to see this observation in practice. Bearing De Mul's findings in mind, the statement that popular media, particularly

television, have been responsible for 'the stifling of childhood imagination and initiative' (Ito, 2010: 246), seems to be based on a rather narrow view. Childhood imagination and initiative were not stifled, but limited to the anonymity of bedrooms and houses. Playful practices such as scrapbooking, home-taping, re-recording, mixing, underground comics and video activism had already started, yet it was not until the specific (above mentioned) technological advances and cultural changes (more welfare and free time (Shirky, 2010: 4)) that these practices have been nourished and have increased rapidly with respect to amount, visibility and influence.

In short, one can conclude that play is a natural aspect of mankind, and therefore not unique to today's world. However, it *is* today's technological and cultural context that fuels that natural playfulness. New media facilitate play as part of an ongoing expression and enable a more complex and social feedback system. It should be clear that, among other things, new media do afford (in Gibson's sense of the word) play in a different, more explicit way, which was before less outspoken and more implicit. As new media scholar Lev Manovich puts it: 'what before was ephemeral, transient, unmappable, and invisible, become permanent, mappable and viewable' (Manovich, 2008: 38). In turn, this invites scholars to adopt analytical concepts that fit this transformation.

## **CONCLUSION**

Through this analysis of existing debates, literature and changing cultural landscapes, I outlined the relevance for this thesis. Firstly, by underlining the importance of the concept of play for our cultural practices and by discussing how the concept has been defined and reformulated throughout the years. Secondly, by embedding this thesis in an existing tradition of media scholars who formulate, refine and shape analytical concepts to stay in touch with dynamic technology, media and cultural practices. Finally, the analytical concepts of playfulness and playability were discussed in detail. In the next part, building on the foundation in this part, the analytical concepts will be used as tools to discuss several cultural practices on YouTube.

# **PART III**

***CASE STUDY***

***YOUTUBE***

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# RISE OF A GIANT – YOUTUBE’S HISTORY

*This is the birth of a new clip culture where the audience is in control more than ever. – Chad Hurley (Financial Times, 2006)*

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Part III of this thesis is a practical elaboration of the theory: using the analytical concepts playfulness and playability, formulated in Part II, cultural practices on YouTube (currently owned by Google) will be analyzed. The key question to be examined is whether using such analytical concepts will result in a better understanding of YouTube’s cultural practices, and, secondly, dependent on the results of the YouTube analysis, it will be examined whether a theoretical perspective of playfulness and playability is, in general, a fruitful perspective for the analysis of new media phenomena.

So why YouTube? According to Henry Jenkins, YouTube is the ‘epicenter of today’s participatory culture’ (Jenkins, 2009: 110). Throughout this part, it will become clear that YouTube also is a prime example of a website that invites playfulness and, through its design, has a high degree of playability. Using then these concepts of playfulness and playability to analyze cultural practices on YouTube, as the case study will argue, might lead to a better understanding of these cultural practices.

That YouTube is a so-called epicenter is reflected in a number of ways. The video sharing website is, for example, the number two website in the world in terms of monthly unique visitors. Around 800.000.000 unique visitors visit YouTube every month, trailing just behind Facebook (nearly 900.000.000) but dwarfing sites like Wikipedia (410.000.000) (Google Ad Planner, 2011). YouTube is also present on many, many other websites, facilitated by the simplicity of sharing a YouTube clip. According to web information company Alexa, over 3.2 million sites link to YouTube (Alexa, 2012). But there is more. Every minute, around 48 hours of material is uploaded. Over 3 billion videos are watched – daily. Furthermore, nearly 17 million people have linked their YouTube-account to another social service. Finally - and this is of particular importance to this thesis – 100 million people perform a so-called ‘social action’: this includes marking something as fun (pressing the thumbs up button), sharing a video or posting a (video) comment (YouTube, 2012). Glancing over these numbers, it seems hard to disagree with Jenkins’ observation. If a theoretical framework of playability and playfulness might provide new insights, YouTube therefore seems the ideal case study.

