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A Funny Thought on a New Way to Play
2008, Fall-Winter

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and say, “this is a game.” Turn to your friends and enemies and say, “this is a game.” Say silently to your self and any imaginary entities you discover in solitude, “this is a game.” See what happens next.

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1

I am already playing. And I don’t tend to like games. At least I don’t like games in which I don’t get to participate in inventing or discovering the rules. What I do like, however, is finding games where and when games are said not to be. My desire is to keep playing this game of truth - and you are invited to play along.

Suppose that we are already playing (I, in writing this; you, in reading it) and that in realizing it we come to admit that in some way everything is a game - everything personal, everything social, and everything cultural, anyway, including what seems least playful: work, or struggle, for example.

Suppose again that we go on (or realize we can’t stop) playing and allow ourselves to discover or invent the conceit that there are games in nature, too, something like a grand cosmic game that interminably bleeds into whatever we might have thought intimate and social life involve. Or could involve, from the most forgettable and trivial exchanges to the cruelest acts. The interest or desire of this bleed is that it colors just those relations that so many of us are usually inclined - and often trained or forced - to conceive of and live out as rule-bound and competitive. Including self-relations. And this within an imagination where rules are not negotiable, but accepted all at once out of duty or the responsibility of so-called fair play (a kind of morality, or at least good practice for moral behavior). Increased exposure to the cosmic game could change all of that. Do these suppositions sound sufficiently inviting? We could begin with how we live out the rules and competitions that seem most trivial - those of discrete, ordinary games -1 mean, what we usually think of as games.

2

The play of discrete or ordinary games is the privileged object of the theories of writers such as the historian Huizinga; these theories make play and games the oldest and most basic stratum of human life. I am fascinated by such theories. The idea is to some extent just beautiful: play as a "voluntary activity," "older than culture," that "has nothing to do with necessity or utility, duty or truth."[1] Though it is an originary stratum, Huizinga does his best not to present this as an evolution: "… we do not mean that play turns into culture, rather that in its earliest phases culture has the play-character, that it proceeds in the shape and in the mood of play" (46). For those of us who like to play at speculative anthropology, especially the speculative anthropology of what is called prehistory, there is much to be excited about here. At the same time, whatever the fascination that such arguments exert on us, they should arouse suspicion as well. It all has to do with how (or by whom) play and games are imagined. Huizinga (but it is not just him, obviously) always describes play as part of a game; he always describes the game as discrete (which seems to come down to being governed by rules); and he always describes the discrete game as a contest or at least the "representation of a contest" (13): That is, it is competitive.[2] It is, predictably enough (according to him), the competitive aspect of games that eventually and repeatedly gives birth to cultures or civilization.

Reading Huizinga, one might disappointedly conclude that his conception of play as games and of games as rule-bound and competitive is far too narrow. Painfully so. But this poverty of perspec-

[1] *Homo Ludens,* 7,1,158.

[2] In his summary of the "formal characteristics" of play, Huizinga lists first the rather abstract quality of play's separateness from ordinary life; but, immediately, he moves to more concrete criteria: the boundaries of time and space and the rules that make that possible. These criteria undergird his later claim that the contest is central in games (8-13).

variable. In this way we might be able to interpret intragame moves as taking positions in the general economy of the Ideal Game.

In this change of attitude towards games, what I would like to expand is precisely what is most interesting about play: the opportunities to study one's own stupidities and desires for humiliation, and the opportunities for virtuosity. Of course I do not want to do away with virtuosity! (Or honor, or even glory, if those virtues can be separated from a small-minded concern with victory.) Normal Games have always been opportunities to develop and display some bizarre virtuosity; for my part, I want to develop the bizarre as opportunity. I think here in passing of the novel and affirmative sense given to competition by Fourier. But I also must include the spoilsport's gesture, the nonsensical refusal to play a game, as in the anecdote Huizinga relates about a certain Shah of Persia, "supposed to have declined the pleasure of attending a race meeting, saying that he knew very well that one horse runs faster than another" (49). Huizinga comments: "From his point of view he was perfectly right: he refused to take part in a play-sphere that was alien to him, preferring to remain outside." In any case, true virtuosity would be to open up the Normal Game to that outside, which I have been calling the Ideal Game. If one wants to compete (and, undeniably, some of us do) they might try competing with nature.

