



Received: 27 July 2016  
Accepted: 02 October 2016  
Published: 19 October 2016

\*Corresponding author: Koen B. Tanghe,  
Department of Philosophy, Universiteit  
Gent, Blandijnberg 2, Ghent 9000,  
Belgium  
E-mail: [koenbernard.tanghe@ugent.be](mailto:koenbernard.tanghe@ugent.be)

Reviewing editor:  
Peter Stanley Fosl, Transylvania  
University, USA

Additional information is available at  
the end of the article

## HISTORY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# *Homo Ludens* (1938) and the crisis in the humanities

Koen B. Tanghe<sup>1\*</sup>

**Abstract:** Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938) is, in certain circles, still highly esteemed as a paradigm of humanist scholarship. Huizinga argues that cultures arise and unfold in and as play but that they tend to lose their playfulness as they mature. As a gifted writer and erudite philologist, cross-cultural historian, and culture critic, he made a, at first sight, brilliant case for this intriguing thesis. However, a more thorough reading shows that it is unsatisfactory as an explanatory treatise about the link between human play and human cultures. It is argued that this striking combination of intellectual brilliance and lack of convincing content is symptomatic of the lingering crisis in the humanities and that Huizinga's masterwork thus excellently exemplifies the need of what will be called soft consilience between the humanities and science. It was anathema for Huizinga because of his strong belief in the vocational, epistemic, and methodological autonomy of the humanities, but any academic treatise on the role of play in human cultures should start out from the scientific perspective of the biology of our species and of play.

**Subjects:** Bioscience; Behavioral Sciences; Humanities

**Keywords:** Huizinga; humanities; *Homo Ludens*; play; science; culture

### 1. Introduction: The existential "crisis" in the humanities

In recent years, we have been confronted with multiple reports about a supposedly alarming, numerical, or popular decline of the humanities.<sup>1</sup> In reality, the great collapse of enrollment in the humanities happened almost entirely in the 1970s (e.g. Bérubé, 2013; Mateos, 2013), mainly because of a remarkable shift in education choices among women (in the late 1960s, more than 20% of the degrees they earned were in the humanities, in the 1980s this number had dropped to less than 10%). In fact, in both the US and the EU, the number of students as a percentage of the entire college-age population, majoring in disciplines like history, English, or philosophy is greater than it was in the 1950s or the 1980s (Silbey, 2013). If there is, indeed, a crisis, it is largely located in the hearts

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The ultimate rationale of my research concerns the ancient project of an integrated science of our species, a true "anthropology" or *Homo sapiens 1* as Richerson and Boyd call it in their *Not by Genes Alone* (2006). One of the many obstacles that have always stood in the way of realizing this project, is the ancient friction between the "humanities" and the "sciences." It is this friction, and the associated crisis in the humanities, that inspired my analysis of Johan Huizinga's classic and intriguing book *Homo Ludens* (1938).

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Johan Huizinga's book *Homo Ludens* (1938) still is an icon of humanist scholarship. The idea that we are foremost characterized by our inclination to play and that this "instinct" is, in important ways, antecedent to the quintessential human phenomenon, called culture, is intriguing, to say the least. Huizinga's elaboration of this idea is, furthermore, in more than one way, intellectually attractive. However, it at the same time also is seriously flawed as an explanatory treatise and therefore fails to convince the modern, critical reader. It is a dichotomy that is symptomatic of a lingering existential crisis in the humanities.

and minds of humanists: it is existential, rather than numerical. Many humanists feel that their status is deflating, compared with that of their scientific colleagues and some even have nagging doubts about their mission and *raison d'être* in modern research universities.

It is a profound malaise that goes back several decades (Arndt, 2006; Rosen, 2014). In 1999, Robert Weisbuch lamented, in an essay that proposed six ideas “to revive the humanities,” that humanists had lost the respect of their colleagues in other fields, “as well as the attention of an intelligent public. *The action is elsewhere*. We’re living through a time when outrage with the newfangled in the humanities—with deconstruction or Marxism or whatever—has become plain lack of interest. No one’s even angry with us now, just bored” (Weisbuch, 1999, p. B4; my italics). There can be discerned three kinds of reactions to the realization or idea that “the action is elsewhere.” Some humanists (e.g. Kronman, 2007) have questioned the (epistemological) relevance or moral credentials and desirability of the scientific action (cf. the science wars; hence also some of the “newfangled” initiatives in the humanities, see Arndt, 2006). Many scholars emphasize the relevance and importance of the traditional humanities: they argue that the humanities simply have different (ethical, political, spiritual, fun) ultimate vocations from the sciences and that humanists should reevaluate these vocations and revamp the humanities curriculum accordingly (see, e.g. Arndt, 2006; Else, 1969; Kronman, 2007 and many of the contributions to Soeiro & Tavares, 2012).<sup>2</sup> Lastly, there are also people who believe that the humanities should join (strong consilience) or at least try to benefit from (soft consilience) the scientific “action” (aims, methodologies and theories). Far from clinging to their original and possibly outdated vocations, the humanities should, according to these scholars and scientists, “adapt themselves to the needs of a society dominated by science and technology or retreat in social triviality” (Plumb, 1964, p. 8).

