'Play', 'game', and identity: concepts to discuss with Jesper Juul
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Michiel de Lange - delange@fwb.eur.nl

summary
The research project 'Playful Identities' is an interdisciplinary approach studying the influence of new technologies/media (internet, mobile phone, games) on contemporary identities. The main aim is to critically rethink Paul Ricoeur's narrative identity theory, and investigate the concept of 'play' as a way to better describe current identities as shaped by digital media.

I want to use the concepts of 'play' and 'game' to talk about "mobile identities". The concept of identity is wrought with many paradoxes, as hitherto essentialist definitions have been criticized and lost their firm roots and groundedness. Mobile technologies, I suggest, contribute to this de-essensializing of identity. In this sense they work as media of separation, constantly leading us away from essentialist convictions of identity. I argue our current identities are characterized by a constant movement between a number of paradoxes. But at the same time we like to believe in identity, even find it necessary to do so. Typical for contemporary technologically mediated identities, I believe, is this constant oscillation between believing and non-believing. To describe this permanent mobility, I want to deploy the concept of play - "free play" (Carse 1986) - as an ongoing proces of stepping into- and out of various circumscribed 'identity games'. I want to rework well-formulated narrative theories - e.g. Ricoeur (1992), Taylor (1989) - into a thesis of "mobile identities", in which spatial movements and routes complement temporal aspects of identity construction. Identity becomes a life-long nomadic enterprise. Mobile media, I suggest, also act as media of coherence. The various hybrid media spaces we live in and carry with us, enable us to experience selfhood as temporally *and* spatially coherent. Play and games for me thus are metaphors to capture the aspect of *mobility* in identity experience, construction, and expression.

Aim

The aim of this text is to think about *game* and *play* as metaphors to talk about identity and the use of mobile media.

"Mobile identities"

Personal identity can be described as the construction, experience and expression of selfhood. Cultural identity can be described as a sense of belonging to a certain group on the basis of experienced similarity. Both give meaning, value and a sense of direction (end) to one's life. Through personal and cultural identities, people relate to themselves, others and the world around them. According to narrative theorist Paul Ricoeur (1992), the narrative is the privileged form of mediation between these relations. Through the narrative, we relate to ourselves, to others, and to the world outside. Narrative identity theory tends to emphasize temporal aspects of identity. Space and movement receive little attention with the narrativists. Ricoeur's main concern is how can we talk about identity as something that stays the same over time (*idem*), yet is continuously in flux through the developments we make and undergo over time (*ipse*)? How can I have a Self, although I am not the same person I was in the past? How can I develop my Self into the future and still remain the same? Yet time and space cannot be separated from each other. In the light of increasingly mobile lifestyles and travels, in the context of globalization, identity also involves a lot of spatial questions. How does *I* relate to *me*? What room do I occupy for myself in this world? How deep do I want to probe into myself, perhaps to find the 'real me', or to continuously refresh my Self and never stay the same? How do I move through life, what paths do I take? How near do I go, or how far do I want to stay from others? What places in the world do I consider mine? Which items do I consider to belong within my personal lifeworld, and which ones do I keep outside? How do I relate to the myriad of different and shifting contexts?

I want to argue that identity as a mediating concept is mobile. It is continuously in flux. Identity, so we are told, is no longer a solid category or essence. Instead it is contextual, fluid, and mobile. Yet the concept of identity remains paradoxical. We want to develop a highly original personal identity, yet we want to belong to larger groups as well. We want to detach ourselves from fixed, and sometimes oppressive identity categories, yet we want to feel attached both in time (history) and space ('elsewhere') to a larger whole. We want to choose and shape our Selves in freedom, yet keep phrasing cultural identities as a higher order imposition: innate and ours by birth, by blood, by vocation. We are highly reflexive and critical towards any claim on truth and essence, yet we want to believe in the real, the profound, and the lasting. Personal and cultural identities continuously move and alternate in a field that is shaped by historically changing sets of identity 'landmarks' by which we orient ourselves moving through life:

Identity as highly personal and unique (difference) and/or being part of a group (similarity).
Identity as a rational product or work (which can be explained) and/or identity as a strong emotion and conviction (which cannot be put in words).
Identity as a fixed and categorizable entity (a state) and/or identity as fluid and transitory (a proces).
Identity as the search for the authentic and/or identity as a contextual construction.
Identity as an imposed property (e.g. inherited) and/or identity as acquired during life (by choice or fate).
Identity as freely chosen and/or acquired by fate or (mis)fortune.
identity as a singular entity and/or multiple identities.
Identity as striving for unification and/or. acceptance of contingency.
Identity as (striving for) coherence and/or accepting contradictions.
Identity as the result of description & inscription (something I *am*, *have* or *give* to myself) and/or the result of ascription (something others give to me/impose on me).
Identity developed through inwardness and/or developed through outward orientation and interaction with outside world & people.
Identity as search for freedom (release, escape) and/or need for limits, boundedness, and security.
Identity as an 'object' with an essence, a potentiality for action and/or only there in actual practise and performance.
Identity as a conscious awareness of Self and/or sub-consciousness, state of flow.
Identity as purely 'spirit' and/or identity as defined by the material: e.g. consumer goods we surround ourselves with.
Identity as a moral imperative (I have to think about myself and develop an identity) and/or a certain carelessness for identity issues.
Identity quest as fun and enjoyable and/or identity as a heavy burden.

Although arguably, western thought likes to think in binaries, these are not necessarily oppositions. I think many people will recognize a bit of both sides of these oppositions, though they may tend towards one of the poles, hence the use of "and/or". Also, this is not a static field. The parameters of identity *and* the discourses we think with and use to talk about identity change over time. Charles Taylor shows for instance that the idea of looking inward, the "inner turn", is a historical process in thinking about ourselves (Taylor 1989).

An overarching theme, I suggest, is the tension between believing in either of these poles as constitutive for one's identity, and lurking disbelief nibbling away at this certainty as a result of late-modernities' "increased reflexivity" and "constant doubt" (Giddens 1991). We want to believe, we need to believe. In specific situations and contexts we actually become something *and* become someone. Festivals, meetings, rituals, social gatherings, etc. are contexts where we take on a situational identity as member of a group, and fulfill our quest for personal Selfhood. I want to describe such situations and contexts as a *game*, having its own rules, being for its own sake, being finite, bounded (and some more formal descriptions of what a game is - e.g Juul 2005). Such games involve a certain pretence, a "temporary suspension of disbelief". We take on an identity *as if* we believe in it, yet knowing somewhere in the back of our minds that this is a game, not real, that it is possible to step out of it [Mannoni: "Je sais bien, mais quand meme…"]. There is always a critical little voice whispering in our ear: it's not real! Almost always, we eventually step out of the game (or are forced out). Our "increased reflexivity" propels us to move on, get into other identity games, search for new contexts in which we can feel our self come to rest, and sediment, if only there for an instant. This ongoing and open-ended movement of going in and out of such games I call *play*.

For me, the interesting aspect is not identities' situational side, but how to understand it's in-between-ness, its mobility. I don't see context/situation (game) *in itself* as important for identity, but the in-betweenness, the movement, *play*. More and more people are in-between. They have no clear single identity setting, no single identity. Instead they are hybrid creatures. Essential for their sense of identity is movement between different identity settings. In Indonesia for instance, where I recently did fieldwork, people move between identity contexts, such as the traditional and the modern, often with ease and without an apparent sense of contradiction. It's a kind of 'cultural mobility' - the movement between (sub)cultural settings. Through a constant sense of being on the move, identity settings become playgrounds. They are circles with their own rules and make-belief that one can step into and step out of again. Inside the circle the *game* is played, the movement between circles is *play*. It's fun to dress up traditionally for a two-day long wedding. It's fun to pretend you are a celebrity dressed to kill in the nightclub after the wedding. It's even more fun to able to *move between* those settings.

Mobile technologies and play
An analysis of mobile technologies in relation to the concepts of play and games, and the

concomitant questioning of identity, can be conceptualized on multiple levels.