Competing with nature? A move in a game is defined (or at least definable) in terms of game rules - but is at the same time the index of a position, a temporary arrangement or disposition in one or more broader and fuzzier spheres of play. Those fuzzy spheres are interminable, infinite. The extent to which we conceive them as bounded reflects exactly to what extent we more or less consciously conceive of nature or cosmos as bound by laws or a divine hierarchy. This is my move, my position: nature or cosmos is the outside, unbounded in every sense. Which is perhaps how, playfully, we might have come to admit that nature also - and eminently - plays games. But if that kind of language is too abstract, turn to your lover and say, "this is a game." Turn to your parents or children

multiple manipulations, the machine to play with the stars, in short the Heracli- tean fire machine."[11]

7

Another way of proposing such an attitude might begin by noting that what is interesting in the play of Normal Games is not the endgame, the final moves, wherein something or other is decided (victory, or judgment, an entire imaginary of apocalypse that plagues would-be revolutionaries as much or more so than most others), but taking a position. Maybe rules ultimately derive or depend on this taking of a position (how one takes a position, or creates a situation), such that play is irreversibly altered. A sense of where and when one is invokes not just the derivation of rules, but the derivation of the board, or table, or court - the delimited zone where the game imagined as the Normal Game is played. The board corresponds (this is going too fast, again!) to something like an imagination of space that defines what rules apply and how one plays. It is an imagination of ambiance, of place, of milieu - and, given whatever space or place, there are specialists who will tell us what rules apply there. Again: a culture and its taboos. A state and its laws. A language and its grammar. Et cetera. But why place the emphasis on these, when what is vital and primary is this taking of a position, affirming where and when one is?

Almost any game can involve a vaguer, broader idea of play. So one might want to consider moves in and out of Normal Game play. First, into and out of other Normal Games, and then into and out of activities that do not yet seem to be games. Interestingly, this is easier when there is no board, physical or otherwise, and the game is a word game or gesture game, a game made up just for the occasion, whose rules are looser, as yet unformed, or explicitly

[11] Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy,* 36.

tive can be interesting if we ask ourselves how it might have come about, what sort of attitude it bespeaks. In this sense the root of the problem might be that to accept that play and games compose the base stratum of culture involves entirely too much seriousness. This would be descended from or instantiated as the seriousness, one imagines, of the contest. Given that he repeatedly states that "play is the direct opposite of seriousness" (5), one might conclude that he did not think he was playing when he wrote the book.[3] He instead seems to be in the grips, precisely, of a seriousness that divides what is and what is not (play, for starters). For me this is something like the seriousness that Stirner once linked with what he called possession: "there is nothing more serious than a lunatic when he comes to the central point of his lunacy; then his great earnestness incapacitates him for taking a joke."[4]

These things unfortunately seem to go together: the seriousness of the thesis (of proposing, sometimes, but especially of maintaining or defending a thesis, that "central point" of one's "lunacy"), and the rules one endlessly discovers once one sets out in search of them. Whether or not and to what extent the rules are fully known is a matter of power, or what seems to be power - and the search for rules is a competitive move, an attempt at a coup in the game, the unmentionable intellectual game: the contest of the thesis and of rules. Huizinga makes play the origin of civilization and cultures, but not the totality of them, not their very practice, and certainly

[3] At least as I understand its overall movement. I do fear I might seem ungenerous in my criticisms, seeing as Huizinga's argument continually undermines itself in stray remarks. For example: "Play cannot be denied. You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play" (3). But then why take the seriousness emergent from play so seriously? In some sense my entire essay could be taken as an attempt to vindicate some of Huizinga's propositions against the grain of the overall movement of Homo *Ludens.*

[4] *Ego and its Own,* 62. As I was writing this I recalled the idea of "playfulness" proposed by the feminist philosopher Maria Lugones, which sets out precisely from a rejection of the "agonistic" focus of the theory of play in *Homo Ludens.*

not their end point, because he was, or at least thought he had to sound, serious. He might have thought, more or less consciously, that he had to repeat the same transition from game through contest to cultural or civilized institutions that he hypothesized. To do this, he had to imagine play in the form of discrete, competitive games with specific sets of rules.