This last approach does not seem to be the most self-evident, in light of the centuries old chasm between science and the humanities (Bouterse & Karstens, 2015; Snow, 1959; Wallerstein & Lee, 2004). However, it should be pointed out that both cultures have, at the same time, always influenced each other. Without the highly innovative Renaissance humanists, the Scientific Revolution would even never have taken place. “It is,” as the British historian John Henry (2008, p. 17) puts it, “chiefly through the reformist ideas of the humanists (...) that we arrive at the origins of the Scientific Revolution.” Seen this way, the plea for more vocational, methodological, and/or epistemic consilience between science and the humanities is not as utopian as it may seem but rather fits into a historical pattern.

Steven Pinker is one of the most vocal proponents of this consilience option. In a much-noted article entitled “Science is not your enemy” (2013), he argues that various forms of consilience with science offer the humanities countless possibilities for much needed innovation in “understanding.”<sup>3</sup> It is in the light of this plea for more consilience that I would like to discuss one of the classic works in the humanities: Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: Proeve eener Bepaling van het Spel-element der Cultuur* (1938) (Huizinga, 1949, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*). It is generally considered to be one of his masterpieces (Section 2). Huizinga, indisputably a giant among 20th century humanists, was a strong believer in, and advocate of, the autonomy of the humanities *vis à vis* the sciences. *Homo Ludens* was, as we shall see, in at least some respects, a clear exponent of this defiant attitude (Section 3). It is also this strictly humanist nature of *Homo Ludens* that helps to explain why it has been severely criticized as an analysis of the role of play in cultures (Section 4). It will be tentatively suggested that a credible humanist treatise on human play and human cultures should, in at least some respects, be consilient with the science and, particularly, the biology of play (Section 5). It is in this sense that *Homo Ludens* can be interpreted as testifying to the said existential crisis in the humanities and that it exemplifies the need of forms of consilience of the humanities with science. An uncompromisingly humanist treatise like *Homo Ludens* certainly has its intellectual charms. It is, without a shadow of a doubt, an impressive intellectual *tour de force*. However, unfortunately or not, in “a society dominated by science and technology,” it smacks, to many, both inside and outside academia, of frivolous triviality.

## 2. A masterpiece

Born in Groningen, the Netherlands, in 1872, Huizinga was educated as a linguist and Orientalist. After taking his degree in 1896 in comparative philology (on a Sanskrit subject), he started teaching history at a high school in Haarlem. In 1905, he became Professor of Dutch History and of History of the Middle Ages and Modern Times at Groningen University. In 1915, he was appointed Professor of General History at Leiden University. However, Huizinga earned (most of) his spurs as a practitioner of cultural history. His best work is furthermore characterized by high literary quality and “expressive capacity” (Hugenholtz, 1979). Logher (1947) speaks of a meeting and sometimes uncomfortable cohabitation, in Huizinga, of an accurate philologist-historian and an artist.<sup>4</sup> Kossmann (1973, p. 368) refers to several scholars who detected a number of inner contrasts in Huizinga that “can be reduced to a common denominator, the fundamental antithesis in Huizinga’s nature being the conflict between his artistic genius and his rational scholarship.” The Dutch polyglot also always succeeded in seamlessly drawing together several of the different subjects that drew his interest: art (in particular the visual arts), ethnography, Orientalism, linguistics, philology, history, the theory and philosophy of history, and culture theory and criticism. Willem Otterspeer, a historian of universities at Leiden University and author of an engaging intellectual biography on Huizinga (*Reading Huizinga*, 2010), depicts Huizinga’s intellectual development as a series of pupations: “A close look shows how naturally the philologist emerged from the linguist, the historian from the philologist, the cultural critic from the historian. An attentive eye will see that the critic was latent in the linguist, and that the historian always remained a philologist” (2009, pp. 41–42).

It was this hybrid or “fluid” scholar-artist, cultural historian and humanist *par excellence*, who wrote *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen* (1919) (1924, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*), the work that established his reputation.<sup>5</sup> However, it is probably *Homo Ludens*, that “strange” and “difficult” book (Gombrich, 1973, pp. 277–278), that should be considered Huizinga’s *magnum opus*, rather than *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. It is, of course, to begin with, a very ambitious work in that it aims at showing that play is “older than culture” (1955, p. 1) and therefore foundational to culture. It is also only in *Homo Ludens* that we see the full breadth of Huizinga’s multidisciplinary eruditeness.<sup>6,7</sup> Otterspeer (2010, p. 49) states that *Homo Ludens* “encompasses virtually all themes of his work. It not only provides the context and framework, as it were, for his cultural-historical studies of the Middle Ages and the modern era, but it also revisits his earliest work in linguistics, on the need to construe language and culture as an integrated whole.”

