A Ludic Perspective on Everyday Practices: Evidence from Ethnographic Fieldwork

Completed Research Paper

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Abstract

In this paper we introduce Johan Huizinga’s ludic perspective to information systems research with the aim to understand large complex social phenomena, specifically how the younger generation interacts with technology in their everyday organizational practices. Against an anthropological background, we employ Huizinga’s ludic approach to grasp everyday practices using the concept of play. We specifically invoke this novel concept in an ongoing critical ethnography of young professionals’ everyday encounters with IT in a large organization. Our findings endorse the idea that young people seem to be at play with IT in their everyday practices. This paper adds two contributions to IS research: first, it introduces Huizinga’s ludic perspective as a framework to help understand everyday practice; second, the organizational ethnographic evidence sheds light on the practical intricacies from young people’s perspective, thus placing the use of IT in the broader context of everyday practices of the younger generation.

Keywords

Ethnography, Generations, Play, Spatiality, Temporality.

Introduction

The idea of the emergence of a new generation of users is being debated in information systems (IS) (e.g., Leidner et al. 2010; Vodanovich et al. 2010; Wang et al. 2013). Some IS researchers have suggested that tech-savvy youth (sometimes described as digital natives) interact with information technology (IT) differently than those of the older generation, or digital immigrants (e.g., Bennett et al. 2008; Jones et al. 2010; Selwyn 2009; Smith et al. 2012). Thus, in this debate, it is simply assumed that there is a digital divide by generation as IT is placed on either side of this gulf. We suggest that the works of Huizinga (1980) might shed some light on this debate. His ideas might help us conceptualize our understanding of interaction with IT as an everyday ludic practice rather than an inter-generational phenomenon.

From the ludic perspective, Huizinga (1980, p. 19ff) shows our everyday practices are a ‘play’ in which we engage with the world. It serves two distinctive purposes; first, it succinctly explains the structure of everyday practices in which we find ourselves in the world instead of becoming separate to it. Second, it specifically addresses generational phenomena. To this end, Huizinga (1980, p. 173) says the significance of play in any given generation is central to develop a plausible understanding of everyday practices. He shows the participation in practices vis-à-vis generational phenomena is in essence play on a large social scale:

“Phenomena which a younger generation is constantly relegating to "former days" are, for their elders, part of "our own day", not merely because their elders have a personal recollection of them but because their culture still participates in them. This different time-sense is not so much dependent on the generation to which one happens to belong as on the knowledge one has of things old and new.” (p. 195)
He points out that it is the actual participation, or to know how to play in practice, that constitutes a particular generation (cf. Mannheim 1998, p. 302ff). As IT becomes an integral part of our everyday lives, our everyday practices hold the key to understand our interaction with technology. We suggest that Huizinga’s ludic perspective on everyday practices offers a framework to grasp complex social phenomena by taking a holistic view. We acknowledge the fruitful possibility to grasp the ludic perspective using Heidegger (2008) specifically through Gadamer (1989, p. 102ff) and Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 136ff). However, an extended discussion of this would lead us into a discussion of embodiment rather than practices.

The paper proceeds as follows. We first briefly revisit ludic scholarship and place the concept of play in a broader context. We then explicate the ludic perspective by spelling out the key aspects of the concept of play. Finally, we present some evidence from the field. This is followed by the discussion and conclusions.

Historicity and Relevance of Ludic Scholarship

Huizinga’s (1980) interpretive concept of play lays the groundwork for some of the pioneering scholarship of social phenomena, notably of Goffman (1961), Geertz (1973) and Gadamer (1989). Consequently, these seminal works have inspired influential studies concerning the concept of play within computer science (e.g., Garris et al. 2002), management (e.g., Kark 2011; Roos et al. 2004), organizations (e.g., Sørensen and Spoelstra 2012) and consumer research (e.g., Kozinets et al. 2004). However, Huizinga’s ludic scholarship remains mostly unacknowledged and unheard of within IS research.