How did this epicenter of participatory culture come into being? It is important to investigate some of the choices that were made during the first years, as well as the economic, cultural and technological context in which YouTube’s founding was imbedded. The next section will provide a brief overview of YouTube lifespan.

## FROM GARAGE TO GURU – A BRIEF HISTORY OF YOUTUBE

True inspiration seems romanticized. Often, breakthroughs are portrayed as a 'Eureka!' moment, but in practice, most breakthroughs are a result of sheer hard work or dumb luck. Facebook was not the result of some brilliant insight, but the result of a college student's frustration, jealousy and tipsiness (Mezrich, 2009). The same goes for YouTube, which is a result of hard work, trial-and-error and luck.

Before its official foundation in February 2005, founders Chad Hurley, Steve Chen and Jawed Karim only were acquainted with one another because they all were employed by another well-known company: PayPal. Chen was a computer science drop-out, Karim had not graduated yet and Hurley was fresh out of college, graduated as a graphics designer. It is not quite clear when the idea behind YouTube came into being, but the story goes that the first seeds for YouTube were planted. when Chad and Steve had trouble sharing online some video they had been shooting at a dinner party. It took quite some time, however, before the site as we know it today, emerged. The first version was designed as a video version of rating site HotOrNot.com (which is still in existence today), but the three founders thought its use was too narrow. They overhauled the site to a platform where people could share videos for online auctions, but quickly realized people were using it to upload all kinds of videos. YouTube's initial growth is largely due to MySpace's dominance during those years; thousands of people linked to the new video sharing site from their MySpace page. Investors started pouring millions of dollars in YouTube, following an early viral ad by Nike (featuring soccer star player Ronaldinho) and the enormous success of Saturday Night Live's "Lazy Sunday" sketch, which was posted on video shortly after airing on NBC (Ars Technica, 2008). The most influential moment in the company's short history was its acquirement by Google for 1.65 billion in stock, on November 13 2006. Google perfected YouTube's business model by introducing advertising, copyright protection systems and partnerships with Big Media companies, resulting in the video sharing site we still visit by the millions today. (Cloud, 2006; Fairfax Digital, 2006; YouTube, 2012.)

Even though it is a charming story, it is only part of YouTube's success. YouTube was also, to follow a cliché, the right service at the right time. The cultural and technological context in which Chad, Steve and Jawed operated proved to be perfect to fuel YouTube's success. For example, 'the advent of 3G cell phones equipped with photo and video cameras occurred almost simultaneously with the rise of YouTube' (Simons, 2011: 95). But there is more. During the first years of the millennium, broadband was starting to become ubiquitous in many developed countries. Without this transition, YouTube would never have succeeded: 'moving images, even in streamed form, required considerable connection speed, which only broadband could give' (Snickars, 2009: 301-302). Related to this is the drop in costs for companies for purchasing bandwidth. Additionally, the rise of YouTube coincided with the now widely

known application; Adobe's Flash Player. This finally made video playback simple for users. Other established players (such as RealPlayer and QuickTime) often required people to download plug-ins or separate software packages, which was rather tiresome for casual users. Flash, on the other hand, was pre-installed on most computers, and used a very user-friendly way of upgrading. Choosing Flash as the dominant video player for YouTube was a wise decision, as 'users rarely had any problems with incompatible video-encoding formats' (ibidem: 302).

Finally, the cultural context in which YouTube emerged nurtured its success as well. In short, people were ready for YouTube. While some might argue that YouTube "caused" participatory culture, it can also be argued that it is in fact the other way around: 'the emergence of participatory cultures of all kinds over the past several decades paved the way for the early embrace, quick adoption, and diverse use of such platforms' (Jenkins, 2009: 109). Henry Jenkins elaborates:

Many groups were ready for something like YouTube; they already had communities of practice that supported the production of DIY media, already evolved video genres and built social networks through which such videos could flow'. (ibidem: 110)

YouTube's enormous success, in short, is the result of many factors, woven together by luck, hard work, and the right economic and cultural context. For a fruitful analysis it is important to understand the complexity of YouTube's history because the way the site works today is largely embedded in contexts and decisions made in its founding years.