Norman Cantor (1991, p. 378), the noted Canadian-American medievalist, rightly called it Huizinga’s most ambitious work. The philologist in the Dutch scholar examines how the activity that we call play has been conceptualized in various languages and continuously refers to play terms and phrases in at least half a dozen languages, from *pantun* (Malay) to *gelp*, *gelpen* (Old-German); the ethnographer in him talks about the Native American *potlatch*, the Melanesian *kula* and the Arabic *monafara* and *mofakhara*; the historian refers to the famous *Combat des Trente* (1351) and the agonistic element in the medieval problem of the universals; the art lover Huizinga dedicates an entire chapter to the play element in various forms of art; and the culture critic laments that the playful element in Western cultures has, since the 18th century, lost much of its significance.

## 3. An uncompromisingly humanist treatise

*Homo Ludens* may be an extremely erudite and impressively multidisciplinary treatise, it is also, epistemically, methodologically and vocationally, a strictly humanist and non- or even anti-scientific analysis of the relationship between play and human cultures. The aforementioned, Austrian-born art historian Sir Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich (1973, p. 292) reproaches Huizinga for using an essentialist definition of “play” (even though he was a professed anti-essentialist), which he opposes to a more scientific, nominalist approach. Biologists are indeed more flexible about the concept, but merely because it has proven impossible to define.<sup>8</sup> The real problem with Huizinga’s definition of play is in my opinion not that it is “essentialist” but that it completely and explicitly ignores the biological roots and nature of human play. In the preface, Huizinga explains that the aim of *Homo Ludens* is to try to integrate the concept of play into that of culture. “Consequently, play is to be

understood here not as a biological phenomenon but as a cultural phenomenon. It is approached historically, not scientifically.” In the first chapter, “Nature and significance of play as a cultural phenomenon,” the biology of play is again explicitly excluded: play only interests him in as far as it is a strictly cultural as opposed to biological phenomenon.<sup>9</sup>

Whence this aversion for biology?<sup>10</sup> In an intellectual autobiography (1947), Huizinga admitted that he was himself surprised, while contemplating his youth years, by his almost total lack of interest, not only in philosophical and mathematical subjects, but also in the natural sciences, despite the fact that he had plenty of friends who were enthralled by biologists like Haeckel and Büchner or physicists like Lorenz and Maxwell and even though his own father was a talented professor of physiology. However, there is more to Huizinga’s reluctance to take into account the biological roots of play than personal interests and talents. He was not an economist either, but that did not prevent him from discussing, in chapter 20 of *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* (1936), the relationship between the spiritual crisis that is the subject of this book and the socio-economic relations of his time.<sup>11</sup> So why then did Huizinga not consider it necessary to deal with the biology of play in a book about human play?

The answer, in short, is that he believed that human play was intrinsically not a biological phenomenon. Biological interpretations allegedly all started out from the (mistaken) assumption that play must have some kind of biological purpose. They did, in Huizinga’s humanist opinion, not pay enough attention to the subjective meaning that play has for players and to the profoundly *esthetic quality* or beauty of play.<sup>12</sup> They did not explain why the baby crows with pleasure or why the gambler loses herself in her passion. Nature could just as easily have given her children the biological functions that play fulfills in the form of purely mechanical exercises. “But no, she gave us play, with its tension, its mirth, and its fun” (1955, p. 3). This intensity of play “finds no explanation in biological analysis” (p. 2).<sup>13</sup> Huizinga believed that it is precisely in this intensity that the very essence and the primordial quality of play lies. It is, in short, foremost a mental phenomenon. In acknowledging play, one acknowledges mind, “for whatever else play is, it is not matter” (p. 3). And because play is a “mind phenomenon,” it is a topic for the humanities (“geesteswetenschappen”), not for the natural sciences.<sup>14</sup> Huizinga furthermore asserted that play only became possible when an influx of mind broke down the absolute determinism of the cosmos. “The very existence of play continually confirms the supra-logical nature of the human situation. (...) In tackling the problem of play *as a function of culture proper and not as it appears in the life of the animal or the child*, we begin where biology and psychology leave off” (pp. 3–4, my italics). In private notes, he even wrote: “the goal is not to describe all forms of play, only there where it passes into culture” (cited in Van der Lem, 1993, p. 252).