For Huizinga, it seems, play and games can be an at least chronological origin of culture, but only as preparations, only as experiments concerning the next stages, the official seriousness and misery of which is all too familiar to some of us. Playing games and freely (arbitrarily, even) accepting their rules and competitions in the name of play slides all too arbitrarily (freely, even) into not freely accepting rules (and everything that game rules might, according to Huizinga, be practice for: innumerable conventions, customs, moral codes, laws) in the name of Society, or of Normality, or, if one thinks too much like a certain unhappy sort of social scientist, the structures and functions of cultures and social life, with all of their explicit and implicit formulations. A culture and its taboos. A state and its laws. A language and its grammar. Et cetera.

It seems to me that some procedure like this extends from our engagement in apparently discrete, rule-bound, and competitive games to most or even all of our intimate and social relations, manifest as our more or less spontaneous apprehension of life as rule- or law-bound. (This is going too fast, I know, but that's the game I am playing). The interest of proposals like Huizinga's is that, used otherwise, they suggest a situational, everyday model for how one makes the supposedly spontaneous larger assumption of the two. One begins (but this is rarely a beginning! - it is usually a repetition) to play a discrete game. Think of the invocation of society or cultures, for example, as an agent of some sort, not to speak of morality, nation, religion! Thanks to such an imaginary model we might come to see practically any thing, process, or abstraction as an imaginary agent: a Fate, a God, a Cause, demanding respect and inspiring hope and fear, each so harmful in its own way. I am re-

- where rules, codes, laws (etc) appear without explicit reference to the element of chance. Where the chance element is ignored, devalued, apparently set aside. For me this means that it is assumed, relied on, gambled on, in a very superstitious, a very dangerous way. This has everything to do with how (or by whom) a game is played, and ultimately with what is conceived or not conceived as a game.

Indeed, this might be the superior use of the Normal Game: playing in such a way as to show any number of so-called serious activities to be variants of Normal Games, in the sense that assuming the rules of Normal Games might habituate us (think again of children) to accepting rules in situations that do not seem to be games, and not assuming them in that common way opens up every Normal Game to the play of the world.

I would like to recall here the Situationists' definition of a situation, especially its invocation of a play of events. The challenge of the infamous definition is of course the tension implied in "deliberately and concretely constructing" a situation in a way that combines the play of events with the "collective organization of a unitary ambiance."[10]

A situation, it seems to me, is like a Normal Game, but precisely one that is programmed to be open to the Ideal Game. In this sense it is like a machine that assumes the unpredictable (should we just call it time?) as its own. Normal Games involve an attempt to master chance, which is of course macrocosmically impossible. Still, every Normal Game plays as or in the Ideal Game in some way or another, more or less gracefully. What is the interest of a match or contest where the outcome is known? A situation, in this sense, is a graceful move, a display of virtuosity, in a game of social relations. Think of it as the unlikeliest machine: "The machine to affirm chance … the machine to release these immense forces by small,

[10] *Situationist International Anthology,* 45.

stratum. It seems that there is power and resistance in this transmission. But why invoke a historical transmission at all? It depends on how we think of or live out our history. If history obeys rules or has a pattern, an order (stages, even), a telos (progress, even), then the codification of its rules is desirable. If it doesn't, if we think of or live out history as another way of grasping the chaos of the ideal Game, then, to us, what we do with games is analogous to what we do with rules, laws, studies of rules, studies of laws: we grasp them as one form or another of a superstition concerning one form or another of victory, mastery, winning. Such are the stakes of the procedure I referred to earlier: rather than conceiving of play and games as the origin of and practice for culture as a historical affair, a chronological procession, we might instead imagine and practice them as the ever repeated, ever interruptible beginning of whatever in culture (and thus in history) appears to be all too serious.