Kozinets et al. (2004) uncover the ludic structure of practices and say that people find themselves among technologies as if “being-in-the-game” in which they not only ‘play along’ but also ‘play for one another’ (Kozinets et al. 2004, p. 665-9). In this playfulness, they find people “simply stopping their tracks to space out and attend to the flickering screens” (p. 669). The play, following Huizinga (1980), takes over the practices of people. Accordingly, Kozinets et al. (2004, p. 665) observe events of “subversive (re)appropriation of game play” in the field. In such events, they find “ludic elements” (p. 669) in practices insofar as people engage in playful interaction they withdraw from the mundane and immerse themselves in technology. For the latter, they say it is the skillful use of IT that provides an exit into fantasy where people engage in activities which otherwise seem incautious. They conclude that “[people] use technology and their bodies to produce parts of the [play]...to create and alter the space” (p. 668) in which they find themselves playing.

Kark (2011) uses the concept of play in terms of IT and organizing practices and acknowledges “the new demands prompted by advances in technology” (p. 516). Like Kozinets and colleagues, she notes that the concept of play reveals multi perspectival ludic involvement when we see IT in everyday practices and it is the “betwixt-and-between nature of play” that “distinguishes play from other activities and makes it a universally recognizable phenomenon” (p. 512). She concludes that the actual participation in “play is one way in which individuals can gain experience and experiment with skills they need to learn, then further develop them by ongoing rehearsal” (p. 521). In this way, we find the significance of the concept of play to help understand roles and identities in organizing and everyday practices concerning technologies.

We now proceed to explain some of the basic concepts of play before invoking it as the main lens.

The Concept of Play

Play is the logic of the mundane, according to Huizinga (1980, p. 1). His insight paves the way for a practical understanding of ‘play’ as our everyday way of being in the world (e.g., Gadamer 1989, p. 102ff; Goffman 1961). For Huizinga (1980, p. 13ff), play is a volitionally spatial and temporal practice insofar as it is always freely engaged within a given space against a historical background of time. From this perspective, we are, thus, always in play as we find ourselves in various situations. In this way, we can also better understand the unreflective interaction with the phenomena in everyday world where the play takes over the players (Ibid). This conceptualization is succinctly interpreted by Gadamer (1989) who develops a complete hermeneutic framework of everyday practices, which we employ to spell out the basic aspects of the concept of play.
Plaything, the Equipment of Play

Play always pivots on something namely, a plaything (Huizinga 1980, p. 30). We can understand it in terms of material equipment, such as devices or toys, or discursive equipment such as rhetorical devices or a play on words (Ibid). A plaything is, adhering to Gadamer (1989, p. 106), a fundamental prerequisite to play:

“\[\text{In order for there to be a \{\text{play}\}, there always has to be, not necessarily literally another player, but something else with which the player plays and which automatically responds to his move with a countermove.}\]”

The response of a plaything, he explicates, is simply a consequence of the significance which is assigned by a skillful player in meaningful use of the plaything. Accordingly, the plaything is intimately woven with the player in a ludic practice. From this perspective, we see a plaything as a tool to play with. Accordingly, Huizinga (1980) reminds us that play indeed is a holistic whole in which, as Gadamer (1989, p. 106-9) interprets, the plaything is seen as a holistic tool entwined with a player. Hence, a plaything makes sense only in the world of play where it is used, by a player, for a purpose; thus, in modern scholarship the plaything is often conceptualized as equipment with which one plays (cf. Sicart 2012). This conceptualization also opens up the possibility to understand where one plays with the plaything namely, the playing field.