I believe that this short note betrays the real or ultimate reason why Huizinga describes play as a non-biological “mind phenomenon”: it was, more than anything else, his insistence on the sharp (epistemic, methodological, and vocational) distinction between the humanities and the natural sciences or culture and nature that inspired his humanist and restricted definition of play as a “mind phenomenon.” This definition was subsequently, in a perfectly circular way, used to argue that play is a topic for the humanities, and not for the natural sciences. The ancient, humanist separation between the study of nature and that of humanity was indeed a crucial element in Huizinga’s thinking. In an inaugural address as Professor of History at the University of Groningen (Huizinga, 1905), he already sided with the likes of Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Simmel, Wilhelm Windelband, and Heinrich Rickert who had opposed Karl Lamprecht’s positivism and vindicated the right of history to an autonomous method, separate from the mechanistic natural sciences.<sup>15</sup> The “understanding” of the humanities was said to differ from the more nomothetic—i.e. oriented toward the establishment of general laws—modes of inquiry of the natural sciences in the particular attention that they offer to subjective and idiographic experiences and to meaning, purpose, and self-reflection as opposed to empirical “truths.”<sup>16</sup> The humanities’ methodology therefore had to be historical, hermeneutic, or interpretative and even speculative (“narrative imagination”), rather than experimental and quantitative (cf. Dilthey’s terminological distinction between interpretative “Geisteswissenschaften” and explanatory “Naturwissenschaften”).

Like these scholars, Huizinga opposed the positivist ideal of general, objective laws that rigidly govern a mechanistically conceived nature or reality. In the aforementioned autobiography (1947), he speaks of the incontrovertible vindication of the mind and culture sciences from the spell of a self-assured scientific evolutionism and of a restoration of the equivalent autonomy of the humanities. It was precisely the particular that was the subject of the historiography that he practiced and subjectivity was inevitable or even the only meaningful reality (cf. his definition of play as a “mental phenomenon”). In a lecture, given in 1926 to the general assembly of the “Historical Genootschap” (Huizinga, 1950), he observed that the idea of the autonomous humanities (“geesteswetenschappen”) had, since Rickert published his *Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung* (1896–1902), only become stronger. Practicing historians were, nevertheless, strongly influenced by the scientific thinking of their colleagues. He referred in this respect to the idea of development. Once it had become clothed in the guise of evolution, it was, for historians, almost impossible not to become infected by this powerful notion. Huizinga, by contrast, pointed out that a historical phenomenon was profoundly different from an organism. The latter is sharply delineated from its environment whereas a historical phenomenon is not: “closed” historical “organisms” do not exist. Napoleon, for example, can only be understood as a child of his time. Also, historical changes are not comparable to evolutionary changes because they are much less internally determined.<sup>17</sup>

It is abundantly clear that this methodological dimension of the humanities’ autonomy was important to Huizinga. However, I believe that the most important way in which *Homo Ludens* was conceived as a non-scientific and humanist treatise was not methodological but rather vocational: it seems to me that Huizinga did not at all aim at critically or objectively investigating the roles that play may or may not fulfill in human cultures, or at contributing to such an investigation with a falsifiable hypothesis. He rather aimed at developing an erudite and intellectually charming, humanist narrative around certain preconceived ideas about the nature of play and the role it plays in human cultures.<sup>18</sup> We already know one of these preconceptions: play lies at the origin of culture. We will shortly (Section 4) see, though, that this was not Huizinga’s ultimate or most profound preconception regarding the nature of the relationship between play and human cultures.

Huizinga’s exclusive interest in play as a cultural and formal phenomenon must, lastly and paradoxically, also be seen in light of the biologically inspired historiographical morphology (and physiology) that he, in the late 1920s, intended to elaborate (see Krul, 1990, ch. 6).<sup>19</sup> Small formal units (e.g. myths, sacred acts, sanctification, and secret societies) and functions (e.g. honor, resistance and servitude) that are, both synchronically and diachronically, culturally stable or constant were to become the focal points of a cultural historiography. *Homo Ludens* is the only result of this project. It can, as Krul (1990, p. 238) puts it, be considered a study of one particular though also all-pervasive and irreducible cultural form: play. In a similar vein, Gombrich (1973) points out that play had become to Huizinga what Goethe would have called an *Urphänomen* and that this is the reason why *Homo Ludens* offers so few answers. Goethe, he says, had used this strategy to preserve his notion of color from the analysis of Newtonian optics.

Huizinga withdrew into a similar fortress to ward off the onslaught of psychology and the study of animal behaviour. It is for this reason, I believe, that *Homo ludens* raises so many questions and offers so few answers. The notion of play as an irreducible fact could not but rule out any attempts at explanation. I hope to have shown that Huizinga was consistent in adopting this attitude, and it can certainly not be the purpose of this paper to enter into the vast range of problems he so deliberately excluded. (Gombrich, 1973, p. 192)

#### 4. Flawed as an explanatory treatise

This brings me to the credibility of Huizinga’s analysis. It may not (primarily) have been conceived as a truly or objectively explanatory treatise, but that is, inevitably, how it was and is perceived.

Unfortunately, seen from this explanatory angle, *Homo Ludens* all of a sudden does not look like a *magnum opus* anymore. Gombrich is certainly not the only scholar who has put its explanatory credentials in serious doubt. Logher (1947, p. 102), for example, likewise remarks that *Homo Ludens* does not satisfy the reader because he treats play as a purely formal phenomenon whereas our mind also longs for content.<sup>20</sup> That content can, as we shall see (Section 5), ultimately only be derived from biology since human play is at least as deeply rooted in our biological nature and in the animal kingdom, as human cultures are in play. A thorough understanding of the role of play in human cultures therefore requires, in sharp contrast with what Huizinga claimed, that we also have a good grasp of its biological and adaptive significance (cf. Goldschmidt, 2007). Or, as the biologist Burghardt (2006, p. 5) puts it: “It is unrealistic to think we can truly understand human play without understanding the play of dogs, monkeys, and turtles (...).” In the following three subsections, I will first discuss three important flaws in Huizinga’s analysis.