6

"Do you propose, then, to do away with games?"

No, of course not. How could we, anyway?

"*With Normal Games?"*

No, not exactly. This funny thought concerns how they are played. Wouldn't one always want to be careful of the moment where one assumes whatever rules to be one's own? When one entered that ambiance or milieu? *"To always invoke the Ideal Game?"*

Sort of. But who would want to speak in the name of the Ideal Game, anyway? To render it divine?

The virtue, presumably, in all this would not be to come to see Normal Games as less desirable (that is a matter of taste) - but to recognize, to get better at recognizing, situations in which one is invited or forced to compete seriously, in which competition seems necessary for play. It has more to do with the ability or attitude that recognizes a potential game in whatever is supposed to be serious

ferring first and foremost to the ordinary, colloquial use of these words, but also to how we are bound by what we unconsciously suppose that they involve. They are in some sense modeled, I will playfully propose, on our engagement with the apparently discrete, rule-bound, and competitive games, and not the other way around!

It might then be an occupational hazard of those who write on play and games that they do not sound either playful or gaming. I include myself in this, of course; and if I hope to overcome this obstacle, it is not by being funny (at least not on purpose), but rather by being parodic, paradoxical and occasionally nonsensical.

3

Some years after Huizinga, the philosopher Deleuze, playing his way out of what was known as structuralism, wrote a fine text on play and games, inspired by Lewis Carroll. What I have been calling discrete or ordinary games, Deleuze dubbed Normal Games, suggesting that they are "mixed" - they involve chance, of course, but "only at certain points"; the rest of their play (?) "refers to another type of activity, labor, or morality."[5] We can think of social activities as games, a la Huizinga, only because we think of games in the restricted, "mixed" economy of Normal Games that involve the acceptance of rules and a possible competition. That is, normal games always refer their play to a norm that is taken to be serious, outside of the play-sphere. Otherwise there seems to be no game. Without games, no society, no culture - and, maybe then, no self?

The alternative to this ought to sound nonsensical. To the seriousness of the thesis and its contest one might propose an alternative, a whimsical or funny thought *(drole de pensee,* as Leibniz once wrote) that takes on the play of the world[6] as its uncommon

[5] *Logic of Sense,* 59.

[6] If I can rescue this phrase from Kostas Axelos, who stressed that play should not become a new slogan, only to produce a theory of play that I regard, for

perspective, as its excessive subjectivity, playing at but never seriously claiming the reality of an infinite play-world (as opposed, for example, to the necessarily finite work- world often invoked by those fascinated by terms such as scarcity or production).

The ideal Game is Deleuze's name for this funny thought of the cosmic game or the play of the world. It has no rules and is entirely too chaotic to allow for any skillful use of chance (meaning the mechanical consequences of well-executed moves). Every Normal Game flirts with chance to some degree or another, and plays, Deleuze wrote, at mastering it. And if one is serious one might think one has. All too often that desire for mastery, which bears ultimately on one's intimate relation to the macrocosm (but is rarely - if ever - consciously felt as such) collapses into the specialized microfascism of so many games, into an obsessive clinging to the rules, the little cruelties of competition, and (more interestingly) what is called cheating.[7]

My problem with Deleuze's version of the Ideal Game is that he states, first of all, that it can't be played "by either man or God." Worse, "it would amuse no one" *(Logic,* 60). He writes that, ultimately, "it can only be thoughtas nonsense." I wonder why this did not suggest another idea of play and of amusement, such that, not negating but simply and nonsensically contradicting the first two claims, the Ideal Game can't but be played by people and Gods (if any); and it not only amuses everyone but is precisely the Amusing as such!