Playing field, the Spatiality of Play

All play is spatial simply by the virtue of being played somewhere (Huizinga 1980). The space where play occurs can be conceptualized as a field of ludic practice, or simply playing field. This space both sets boundaries of play and acts as a platform to transport the players from the mundane into a ‘magic world’ of play. Huizinga (1980, p. 19) defines it as:

“\[\text{One of the most important characteristics of play \{is\} its spatial separation from ordinary life. A closed space is marked out for it, either materially or ideally, hedged off from the everyday surroundings. Inside this space the play proceeds, inside it the rules obtain.}\]”

He goes on to explicate that the playing field is neither a formal spatial distinction nor an abstraction of reality. Instead, it is simply ‘where’ the play occurs, thus it acts as a ‘temporary world’ which has its own rules. Gadamer (1989) takes this point and says the play can be understood in terms of the place where the play makes sense. In this way, we understand the significance of space insofar as the space puts a construction on the play. Gadamer (1989, p. 107) spells out the significance of space in terms of purpose and skills in play, he says:

“\[\text{Human play requires a playing field. Setting off the playing field… sets off the sphere of play as a closed world, one without transition and mediation to the world of aims. That all play is playing something is true here, where the ordered to-and-fro movement of the game \{which\}… determines more exactly why playing is always a playing of something. Every game presents the man who plays it with a task. He cannot enjoy the freedom of playing himself out without transforming the aims of his purposive behavior into mere tasks of the game. Thus the child gives itself a task in playing with a ball, and such tasks are playful ones because the purpose of the game is not really solving the task, but ordering and shaping the movement of the game.}\]”

From this perspective, we find a threefold structure of the spatiality of play. First, the playing field can be understood as a practice world where the play can be meaningful. Second, the playing field reveals a dialectic structure of how a play proceeds. This dialectic also reveals the multi perspective nature of play namely, the player, the plaything and the playing field, which are necessarily joined. Third, the purpose of play lies within playfulness and not completing a task, which is why Huizinga says that play, like a hobby, is never complete but always projecting in play. Thus, the play is seen as an end in itself. Accordingly, the projection aspect of play is where we can conceptualize how the spatial reveals the temporal aspect, as discussed next.

Playtime, the Temporality of Play

Huizinga (1980, p. 8) points out that there is no specific playtime in everyday world, he says:
“Play can be deferred or suspended at any time. It is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task. It is done at leisure, during "free time".”

Further, he reminds us that if and when play is conceptualized as a rite then playtime, too, is bounded to the phenomenon (Ibid). Huizinga points out that the play engrosses the players and it is this deep immersion in practice which allows them to step out of the mundane and be absorbed in the world of play, the playing field (also see, Geertz 1973, p. 433ff). Thus, a sense of timelessness is found in the playing field. Gadamer (1989, p. 104-5) explicates that this very absorption in the play takes the players beyond any obvious goals, and by doing so, makes the dialectic a transparent practice, he says:

“The movement of playing has no goal that brings it to an end; rather, it renews itself in constant repetition. The movement backward and forward is obviously so central to the definition of play that it makes no difference who or what performs this movement. The movement of play as such has, as it were, no substrate. It is the game that is played—it is irrelevant whether or not there is a subject who plays it. The play is the occurrence of the movement [which]... is not only without goal or purpose but also without effort.”

Thus, the effortless in play is achieved by repetitively engaging in play. Here, Gadamer (1989) reminds us, following Huizinga, the repetition within the dialectic of play differs from a literal repetition, so it will be a mistake to reduce it to abstract rules or a fact. Instead, he says, “every repetition is as original as the [play] itself” (p. 120). It is, then, the actual participation of the players in play, which becomes pivotal in grasping the logic of practice from the ludic perspective. After all, a play materializes in the playing field only when it is played by someone namely, the players.

**Players, the Participants of Play**

Huizinga (1980) says that the ‘player’ is someone who is truly engrossed in the play compared to the other participants. Here, we use the term ‘true player’ for the former to avoid confusion. Hence, in a play, Huizinga (1980, p. 11ff) says there are following participants namely, i) true player, ii) “false player,” iii) cheat or “spoil-sport,” and iv) “spectator.”