#### 4.1. A “ludicrous” contradiction

The motivating energy behind *Homo Ludens* was “a recognition that something had gone terribly wrong with the element of play in culture, and that this ‘something’ was connected to the rise of mass movements and totalitarian regimes, and to a profound cultural crisis (...)” (Thomassen, 2014, p. 146).<sup>21</sup> This *contemporaneous* pessimism fed into, reinforced or confirmed Huizinga’s romantically inspired *historical* pessimism (even though he called himself, in the preface to *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*, an optimist), something which undoubtedly partly explains the lasting and somewhat enigmatic appeal of the Dutch scholar (cf. his often criticized idealizing of the past, see Geyl, 1961).<sup>22</sup> In his *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (1997, p. 80), the American historian Arthur L. Herman defines the historical pessimist as someone who “sees the present as systematically undoing the achievements of a creative and ordered past.” Jakob Burckhardt, the influential Swiss historian of art and culture whom Huizinga held in high esteem, for example, believed, like Huizinga, that high culture and creativity had become debased in our modern world where “money becomes and remains the great measure of things, [and] poverty the greatest vice” (cited in Herman, 1997, p. 88). The Middle Ages, by contrast, for all their faults, had been “without (...) threatening national wars, without forced mass industry with deadly competition, without credit and capitalism” (cited in *ibid.*). In short: “Our life is a business, theirs was living” (cited in *ibid.*). Burckhardt’s historical pessimism “sprang from a view of society that he inherited from Ranke, the view that it is a complete and organic whole that must eventually face decline and death just as any living organism does” (Herman, 1997, p. 106). The organic principle or metaphor was one of the hallmarks of Romanticism (e.g. Peckham, 1951); whereas the machine metaphor was of course central to the advent and development of modern science. Modern science was, more in general, forward looking and inspired by the idea of progress, whereas medieval philosophy and classical, Renaissance humanism were, at bottom, pessimistic and backward-looking endeavors: “The classical humanist recovered the literature and the monuments of classical antiquity with a sense of return to the pure gold of a civilization better and higher than his own” (Yates, 1964, p. 1). And: “the overall orientation toward the past that marked humanist thought no less than that of the scholastics was not conducive to science taken as a search for discovery rather than for recovery” (Cohen, 1994, p. 273).

This romantic pessimism clearly also inspired Huizinga’s analysis of play and of cultural history in general. His ultimate and, granted, magnificently accomplished (humanist) aim was to esthetically express a romantic cultural pessimism and to eruditely ventilate all too warranted political worries. This may explain or help explain why so much praise was heaped upon a book that, as an explanatory theory about the role of play in cultures, was deeply unsatisfying: it struck a moral and esthetic nerve. A central element in his story is that a culture tends to lose its original, fresh playfulness as it “matures.” The “play-element gradually recedes into the background” and ultimately becomes “almost completely hidden behind cultural phenomena” (Huizinga, 1955, pp. 46–47). Huizinga assumes that cultures spring forth from play, much like human beings develop physiologically and cognitively through play (the organic metaphor). Once mature, they become, like adults, less playful. The 19th century lost many of the play-elements “so characteristic of former ages” (1955, p. 195). Play lost its significance in almost all cultural domains where once it ruled supreme. The 20th century, dissected

in the last chapter, was even worse: “civilization is no longer played, and even where it still seems to play, it is false play (...)” (p. 206). This chapter reads as an indictment of modern times. Indeed, Gombrich (1973, p. 277) advises the reader of *Homo Ludens* “to start with the last chapter and work their way backward. It is in the last chapter that Huizinga reveals what his problem really is and why he undertook the labour of surveying so large and diverse a field for manifestations of play.”

Play, Huizinga laments, has, in the 20th century, in many instances degenerated into a blend of adolescence and barbarism. In *The Shadow of Tomorrow* (1936), this toxic cultural amalgamation had been called “puerilism.” It concerned habits that are as old as the world but that had become more prevalent and brutal in Huizinga’s time. Puerilism could be studied most thoroughly in all its aspects in America and was characterized by a mixing of the sphere of play and the sphere of serious activity. In apparently serious activities, like politics, hid an element of play (political games), while true play was being taken too seriously and had become technically overorganized. In *Homo Ludens* he refers in particular to the habit of gregariousness: “It results in puerilism of the lowest order: yells or other signs of greeting, the wearing of badges and sundry items of political haberdashery, walking in marching order or at a special pace and the whole rigmarole of collective voodoo and mumbo-jumbo” (1955, p. 205). At a slightly deeper psychological level, puerilism manifests itself “in the insatiable thirst for trivial recreation and crude sensationalism, the delight in mass-meetings, mass-demonstrations, parades, etc.” (ibid.).