First of all, the kind of games we play and the way we are playing is changing. We witness the rise of digital games. The quantity of games, the time spent playing, the number of players, all seem to be on the increase. Qualitatively, the ways games are played change too. Typical aspects of digital games are the use of avatars, the importance of visuals & player perspectives, changes in narrativity. This level is about understanding identities as shaped by playing games.

Second, medium-specific elements of mobile technologies, and the way we interact with them, can be understood as playful. E.g. the joy of trying out and exploring new uses, competitiveness between users (who is the most skillful/has the biggest/smallest, fastest…), 'mobile gifting' as playful exchanges, the tendency to challenge predefined rules by hacking technologies, locative media blurring boundaries between virtual and real spaces, etc. Game characteristics such as proposed by Huizinga (1955), Caillois (2001, orig. 1958), Juul (2005), can be applied to our interaction with technologies. This level is about understanding human use and interactions with technologies as *playful*.

Third, I understand the influence of technologies on our lives as 'playful'. We spend an increasing portion of our lives in technologically mediated worlds. We find information there, we communicate in these worlds, we have profound experiences and emotions there. Clear-cut borders between the real and the virtual are disappearing, dissolving into a "hybrid space". Technologies also bring a certain unexpectedness, contingency, a sense of being played by technologies. Absorption in- and retreat from such in-between worlds can be understood as stepping into- and out of a game. The ability to rapidly switch communicative contexts for instance may induce a sense of identity as play: spatially bounded theatrical performances of self (Goffman 1959). In-between spaces become increasingly important too, as "liminal spaces" in which essentialist identities are shed (Turner 1982). This level is about understanding technological spaces as *games*, and the movements in- and between them as *play*.

Fourth, I will make the argument that new media influence culture: the rise of ludic culture. There are ludic elements is popular and material culture: e.g. in architecture as a kind of make-belief of 'historical' and 'authentic' places; in branding & marketing creating desirable illusions (often of symbolic proximity); leisure time spent at 'festival' sites, suggesting inversion from the ordinary, the regular, the everyday. Non-material culture too become ludic: important values are (sometimes only semantically) 'playful' and 'game-like': youthfulness (infantility even), non-seriousness and irony, search for joy, pleasure, flow, energy, optimization of life (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), life as competition. This level is about understanding contemporary culture itself as playful.

Mobile technologies on the one hand expose the multiple roles and facets of our identities because for instance the mobile phone helps to coordinate rapid switching between settings, stories and types of behaviors. Mobile phone stimulates multiplicity of settings, plot and character. The mobile phone may increase the sense of having many fragmented identities. It helps stepping in and out of different instances of experiencing and expressing identity. Yet at the same time the mobile phone helps to create coherence between the many different sessions, events, and situations that make up one's identities. Even though elements of narrative identity (such as singularity of setting, linear time, permanence of character) may no longer be so strongly felt, mobile technologies offer means to integrate and maintain a sense of coherence of self. The mobile phone aids in sustaining continuity. Calls are like ongoing (micro-)narratives. I am still the same me that answers the telephone all the time, picking up where we left off last time. The phone also helps in sustaining unity of Self. The phone is a tool for managing selfhood, tying the many different relational strands that make up me as a social person together in one device, one terminal, one access point to the world. It also helps to maintain coherence: feeling one, or singular, in a networked mesh of many relations. It is *me* who answers.

In-between *hybrid spaces* (De Souza e Silva 2006) are portable, mobile, and personal. They offer constant potential to step into the various identity games we're involved in, and fully participate in them. They also offer the potential to step out of them as well, thus 'play' with different sides of our selfhood. Yet mobile media, it must be said, also bring about a sense of 'being played'. It shouldn't be forgotten that identity is not only freedom, but also about being identified, being called. Apart from stepping into identity games by choice, we can also be called into an identity game, be fixated into one essence, or be forced to move out (e.g. by being ostracized socially, by political forces, by a psychosis, by any "fateful moment"). We then 'are played'.

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