In the next chapter, the cultural practices of YouTube will be analyzed using the analytical concepts of playfulness and playability.

# THE CULTURAL PRACTICES OF YOUTUBE

*When I made these rant scenes I never intended for them to be used for stupid dumbass parodies. – Hitler Downfall Parody video (YouTube, 2009)*

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In the previous chapter, it has become clear that YouTube is a fruitful case study because it is, as impressive numbers prove, the epicenter of participatory culture. But there is more. It was argued in Part II that new media afford play more explicitly than many earlier media forms. YouTube is a strong illustration of that argument. Antoni Roig acknowledges this: he thinks YouTube transforms ‘the established “spectatorship” relation with audiovisual products to a more interactive engagement with media’. According to Roig, YouTube ‘reflects the playfulness present in new media practices’ (Roig, 2009: 95). If YouTube indeed reflects a certain degree of play afforded by new media, it seems to justify itself as a case study for an analysis using the analytical concepts playfulness and playability. What can we learn by using these concepts?

The scope of this thesis does not allow for an analysis of YouTube as a whole – with an archive consisting of thousands and thousands of videos, it might be impossible altogether. Instead, YouTube is analyzed from two different perspectives: ‘playing on YouTube’ and ‘playing with YouTube’. The former perspective focuses on the way YouTube is used as a platform to playfully engage with cultural practices, through an analysis of the persistent and popular memetic ‘Hitler’s downfall parody’ videos. The latter focuses on the ways users playfully approach official YouTube features in a surprising manner, through an analysis of the ‘Caption Fail’ videos. For both perspectives, the analytical concepts playfulness and playability will be deployed.

Firstly, however, the heavily debated relationship between so-called amateurs and professionals on YouTube will be discussed. As the following section will try to argue, a perspective of play might shed a different light on the dichotomy between amateurs and professionals..

## **“AMATEURS” VERSUS “PROFESSIONALS”**

Since the advent of the so-called Web 2.0, one of the most heavily debated topics is the changing relationship between amateurs and professionals. The once clear and relatively distinct boundaries between amateurs and professionals have become blurred, complex and increasingly problematic. One thing is for certain: the rise of YouTube has not made this debate any easier. It has made it all the more complex: ‘YouTube is disruptive not only because it unsettles the producer-consumer divide, but also

because it is the site of dynamic and emergent relations between market and non-market, social and economic activity' (Burgess, 2009a: 90). In this section, however, will be argued that, analyzing the producer-consumer divide on the basis of playfulness and playability, uncovers the once obvious professional-amateur dichotomy as irrelevant and unfruitful.

This statement needs further explanation. Obviously, the content that is uploaded to YouTube is deeply heterogeneous. Surfing YouTube for one day, clicking through related videos, recommended videos and random clips, one encounters a wide range of videos. In other words, YouTube's content is contributed by 'a range of professional, semi-professional, amateur, and pro-amateur participants who produce content that is an uncomfortable fit with the available categories of either "traditional" media content or the vernacular forms generally associated with the concept of 'amateur' content' (Burgess, 2009b: 55). The key question here is: why is this produced content on YouTube an uncomfortable fit with previously obvious categories?



**Figure 3: Lonelygirl15 in her first YouTube video (YouTube, 2006).**

A possible answer to that question is twofold. Part of the answer lies in the specific ideas of "professional" and "amateur" aesthetics we associate with video. YouTube exposes the weaknesses of those associations. Within YouTube, aesthetics often have little to do with professionalism. This was first exposed by a female blogger called lonelygirl15, in the summer of 2006. She posted her first vlog (which is short for video log) in on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June 2006<sup>7</sup>, in which she talks casually about buying a webcam and other casual subjects. It aesthetically resembles everything we associate with "amateur" content (see figure 3) – cheap equipment, no professional make-up, a living room setting, lack of sophisticated editing, spontaneous behavior. In September 2006, however, was revealed that lonelygirl15 was not the result of a lonely female amateur but of the professional and clever filmmakers

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<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that YouTube is increasingly becoming a sort of cultural archive, since every video is stored forever (although it remains subject to market logic and commercial interest). This has caused scholars and bloggers to think of YouTube as an 'accidental archive' (Burgess, 2009b: 87). It would seem that lonelygirl15's videos are an important artefact within that archive.