Geyl (1963, p. 262) has said of *Homo Ludens* that Huizinga’s “obsession with decline and ruin and the rancor against his own time had taken complete control.” Therefore, *Homo Ludens* should be considered a “brilliant, but wrong-headed improvisation” (p. 261). Huizinga’s entire argument “seems to have served no other purpose (...) than to pronounce once more the verdict of guilty over present day civilization which has allowed play to degenerate in puerilism” (p. 239, my italics). That is precisely what I meant when I pointed out that Huizinga did not at all aim at critically investigating the roles that play may or may not fulfill in human cultures, or at contributing to such an investigation with a testable and falsifiable hypothesis but that he rather aimed at developing an erudite and intellectually charming, humanist narrative around certain preconceived ideas about the nature of play and the role it plays in human cultures. This is maybe also the reason why he made light of a grave paradox in his narrative: for a scientific hypothesis, it would have been fatal (internal consistency is one of the main scientific “values”), but in a humanist treatise like *Homo Ludens*, it could easily be brushed aside. “The paradox is that Huizinga says (...) play contributes to the transition from savage to civilization but that, as civilization proceeds, play becomes increasingly professional and therefore doesn’t contribute to civilization, a contradiction that some have found ludicrous” (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 136). It is maybe, more particularly, the “solution” that Huizinga introduced to “solve” that contradiction that is ludicrous. In order to “explain” how the mixing of play and non-play did not have culture-generating effects anymore in “mature” civilizations, he introduced, as we just saw, the completely *ad hoc* notion of “false play”: “civilization is no longer played, and even where it still seems to play, it is false play (...)” (1955, p. 206) and “if our modern puerilism were genuine play we ought to see civilization returning to the great archaic forms of recreation where ritual, style and dignity are in perfect unison” (ibid.). How can something that one does for fun or primarily for fun be “false” or not genuine, i.e. something that one does not for fun?

#### 4.2. Nothing but a truism

Central to Huizinga’s formal and humanist definition of play is the notion that it is free and not “ordinary” or “real” life, i.e. it does not belong to the sphere of behaviors which must be performed to, directly or indirectly, fulfill physiological needs (fully functional “normal” or “ethotypic” behavior). “It is rather a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (Huizinga, 1955, p. 8); play is something that is “superfluous,” can “be deferred or suspended at any time,” is “done at leisure, during free time” (ibid.) and also “has a tendency to be beautiful” (p. 10). Play may be serious, but it is not real or for real. As Freud (1959, p. 174) put it: “The antithesis of play is reality, not seriousness.” This leads to the question how something that is as frivolous as play

can be antecedent to a culture in any significant meaning of the word. In many ways, cultures are not very play-like at all. Plowing was an important cultural invention, but a farmer, plowing his field, is not playing. Manners, which are deeply ingrained in our lives, have been described as being “so important that they should be up there with fire and the invention of language as a prime candidate for what makes us human” (Curtis, 2013, p. 28) but they do, *in se*, not constitute a form of play (although they can become the subject of playful behavior). Others facets of cultures seem even more difficult to integrate in the concept of play, least of all, of course, sinister phenomena like wars and genocide.

Huizinga, however, was not bothered by this paradox either because of his peculiar and humanist (but implicit) definition of “culture”: he tended to largely identify culture with playful or “high” culture, i.e. the set of cultural products, mainly in the arts, held in the highest esteem by a society. In *Geschonden Wereld* (1946, p. 25), he states that our perception of culture will above all “associate itself with aesthetic accomplishments, with the fruits of the arts (...).” This elitist and esthetic perception of culture is also reflected in *Homo Ludens* as he discusses predominantly esthetic and intellectual “accomplishments”: poetry, myth-making, philosophy, wisdom, and the arts.<sup>23</sup> Even war (chapter v) is narrowed down to “noble,” playful or play-like forms of violence, like the ancient trial by battle (boxing is a modern example of such playful violence): Huizinga clearly discusses the play element *in war*, rather than the play element *of war*.<sup>24</sup> In short: culture was, to him (in particular in its original phases), playful, *mainly because of the simple reason that he equates culture with play culture and largely ignores the non-playful part of cultures*. The claim that culture “arises and unfolds in and as play” is therefore, in a way, nothing but a truism: *to the extent that culture is implicitly restricted to play culture, it is self-evident that it arises and unfolds in and as play*. This truism too, would be fatal for a serious scientific analysis of the role of play in human cultures, but it is largely irrelevant or certainly less painful within the confines of a humanist treatise.