All of this matters if one wants to take a position. In some sense, I do. To begin with, I want to reveal as games activities that do not

reasons I won't go into here, precisely as a philosophical dead-end characterized by vague sloganeering.

[7]On this last point, Huizinga almost agrees. Discussing those he calls "spoilsports," he writes: "the outlaw, the revolutionary, the cabbalist or member of a secret society, indeed heretics of all kinds, are of a highly associative if not sociable disposition, and a certain element of play is prominent in all their doings" (12). *Their dissent is to play another game.*

> or disingenuously working for it (this is the modern - at least Euromodern - model: the enlightened gamble of the average democratic citizen).

Such superstitions, whatever kind of psychic or social genesis they have, seem to suppress timelessly healthy thoughts such as:

> our superstitions, however inevitable, are of no real help
>
> all of life is a game and has no set rules.

Tag is the game that, in its play, celebrates the circulation of the object, the thing, and the subject, the self. It, the thing, the mark, is what makes the game go. In this sense the game playfully inverts the world that a certain common sense suggests we live in - a world in which the subjects or selves make it go. When we seriously distinguish thing and self, or, at another level, who is and who is not in our tribe or group, we are playing at some variant of this game. The difference is that the playful (childish) version and the serious (adult) version are focused on different questions. The latter wants to know: "who is It?" The former: "how does It circulate?" In the childish version, the otherness of It, whatever it is called upon to designate, sacred or sacrificial, circulates: it could be any of us. If It is the enemy, this position circulates endlessly. I say endlessly because at least the common version of the game has no set end. But this raises the question of how the game begins: does It really come from outside? How (or by whom) is it decided who is It at the beginning? It might be arbitrary - or only seem so. Isn't there always a list of usual suspects?

It is possible that in games like Tag an archaic stratum of the life of the first humans continues to be passed on, even as they continue to be identified with children as a kind of official outside, maintained, at least in modernity, through the child/adult distinction. But this is also perhaps a response to the persistence of this

oppressive game (it teaches ostracism, xenophobia, scapegoating, etc).

I chose Tag because it is characteristic of a number of children's games that have very simple (and often modified) rules, and that are transmitted orally. Such games are likely very ancient. If we playfully suppose that this game belongs to an anonymous and interminable childhood of humanity, there is room to wonder at what it reveals beyond its function as a Normal Game (there is room to ask if certain children's games, those that are truly of children and not imposed on them, are ever normal). If we playfully assume that Tag is an ancient game, passed down orally since prehistoric times, it could be part of how the distinctions between kin groups, tribes, and ultimately humans and animals, or humans and spirits, might have originally been distributed. Maybe Tag is the explicit form of an utterly common, nearly universal game of inclusion- exclusion, communication-persecution that shapes, playfully and not structurally, countless groups, communities, and cultures. That some games, like Tag, are considered to be for children, or to embody the childish in whoever plays, suggests that games, as passing manifestations of play, are endlessly codified and controlled through the recording and imposition of rules that seem to subordinate play, and especially what in play is healthy and vital, to set rules and competition. Adherence to rules and enthusiasm about competition can often save one from being regarded as childish. Competition reinstates, or at least gives folks ground to reinstate, seriousness. This is the value of Huizinga's proposal that games are the beginning of culture and civilization. And superstition? Consider these common malaises:

> that by following the rules I might be lucky enough to conquer Fate (fortune), or appease the gods (this is the ancient model: chance as Fortune or the gods) that I can get the better of Fate by means of whatever makes me lucky: joining the victorious Cause and genuinely

appear to be games, complicating or even dissolving the distinction between discrete play-spheres and the supposedly serious worlds of culture. Eventually, I want to open up all apparently discrete games, acknowledged and unacknowledged, to the Ideal Game. But whereas the first move has to do with revealing what is rule-bound but does not appear to be so, the second, the opening to the Ideal Game, dissolves all of these apparent and more or less concealed rules in a grand chaotic complication that shows all of them as arbitrary. In all this I want to expand and intensify the spheres of play. But I want to play my way into that position, and so I know I will have to playfully abandon it now and then, lest it become the central point of a lunacy I prefer to avoid.