A ‘true player’ is a participant in a play who is “wholly absorbed” (Gadamer 1989, p. 109) in the play’s practice world. A false player, on the other hand, is merely pretending to ‘be there’ in the world of play, so while such player still obeys the rules, he or she does so superficially. A spoil-sport, Huizinga (1980, p. 11) says, is someone “who trespasses against the rules or ignores them”, and thus is seen as an anomaly who “breaks the magic world” and renders the play worthless; in contrast, a cheat threatens the fragility of playing field and must be ejected to bring order into a play. Here, Gadamer (1989, p. 103) adds that a spoil-sport, unlike other players, can also be seen as someone who constantly objectifies the play rather than let the play takes over. Finally, there is the ‘spectator’ who is equally interested in a play as the players (Huizinga 1980, p. 49, 85, 198) and thus becomes intimately involved in it. This involvement in play, Gadamer (1989, p. 110) points out, diminishes any differences between an absorbed spectator and a participating player as both are ‘wholly absorbed’ by being there in the playing field (also see, Geertz 1973, p. 412ff).

Hence, by spelling out different kinds of players, we hope to provide a nuanced view of practitioners as the players (cf. Klein and Myers 1999, p. 73-4; Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011, p. 350). The multi perspective view on the players also adds richness to the analysis inasmuch as it becomes possible to gain insights into the practices of central ‘players’ of a play and uncovering spoil-sports and false players in the playing field.

**Grasping the Generational Phenomena as Ludic Practices**

As stated earlier, some IS researchers have suggested that tech-savvy young people engage with IT differently than those of the older generation (see, Vodanovich et al. 2010; Wang et al. 2013). From the perspective of play, we can say the young people, who seem to be comfortable with technologies, are simply in play with IT, and their engagement can be described as a ludic practice. As the concept of play suggests, the players are absorbed in the playing field which binds them in a play. In the same way, young people are often seen as unreflectively interacting with ubiquitous IT which makes the everyday world meaningful for them. Thus, it is not reducible to a goal oriented game-play but can be seen as a fluid practice, for the players, which is an end in itself (Gadamer 1989, p. 104). Accordingly, when someone is
found to be absorbed in IT in everyday life, they are seen as playing in a playing field which is ‘always there’ on their disposal to step in and engage in a ‘play’ whenever they want (cf. Goffman 1961, p. 37ff). This sudden absorption in play allows “the player[s],” as Gadamer (1989, p. 109) points out, to “experience[s] the game as a reality that surpasses [them].” This phenomenon, as discussed earlier, is aptly captured by Kozinets et al. (2004) who show how the people find themselves “being-in-the-game” when they are fluidly engaging with technologies.

Further, this absorption in play is both practical and experiential; thus, it is difficult to grasp the phenomena without actually participating in it. Here, the ludic perspective allows researchers to critically study the world of participants. For instance, Gadamer (1989, p. 129) says that the players don’t enter “into a strange world” of play but rather it is their “own world” which is transformed by the dynamics of play. Accordingly, following Huizinga (1980, p. 48ff, 166ff), it is the practical skills of the players who transform the situation, where they find themselves, into a playing field. When we see the generational phenomena from this perspective, we find that some people too are using technologies in a skilful way, which to a naïve observer seems that they are in a world of their own. Further, as the concept of play suggests, “participating players are wholly absorbed in... a meaningful whole for an audience” (p. 109); here, we find an anchor for field researchers, to become the audience of, and to provide an opportunity to be part of the play by immersing in participants’ practices in the field.

**Research Method**

In order to study the everyday practices of young people, we are using ethnographic research (Klein and Myers 1999) to uncover how they interact with technology. One of the largest IT organizations in Asia-Pacific, TekOrg, is our ethnographic field site. We selected the site as it satisfies the basic criteria of our research scope namely, actively recruiting young professionals to work on their flagship software, TekPro; thus it provided a clearing to gain insights into the everyday practices of young professionals. The access was gained after initial contact was made in July 2013. One of the researchers joined the department, TekTeam, as a part-time software engineer, and thus got the opportunity to be at the heart of play in the field. Being a working employee also enabled the researcher to be an absorbed player (as a team member) and an absorbed spectator (as ethnographer). The latter further extends the researcher’s role to “a temporary participant” (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011, p. 350) or a player to participate in the ludic practices just as the players do.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Following the ethnographic guidelines, our primary source of data collection is participant observation (Myers 1999). Our field notes include “thick description[s]” (Geertz 1973, p. 3ff) of multiple data sources including informal chats, attendance in meetings (project, user group), electronic messaging logs (emails, messaging), audiovisual media (video conferencing, photographs, audio memos, video logs) as well as working closely with team members on the project knowledgebase. We are at the very late stage of ethnography and we have been in the field for over six months. In addition, we are also conducting semi-structured qualitative interviews of a highly candid and confessional nature (Myers and Newman 2007).