Mesh Flinders, Miles Beckett and attorney Greg Goodfried (SiliconValleyWatcher, 2006). Thousands of viewers were upset by the news – they were fooled by their own bias that a cheap looking video had to be the work of amateurs. It was not, and that illustrates how thinking in the dichotomy of professional and amateur about YouTube can be misleading.

The second part of the answer involves money. Whenever money is being made with something, we tend to associate that with professionalism. On YouTube, however, professionalism is not a necessary condition for making money. For example, through their Partner Program, users (and YouTube) can make money by running advertisements with their channels and videos. Some make tens of thousands of dollars this way, most only a few hundred. It would seem somewhat strange to label them as professionals from the moment their videos start generating some money.

All in all, one might conclude that using the classifications ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’ might prove unproductive, or even misleading. Innovation and media scholars Jean Burgess and Joshua Green conclude:

It is not helpful to draw sharp distinctions between professional and amateur production, or between commercial and community practices. These distinctions are based in industrial logics more at home in the context of broadband media rather than an understanding of how people use media in their everyday lives, or a knowledge of how YouTube actually works as a cultural system. (Burgess, 2009b: 57.)

According to Burgess and Green, these distinctions belong the domain of older media – mainly broadcast media – and are inadequate to be transferred to the domain of a medium such as YouTube.

The ideas proposed in this thesis may lead to a better understanding of how YouTube works as a cultural system. For example: if we think of YouTube as a platform that provides a weak-boundary alternate reality promoting playfulness and playability, in which users are not professionals or amateurs, but all equal ‘cultural participants’ (ibidem), changing roles between spectator, producer and consumer, we would understand something like the lonelygirl15 case in a fundamentally different way. It is no longer a case of professionals fooling amateurs, but cultural participants equally playing with each other. Lonelygirl15’s producers play with aesthetic conventions of so-called amateurism – a form of play Caillois labeled *mimicry* - and certain unwritten rules of a vlog, while spectators quite swiftly formed groups that debated lonelygirl15’s identity and started to look for clues – ultimately trying to “bust” her. Part of the disappointment resulted not only from the fact that lonelygirl15 was fake, but also because this playful tug-of-war had ended. Ultimately, a perspective of play reveals the case of lonelygirl15 not

as a struggle between professionals and amateurs, but as unstructured play by equal cultural participants – *paidea*, as Caillois would say.

YouTube as a platform affords, through its design, user-interface, features and technology, certain rules and boundaries, and spontaneous, unstructured play. In the next section, we will look at another example of how the use of playfulness and playability can lead to a new understanding of a certain cultural phenomenon – in this case, the ‘Hitler Downfall’ parody videos.

## PLAYING ON YOUTUBE – HITLER’S DOWNFALL PARODY

Oliver Hirschbiegel is the director of the movie *Der Untergang* (*Downfall*), which tells the story of Adolf Hitler’s (starring Bruno Ganz) last days in his Berlin bunker (*Downfall*, 2004). This movie about the downfall of one of Europe’s biggest tyrants in history, has won sixteen awards all over the world and an Oscar nomination. There is a good chance, however, that a random teenager will associate Hitler’s downfall not with Hirschbiegel’s grim movie but with a hilarious YouTube clip.



**Figure 4: Hitler reacts furiously to the suggestion that he might buy a Wii, since he is banned from Xbox Live (YouTube, 2007)**

Hirschbiegel might not have won an Oscar, but his film did inspire one of the most well-known and persistent memetic videos (a video meme) on YouTube. A memetic video should not be confused with the more often used notion of a viral video. A viral video ‘spreads to the masses via word-of-mouth mechanisms *without significant change*’ (Shifman, 2011: 4). For example, most videos by teenage star Justin Bieber fall in this category. In contrast, a memetic video is ‘a popular clip that *lures extensive creative user engagement* in the form of parody, pastiche, mash-ups or other derivative work’ (ibidem). One example involves a famous scene from *Downfall*, where Hitler breaks down, loses his temper and unleashes a 4 minute tirade. It turned memetic in 2007 when a British student named Chris Bowley vented his frustration that he was banned from the Xbox Live service by changing the subtitles (and only the subtitles; the German audio track remains untouched) to *Downfall*’s original scene (BBC, 2010). The

result is quite hilarious (see figure 4), and has sparked many others to do the same. By now, there are thousands of *Downfall* parodies and the people creating them are labeled as *Untergangers* or Downfallers.