#### **4.3. Is contest the human form of play par excellence?**

One of the most common criticisms of *Homo Ludens* is that Huizinga puts too much emphasis on one particular form of human play: contests. He believed that contests (“agon”) were the form *par excellence* of play. *Homo Ludens* might, in fact, as well have been called *Homo Agonalis*. In *Homo Ludens* (the original, Dutch edition), he wrote: “Play is a contest *about* something or a demonstration of something” (1938, p. 41).<sup>25</sup> This focus on agonistic play can be traced back to Hermann Usener’s “Heilige Handlung” (1904).<sup>26</sup> However, it was probably foremost inspired by another humanist classic: Burckhardt’s *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* (1898–1902). It is in this famous characterization of the flowering of Greek culture of the fifth century that Burckhardt used the word “agonal.” He showed that agonistic play penetrated the whole of Greek life, from the sports and arts to lawsuits and philosophical dialogs. He also believed that the cult of the *agon* was something peculiarly Greek. However, this did not bother Huizinga as Burckhardt’s theory was developed “before any general sociology existed to digest all the ethnological and anthropological data, most of which (...) were only coming to light then” (Huizinga, 1955, pp. 71–72). Huizinga believed that these data amply showed that not only Greek culture of the fifth century before Christ was agonistic, but human culture in general.

Classic Greek culture clearly was, to Huizinga, the paradigm of a play culture: Hellenic society was “profoundly imbued with the play-spirit (...)” (Huizinga, 1955, p. 144). Nagel (1998, p. 22) calls this “uncritical embrace of Hellenic ‘civilization’” “a bit bewildering.” It would be bewildering in a scientific treatise, but it is much less so in a humanist narrative. Agonistic activities and the associated competitive spirit indeed dominated the whole of Greek (aristocratic) life but, *dixit* another critic, the Dutch ancient historian Hendrik Bolkestein, “All this has nothing to do with *play*—unless one would assert that the whole of life would be play for the Greeks” (cited in Huizinga, 1955, p. 30). In a similar vein, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze called agonistic play “bad play” as it has goals and rules and, in particular, losers and winners. Real play does not have losers and winners (I will come back to this distinction in the next section).



Other scholars did not criticize Huizinga's paradigmatic embrace of Hellenic civilization or oppose the inclusion of agonistic activities in the play category but criticized their central place in Huizinga's story. Burghardt (2006, p. 393) speaks of the (questionable) "truth" of Huizinga: "civilization is built on violent play (...)." Brian Sutton-Smith (1997, pp. 79–80), the renown play theorist who spent his entire career attempting to discover the cultural significance of human play, called Huizinga's thesis "a particularly agonistic and machismo view of play history. The definition of play primarily as contest reflects the widespread male rhetoric that favors the exaltation of combative power instead of speaking comprehensively about play itself. Combat may be widespread but it is hardly a universal truth about all play forms."<sup>27</sup> Henricks (2008, p. 160) defines Huizinga's thesis as the idea "that public competitions between socially prominent individuals and groups both defined the spirit of historical periods and also led to cultural change and refinement (...)." Huizinga's work, he observes, "focuses almost exclusively on the role of the social contest (or agon) in European history rather than on the many other forms of play" (p. 159) (see, e.g. also Gombrich, 1973, p. 288). This restrictive focus would, again (like his focus on Greek culture), seriously undermine the credibility of a scientific study of human play but it is, or certainly seems, more acceptable or even warranted in a humanist treatise with its own, specific, non-scientific aims.

### 5. The biological roots of human play

In 2007, the Dutch biologist and writer Tijs Goldschmidt discussed, in the prestigious Huizinga lecture, annually organized by the newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, the Faculty of Humanities of Leiden University, and the *Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde* (*Society of Dutch Literature*), the biological component of human play. The dimension that, as he pointed out, Huizinga had neglected in *Homo Ludens*, even though he fully realized that animals also play and that play has biological roots (Goldschmidt, 2007). Goldschmidt believed that it was all important and that it might, more particularly, be very worthwhile to reconsider the play phenomena that Huizinga discussed with the help of Darwin's theory of sexual selection. He deplored, more in general, that the distinction between man and nature is still with us today. Philosophers and other students of our species keep assuming all too readily that we, because of our high intelligence, have become somehow detached from our biological roots. In reality, we remain, first and foremost, a biological creature. We will therefore never fully understand the origin and function of culture, including the role of the play element in it, as long as scholars ignore our biological roots or consider them as irrelevant.

I couldn't agree more. A humanist treatise about the relationship between play and human cultures may be erudite, multidisciplinary, idiographic (as opposed to nomothetic), and focus on the mental dimension of this behavior (cf. note 12). It does not even have to (foremost) aim at contributing to the scientific study of the diachronic relationship between play and human cultures (that would constitute strong consilience). However, it should not define human play as an exclusively mental phenomenon and subsequently argue that it is a topic for the "geisteswissenschaftlichen" or humanities. Nor can such a treatise neglect or make light over internal inconsistencies and truisms. It can, last but not least, also not ignore what science and particularly biology has to tell about our species and about human play. It should, on the contrary, build upon these biological foundations (i.e. be epistemically consilient with science). Let me, in the remainder of this section, tentatively (and definitely non-exhaustively) sketch a number of ways in which the biology of our species and of play might contribute to the central topic of *Homo Ludens* and, in particular, what it can tell us about the three identified flaws in Huizinga's story.