We are primarily focusing on how young participants engage with IT and more specifically what do they know and how do their practices shape the way they are? In this way, we hope to better understand the actual practices of the younger generation using the concept of play. We began the multi perspective hermeneutic analysis (Myers 2004) of events starting in the early stages of ethnography. We further invoked principles one and six of Klein and Myers (1999) to reveal many perspectives of play and types of the players. In this way, we see the field as a hermeneutic circle in both the data collection and analysis phase. Accordingly, we also kept the participants in the loop to get further input and gain deeper insight into our own analyses. Finally, all the data was captured, coded and analyzed using NVivo.

**Findings in the Field**

**Examples of Playing field**

After a few months in the field, it gradually became clear that the organization itself is not one playing field but a larger space in which many playing fields are created by the players. We observed that
spatiality, as the ludic perspective reveals, is entwined with the purpose of playthings and the skills of the players. The everyday language in the field implicitly hinted such ludic nature of interaction. For instance, within TekTeam, participants referred to some of the software repositories as “playgrounds,” “lounge,” “sandboxes,” and “sandpits.” Participants used the said places as ‘personal spaces’ to design, develop and test software solutions. One participant related software prototyping to the building of “sandcastles” in the “sandpits” and revealed that such ‘play’ can only be achieved in ‘a specific space’. Thus, we find the participants were at play with technologies in a playing field as they develop IT solutions. Other participants endorsed this insight and further reflected how they see other players in their playing field; for instance, one participant shared their perspective when looking at young people’s use of organizational IT when coming from everyday life:

“[People] will be adapting themselves and their use of technology... where their individual use [of IT] is going to be separate [than originally intended]... maybe for the [management] it would be less separated just because [they’re] more heavily invested in it.”

We note that there is a subtle hint to treat management as ‘false players’. Here, the management is placed within the playing field but is deemed ‘separate’ insofar as they are seen as someone who interacts systematically rather than ludically. This distinction is in line with a ludic interpretation which requires actual participation in the play in order to be a true player. Thus, in the playing field, the players who are not participating in the play are seen as false players.

Accordingly, what constitutes a playing field in everyday organizational spaces is what the players find closest to them. Here, we find the “software” is seen as a holistic space, as noted earlier, rather than an instance of a specific technology. This, again, is in line with ludic interpretation insofar as TekTeam pivots around software technologies and people are found to be self-aware of their playing ‘field’. For instance, reflecting on an event concerning an IT solution, one participant invoked the playing field concept and indicated software as their ‘domain’:

“[For me,] that’s something that was in my control which, as a software engineer, I like to feel in control just ‘cos I feel that software is my domain.”

Accordingly, we observed, if a breach occurs in the playing field, as in interaction with software ‘space’, they get frustrated and try to restore the space; inasmuch as to “make it in such a way that it works how I expected or at least works for my purpose at the time,” as one participant put. This brings us to the next point, the plaything.

**Examples of Plaything**

In line with the ludic view, we find that the young participants see IT as neither a specific device (such as mobile) nor a specific technology (such as instant messaging) nor as work item (such as project), but instead IT is seen as a holistic entity which is “necessary joined,” as one participant puts, with their other everyday purposes. In the field almost all of the IT equipment was found to have a dual play purpose namely, pleasure and work. Examples include using presentation screens as cinema during Christmas period, instant messaging used for pleasure purposes, and so forth. This suggests that many participants see IT as plaything which is specifically “a fun one,” as one participant said, to play with:

“What I would do is [to]... play around with it as much as I can in its [original] form and then I’d go ‘poke around the settings’, see what settings are available and then play around with the settings and see what’s happened from it. That’s what I would do.”