The *Downfall* parodies reveal the fragile balance between copyright protected material, user-generated content and advertising revenues. On the one hand, 'advertising income is necessary for YouTube to survive' (McDonald, 2011: 403). On the other hand, 'user-generated content represents the ethos of self-broadcasting but does not present a magnet for advertising' (ibidem). And then there are the advertisers themselves, who try to demand control over 'not just advertising, but also content' (Andrejevic, 2011: 414), which stands in stark contrast with YouTube's ideas of openness. In short, 'YouTube is caught between the competing demands of these entities: corporations feel uneasy about the lack of control, and users dislike corporations interfering' (Clay, 2011: 220).

YouTube's solution to make commercial corporations and copyright holders feel less uneasy, whilst keeping users satisfied as well, is 'Content ID'. Content ID came into existence in 2010 and is a combination of the algorithmic tools Audio ID and Video ID, which YouTube developed from 2006 onwards (in other words; since Google took control). With Content ID, YouTube gives right holders (largely big media corporations) the possibility to control what happens when content is uploaded that either consists completely or partially out of copyright protected material. Right holders can specify what they want to do whenever uploaded content is flagged by Content ID: monetize (which usually involves a specific advertising campaign), track (which means right holders receive statistics and user data related to the uploaded content) or block (which removes the video from YouTube completely). Content ID is fully automated, using an algorithm that can detect when uploaded content matches reference files provided by right holders. It is a powerful tool that has been quite successful for both YouTube and right holders, but scholars have criticized the tool as well: 'YouTube's system effectively places the power of judgment mainly on automatic recognition of infringement and disregards the context of social and cultural sharing in which the copyrighted material might exist' (Lessig in Clay, 2011: 223). (Kim, 2012: 55; YouTube, 2012.)

One way to make sense of the *Downfall* parodies, is to frame them as a struggle between grassroots creativity and top-down corporations, which is a framework that Jenkins uses (as described on page 22). Framed as a grassroots creativity versus top-down corporation struggle, Constantin Film's (the right holder to the scene) decision, backed by YouTube's Content ID, to block the videos and even threaten some people (like Chris Bowling) with legal action, fits into the picture. It portrays the practice as a tug-of-war between a big media corporation and creative individuals, who fight for control over a small, cultural artifact, using cheap video editing software and YouTube's accessibility and features as a

platform holder to give expression to their creativity, to share it with others and participate in the meme-making process (Jenkins, 2006; Clay, 2011: 225).

A perspective of playfulness and playability paints a different picture. If YouTube is framed as a sphere of play with weak boundaries (inviting users to assume different roles at any moment in time), and Constantin Film and the Downfallers as equal cultural participants, then a different light is cast on the *Downfall* parodies.

It might not *just* be a tug-of-war between big media and grassroots creativity. It is another form of *paidia*, unstructured play. As said before, YouTube invites playability through its features and services, and provokes playfulness. The parodies then are a form of play, with a loose set of rules to play *according to* (the conventions of the meme, which have arisen spontaneously over time) or to try to *circumvent* (copyright and Constantin Film using Content ID to chase down the videos). This may shed a different light on why the Downfallers do what they do. It is not to fight for control. It is for pleasure, sociality and a feeling of recognition, arising from 'the interplay between [...] rules and the margin of movement they allow their players' (Roig, 2009: 96).

According to this line of reasoning, and this might be a bit contra intuitive, right holders, such as Content ID, need not be harmful to the playfulness and playability of YouTube. Rather, they enforce and provoke it, because they provide loose rule sets and become players themselves. Antoni Roig came to a similar conclusion when analyzing fan fiction and movies: 'it would not be preposterous to think of popular films as sets of rules and fans as players. Thus, fan fiction, considered as fan activity could be seen as a process of negotiation of rules and outcomes in the sphere of play' (ibidem, 97).