4

I don't want it to seem as though I am blaming the problem of the impoverished imagination of play I have diagnosed in Huizinga on the seriousness of professors alone. Really, there is no one to blame, unless we want to engage in the superstitious invocation of imaginary agents: "Society tells us that play…" "Our culture says that games…" So many ways of inverting the vital flow, making play depend on seriousness and not the other way around! Almost everyone I have spoken with about what I am writing about games responds that it seems that to them, too, that a game is always or at least typically rule-bound and competitive:

> *Rule-bound* The assumption that play involves accepting a certain set of dictates, oral or written, that govern the activity, defining its beginning and end as well as all possible or available moves, and delimiting the space and time of play.
>
> *Competitive* The assumption that one should engage the rules in such a way as to use skill or chance to best

one or more opponents. (Though one might immediately ask if one can ever use chance, or is better said to be used by it).

In both of these aspects we might be able to discern how games are mixed (in Deleuze's sense), referring to other activities whose rules are hidden or all too obvious, but which are in either case not usually conceived as games. This is the secret morality of play.

If it is our whim to open the idea of games in other directions, we could, first of all, explore the ambiguities in these two aspects. We can likely summon up at least a few memories of solitary play,[8] or of play involving optional or variable rules, or of collaboration or co-operation that appear beside or as part of competition. True, it might be argued that these are only subjective or experiential aspects of play. But that is precisely what is most important here, since it seems to me that to assume games are by definition rule-bound and competitive itself derives from conceiving and practicing them as discrete. That conception, that practice, comprise an attitude, or a series of attitudes. And that is, by most definitions, subjective. An attitude that refuses the assumption that games are always discrete leads, first, to affirming any perspective that allows itself the conceit of acting in a given situation as if it were a game. Dwelling sufficiently within this perspective might ultimately lead to the realm of play and games beyond rules and competition, to the Ideal Game. Inevitably, the Ideal Game involves a subjective (or even existential - why not?) dimension: the feeling of the game as opening onto life or the cosmos, the sense of their tendential coincidence. This feeling, the anticipation or mere possibility of this feeling, might be why some of us bother with supposedly discrete games at all.

Sadly, it seems that a more common reason to play Normal Games is to practice our superstitions. I am thinking first and foremost of the superstition that competition matters at all. But I am also thinking of what does not appear to be a game, that which we are invited or forced to take seriously. So often being serious amounts to being superstitious! As a philosopher, I know this well: how many times, in how many conversations, have I asked myself if my interlocutor is (superstitiously) certain of being right, or playing at the game of acting, speaking, as though he is right?[9] Of course I am not invoking any sort of cosmic truth beyond the play of the world, truth beyond the game that plays at being right. Why would I, if my desire is to keep playing, to play the game of truth, among other games?

[8] It is telling that Huizinga devalues solitary play except when it can be related to some future contest (13, 47).

5

I propose an interpretation of one discrete game, Tag, which opens onto a speculative anthropology. In this game, It comes to any given player from outside. Or at least so it seems. To be tagged, to be It, is to be marked. To bear the mark, however temporarily, is to be treated as someone or something else than the play-group. The tag, the temporary position of being It, has to do with otherness. Tag is the game of us and not-us. It is always an other-than-us that circulates. Perhaps Tag is the game of a group's self-understanding, so that It is always a position that is sacrificial or sacred, above or below the group. Whatever It is has a special accursed power, and always has to be avoided, denied, warded off. For its part, It approaches us, chases us, lures us, traps us, and, if it is lucky, infects us, passing It on. So Tag could be a game of persecution; but at the same time, it could be a game that valorizes or grants power to what is persecuted. That is why it is so easy to interpret Tag as a liberatory game (it teaches how to avoid the one who tries to assume power, as well as how easily this position can circulate). That is also why it is so easy to interpret Tag as an

[9] I use the male pronoun here for autobiographical reasons alone.