As discussed earlier, we observed the nature of interaction with IT is found to be highly ludic in practice. The above quote also links the concept of play to the acquisition of skills. One participant suggested their interaction with IT is exactly like handling a ‘plaything’ from which they derive ‘aesthetic pleasure’ in ‘actually using’ it:

“I think aesthetics are becoming increasingly important to the way, you know, our sense of enjoyment of it and perhaps functionality. ‘Cause you can be like “oh it is functional but it is also pleasing to look at,” you know, and... that’s all kind of interrelated. I don’t think you can necessarily extract [because]... it is necessarily joined [in a holistic whole].”
These insights endorse the holistic nature of plaything insofar as IT is seen as equipment that is woven with many perspectives, including aesthetics, purposefulness and functionality. Accordingly, IT as a plaything is seen as a tool with both practical and aesthetic significance assigned by the player. In this way, the practical interaction, specifically in terms of acquisition of skills with a plaything is captured in the temporality of play, which is presented next.

**Examples of Playtime**

Perhaps the most elusive aspect of a ludic practice is its temporality. From the play perspective, a ludic practice is never complete as it is always in projection. We also observed this in the field. Many people seem to incessantly and fluidly immerse in and out of the playing field. Consider the following field note documenting one such event:

“I was working on a task for [TekProj], and remotely connected to two virtual machines; a server and Joe’s machine which was ‘imaged’ on Bob’s workstation. As I tried to access Joe’s machine, I realized that I have lost the access. So, I went to Bob and asked if he can take a look, he was in the middle of a programming task, but as he looked at me and asked for more information; I noticed he is still writing code though not looking at screen. I gave him the details and he turned to the screen, finished what he was doing, switched to [another software], and began to investigate the issue. He went silent and while I was still talking to him about a possible solution, he said “I’ll have to play around a little with it.” We found a workaround and I went back to resume my work.”

Mainemelis (2001) documents a similar event in the field to demonstrate how absorption in play creates a sense of timeless in organizations. In such absorptions, the play takes primacy and the players’ skills automatically focus on what is significant, in this case ‘software programming’. We further found that players (participants) and spectators (the ethnographer) were equally absorbed in the play and immerse in and out of practices fluidly.

We also observed temporal projection in participants’ play with IT. One participant suggested that programming was like ‘playing a game’ in which they have to ‘solve puzzles’ in order to move to ‘next levels’ of the play. The participant constructed a narrative with vivid play language, and said revisiting a technological problem is akin to playing an old move which is ‘boring’: “When you have solved a problem and if you come across it again a second time, it is not so interesting anymore.”

**Discussion**

In this paper, we have put forward a novel concept of play to shed light on how young people interact with IT within an organizational context. Our evidence suggests that when we put the young generation’s IT practices under a ludic lens, they indeed seem to be ‘in play’ with technology. Thus, the field evidence reveals a nuanced view of their use of technology that is grounded in their everyday practices.

This ethnography adds two distinct contributions to IS research: first, we introduce Huizinga’s ludic perspective as a framework to help understand complex social phenomena using everyday practices; second, the organizational ethnographic evidence sheds light on the practical intricacies from young people’s perspective, thus placing the use of IT in the broader context of everyday practices of younger generation. For this perspective, our ethnography uncovered the dynamics of everyday ludic practices in terms of spatial and temporal significances.

We find the ludic lens is suitable for studying everyday practices, specifically within organizations. In this regard, Huizinga (1980, p. 200) reminds us: “some of the great business concerns deliberately instil the play-spirit into their workers so as to step up production”. We have demonstrated that his insight is still significant and has the potential to open new avenues of critical research. One of the potential avenues could be to explore the ‘seriousness’ of play in terms of ‘serious users’ of technology within organizations and to conceptualize these complex practices in a coherent manner.

We acknowledge a few limitations of our work: first, it is based on ethnography of a single site; second, the ludic lens is just one of many philosophical perspectives that could be used to study this phenomenon. However, we think that our findings might be of relevance for other organizations and practice research.
References