## PLAYING WITH YOUTUBE – CAPTION FAIL

The *Downfall* parodies serve as a clear example of play with YouTube as a platform, but some of YouTube's own functionalities also appear to afford unexpected, playful behavior. Back in 2006, Google introduced a feature for YouTube called Closed Captioning (Google Inc., 2006). Basically, closed captioning (often shortened to CC) refers to the display of text as an optional layer over the video content being played. A well-known example is the ability to opt for subtitles in different languages on DVD and Blu-ray players, or the option to turn on a transcription of the spoken word on television.

This was a much requested feature by YouTube users, but it has also opened up a lot of different possibilities for the company itself. For example, it improves the way users can search within any given video, enabling users to search for an exact part of the video. However, even more promising was the possibility to implement an automatic audio translation, providing users from all over the world to translate the audio track into a language of their choice. Using speech recognition and automatic

translation algorithms (both of which Google has been fine-tuning over the past years), a subtitle could then be inserted into the video using closed captioning (Google, 2009).



Figure 5: Rhett and Link performing one of their Caption Fail sketches (YouTube, 2011a)

But YouTube, it appeared, was not that different from other technologies and devices: they are 'playable [...] to some extent: tightly designed but admitting unexpected use' (Roig, 2009: 99). In the case of automatic audio translation, YouTube users Rhett McLaughlin and Link Neal, who co-own the popular channel RhettandLink, decided to use the functionality in an innovative and quirky way. The basic idea was simple: YouTube's automatic audio translation functionality is inadequate. It often does quite a poor job in recognizing the spoken language and words, which results in a strange (to say the least) transcription that is in most cases hard to make sense of. McLaughlin and Neal decided to exploit this imperfection of the functionality to achieve a comic effect. Every video in the series, which they named Caption Fail, starts with the same premise: Rhett and Link act out a scene using a script they wrote. Then, they take YouTube's transcription of the scene and use that as a script instead, after which they repeat the whole process one more time. The result is bizarre and hilarious (see figures 5 and 6): two guys uttering the weirdest and unstructured sentences in a completely serious manner.



Figure 6: Rhett and Link singing YouTube's transcription of well-known Christmas carols (YouTube, 2011b)

The Caption Fail videos reveal interesting aspects about YouTube's cultural practices. They illustrate why Gibson's original notion of affordance is more fruitful within the context of this thesis than Norman's. As was discussed on page 23 and 24, there is a crucial difference between the way these scholars define the concept: Norman's affordance points to the *likely* uses when an human actor is confronted with an object, whereas Gibson argues that it points to *any* possible use – the only limitation being the physical constraints of a human actor. For Google, it probably was not that likely that users would use the automatic translation functionality in the way McLaughlin and Neal did. Yet they did, and by doing so, supported the thought that it might be unproductive to use a concept of affordance that limits the scope of how a complex new media phenomenon like YouTube might be used.

Furthermore, Caption Fail is a special kind of parody; not just a 'playful transformation of the text' (Clay, 2011: 227) (like the Downfall parodies), but a playful transformation of a specific feature of YouTube. Again, there are multiple ways of looking at this. One might deploy a psychological theoretical framework, arguing that the producers of such user generated content are motivated by a 'struggle for recognition' (Peters, 2009: 194), or that it is 'psychologically empowering', showcasing 'expertise' and receiving 'respect' by peers (Leung, 2009: 1331, 1337). This is important research, for it aids in our understanding of exactly why people decide to devote a lot of time (and quite often,, a lot of money) to content like Caption Fail.

However, another approach is to analyze YouTube's cultural practices using playfulness and playability. YouTube's specific lay-out – a very low publication threshold, social features, and direct feedback through comments, video's, ratings and rankings – has a high degree of playability, and invites a playful attitude. Next to feelings of empowerment and recognition, it may also be this combination of playfulness and playability that fuels user generated content like Caption Fail. In effect, McLaughlin and Neal transformed the automatic translation feature from a practical feature of accessibility into something to play with. An interview with the duo seems to underline this argument. McLaughlin and Neal talk about the role-playing that is involved when looking for "tacky" costumes and acting, as well as a lot of trial-and-error, as they try to create the perfect video, according to their own set of rules. And when they talk about it, they use words that seem to be more associated with players than with producers. For example, consider what McLaughlin says about the process of creating the Christmas Carol Caption Fail (see figure 6): 'It actually took us two nights. The first night, we went through about 15 takes in the freezing cold, then *admitted defeat*. The next night, the 13<sup>th</sup> take was the *keeper*' (Wired, 2011, italics added).

In short, what this example shows, is that – again – it might be productive for the understanding of the cultural practices of YouTube (and maybe even new media in general), to think of these practices as also existing within the sphere of play. It might reveal - until now hidden - aspects which are defining

for these practices. The cases of the *Downfall* parodies and the Caption Fail series provide an intriguing (yet tentative) proof that this is indeed the case.

# **PART IV**

## **CONCLUSION**

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# CONCLUSION

*We find no reason to abandon the notion of play as a distinct and highly important factor in the world's life and doings. – Johan Huizinga (Huizinga, 1949)*

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As this is the thesis final chapter, a short recap might be useful at this point.

In the second part of this thesis, I have tried to illustrate the dynamic nature of cultural practices, as well as the debates and academic discourses surrounding these changing cultural practices. I have also demonstrated that today's cultural practices are unique in various ways and I have showed how different academics came up with concepts to deal with these new practices. Building upon earlier research into the concept of 'play', I have discussed how it is defined and used throughout this thesis. Lastly, I have outlined the relevance of two new analytical concepts: playfulness and playability.

In the third part of this thesis, theory was put into practice through a case-study of YouTube. Keeping in mind its historical roots, the concepts of playfulness and playability were used as an analytical tool in three examples. Firstly the much discussed dichotomy between "amateurs" and "professionals", with YouTube celebrity (and actress) lonelygirl15 as an illustration. Secondly, the Hitler Downfall Parodies were discussed as an interesting example of 'playing on YouTube'. Lastly, McLaughlin and Neal's Caption Fail videos were analyzed to outline how certain technological features of YouTube themselves have become objects of play.

In the next section, the research question will be answered, followed by a critical reflection on this thesis.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

As discussed in the first part, this thesis aims to answer the following research question:

*To what extent do the analytical concepts of playfulness and playability allow us a better understanding of contemporary cultural practices?*

In search for the answer to this research question I have critically examined the many existing discourses, arguments and concepts and closely looked at abstract problems, such as the strengths and weaknesses of existing theoretical concepts. I have tried to map the always changing media

ecology, how new media fit into this ecology and how scholars have tried to adapt to these frequent changes. It has become clear to me how new ideas and thoughts go hand in hand with changing social, historical and technical contexts in our world.

I have tried to take it a step further. Starting out with the observation that, today, ‘play is permeating media practices in many ways’ (Roig, 2009: 94), the aim of this thesis has been to find out to what extent, it would be fruitful to formulate new analytical concepts that could function as analytical tools for these playful media practices. After a thorough discussion of the concept of ‘play’, the analytical concepts of playfulness and playability were formulated, which subsequently were used to analyze three different examples of cultural practices on YouTube.

Because this thesis is based on only one case study, it is impossible to answer the research question in definite terms. It is absolutely vital that more conceptual research will be conducted to strengthen and sharpen the concepts themselves, and to find out if they really do allow us a better understanding of today’s cultural practices. Furthermore, further research is needed that weaves the analytical concepts of playfulness and playability, as they are formulated and used in this thesis, into a fully-fledged theoretical framework of play. Still, this thesis might provide an early indication whether or not it is worth putting the extra effort in this.

And, based on the analyzed examples, I am inclined to say it is definitely worth closer investigation. The most important benefit of using new analytical concepts is that it forces scholars (and students, for that matter) to think differently about cultural practices. By using the analytical concepts of playfulness and playability, I have showed how a much used dichotomy – the ‘amateur’ verses the ‘professional – might only tell us one side of YouTube’s story. Framing users as equal participants, playfully engaging with one another, sheds a different light on much discussed cases like *lonelygirl15*. The same goes for the Hitler Downfall parodies. These videos were frequently discussed in terms of legal issues, but that is not the only way of looking at them. As said before, it might not *just* be a tug-of-war between big media and grassroots creativity. It is another form of *paidia*, unstructured play. This sheds a different light on the relationship between users and right holders, but also on the important question of *why* so many users join in making videos like this.

Bearing in mind De Mul’s theory that our history shows how our natural tendency towards play is alternately suppressed and nourished, it is interesting to view the playful character of today’s cultural practices in a broader historical context. Investigating cultural practices from the perspective of playfulness and playability, we are able, for example, to notice a striking resemblance with the playful actions of rebellious young people in the nineteen-sixties in the Netherlands.<sup>8</sup> These so-called *Provo*’s (abbreviation of ‘provoke’) interpreted in a playful way existing rules and laws (the guidelines of society)

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<sup>8</sup> More information in: Van Duijn, 2012.

and by doing so, they created their own weak-boundary alternate reality. They established a micro society within society: the so-called *Oranje Vrijstaat*. There is, however, also a striking difference: the Provo's only goal was to rebel against the authorities. As we have seen with the Downfall parodies, the authorities (the copyright holders) are mere equal participants. In fact, they were part of the play, not a goal or the object of disobedience.

In analyzing the Capton Fail videos the new analytical concepts proved to be less useful for improved understanding of a given cultural practice. Although they worked out well for framing technological features of media as part of the sphere of play, they proved to be only a minor addition to Gibson's concept of affordance as an analytical tool. Is this bad? Not at all. As said before, this is but an initial impetus for future research into the usefulness of a full-scale theoretical framework based on play. Finding out it might not be as applicable to some practices as it is to others, is an important part of such an impetus.

All in all, the answer to the research question is as follows:

*The use of the analytical concepts of playfulness and playability has a good chance of forcing scholars to think differently about contemporary cultural practices. It also allows us a better understanding of cultural practices in comparison with much used existing tools, concepts and discourses, yet the amount of gained understanding differs, depending on the object of study.*

## **CRITICAL REFLECTION**

I want to conclude my thesis with a few arguments against the assumptions used in my thesis. It must be noted, for example, that 'the internet does not automatically turn every user into an active producer and every worker into a creative subject' (Terranova, 2004: 75). Media scholar Tiziana Terranova is right about this observation. This thesis discusses the ludification of today's culture in great detail, but that does not mean everybody is suddenly engaged with culture in a playful way, because it is dependent on their personal tastes, social context or access to certain technologies.

Another much-repeated argument, related to Terranova's correct observation, is that '21st century prosumers and 'pro-ams' are passionately imitating products of culture' (Manovich, 2008: 36). What has been described as creative acts of play in this thesis, is frequently described as the opposite (see also Keen, 2007): the lack of creativity. Although, I do not agree with this line of thinking (I agree, instead, with scholars like Jenkins and Lessig who describe imitation, annotation, and appropriation as part of a creative, playful process (see Jenkins, 2006; Lessig, 2008: 93)), it is important to mention this argument.

Finally, it is important to understand that although the use of certain analytical concepts, in this thesis the concepts of playfulness and playability, can bring to the surface aspects that remain hidden when other analytical concepts are deployed – no concept can fruitfully analyze everything. For example, issues of power relationships between actors largely fall outside the scope of this thesis (one might want to use a political economy approach instead). The concepts of playfulness and playability, as used in this thesis, also ignore the (problematic) issue of gender in cultural practices.<sup>9</sup>

The key argument here is that the analytical concepts of playfulness and playability may allow us a better understanding of cultural practices, but that they may not be useful for every type of research. This, to me, seems inevitable.

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<sup>9</sup> Although it would be interesting to analyze gender differences from a perspective of playfulness and playability: are there differences between men and women in the way they deal with play design? Are there differences in the extent of creative or provocative play?

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