If our species indeed is the playing species *par excellence*, it is probably at least partly due to the neotenzation or juvenilization process that we underwent: we are, as Stephen Jay Gould (1980) put it, like Mickey Mouse, we never grow up.<sup>28</sup> Play, curiosity, behavioral flexibility, and "neophilia" (dixit Desmond Morris), are all neotenous features. Stuart Brown (2010, p. 58), an American psychiatrist and play scientist, certainly believes that it is our neoteny and associated playfulness which "has allowed us to come down out of the trees and live anywhere on the planet. We are designed by nature and evolution to continue playing throughout life. Lifelong play is central to our continued

well-being, adaptation, and social cohesiveness. Neoteny has fostered civilizations, the arts, and music. While neoteny has its drawbacks, it's simply how we are built.”

Not only are we, as a neotenus species, provided with an exceptionally strong play instinct, that instinct can also express itself in a wide variety of behaviors, due to what has been called “cognitive fluidity” (Mithen, 1998): the multifactorial ability to combine sometimes very different thoughts, ontological domains or behaviors in new ways (it is visualized in great art like the Lion Man of Hohlenstein or the bewildering paintings of Huizinga’s compatriot Jheronimus Bosch). It allows the human play instinct to “infect” and “infiltrate” almost any other human behavior, ranging from erotic behavior and courtesy to aggression (sadism) and physical activities.<sup>29</sup> Human play is furthermore also strongly influenced and facilitated by our highly developed theory of mind and by our capacity for symbolic thought and foresight.<sup>30</sup> The latter capacity allows us to look ahead in the future and be curious about what will happen, a curiosity which plays a crucial role in the appeal of contests (hence also another common human game: gambling). Our theory of mind, i.e. our exceptional ability to transpose ourselves in the mind of other beings, or even to ascribe a mind and goals to mindless things like dolls or cars, makes it possible for human beings to passively enjoy literature, theatre and cinema. It also is instrumental in the passive enjoyment of sports as it allows us to identify with an athlete or a team.<sup>31</sup> Needless to say, this array of “fluid” forms of play was, because of his restrictive (formal) and a-scientific (humanist) interpretation of this phenomenon, not recognized as such (or as “real” play) by Huizinga.

The biology of play also does not support his historical pessimism: there are no reasons to expect that (true) play will weaken and dwindle away (or become “false”) as a culture matures (cf. Section 4.1). On the contrary, the Surplus Resource Theory (Burghardt, 2006; Pellegrini, 2009; Spencer, 1872) predicts that play, including human play, will become more prevalent as resources become more plentiful. Play is, in sharp contrast with Huizinga’s central claim, probably more omnipresent in the modern Western world than it has ever been in human history.

One of the main biological functions of play is that it fosters (cultural) innovation (Fagen, 1981). Pellegrini, Dupuis, and Smith (2007, p. 266) put it thus: “When faced with a relatively novel or uncertain, but safe, environment, play affords opportunities for behavioral and cognitive innovation and subsequent practice of newly developed behaviors and strategies (...).” Play is sometimes compared with the variability seen in genetic systems and even with variability, generated by the cosmos (Brown, 2010, pp. 44–45). Brown (2010, p. 200) probably exaggerates when he claims that “the ability to innovate largely comes out of an ability to play.” However, it is undoubtedly true that playfulness is important to inventors, scientists, and other innovators. Cognitive play and creativity have one thing in common: divergent (innovative) thinking. Play has been found to foster divergent thinking (Russ, 2003). It may have been instrumental in the evolution of language and the invention of cultural hallmarks like the mastery of fire, cooking and the wheel. One might therefore say that culture *is* play or that it *is generated through* play. Put differently, the claim that cultures arise and unfold in and as play does not need to imply that we interpret them in Huizinga’s restrictive and esthetic way (cf. Section 4.2) as (innovative) play is also involved in the emergence of less frivolous cultural phenomena.

A second important biological function of play is that of fostering social bonds: much play is social play. It is that kind of play (as opposed to play in general) that does not have losers and winners (cf. Section 4.3). Social play also has flexible as opposed to fixed rules. A key difference between serious fights and play fights in animals and children, for example, is that in the latter kind of fights, the stronger or better opponent inhibits his or her behavior (self-handicapping): *the goal is not to win, the goal is to keep the (social) play going*. The goal of agonistic games, by contrast, is to win, not to keep the play going. Does that mean that these games constitute a bad form of play or even no play at all? The middle-of-the-road answer, I believe, is that they are simply one of the almost infinite ways in which the strong inclination of human beings to do things just or primarily for fun (the “play instinct”) manifests itself.

## 6. Conclusion

The mutual animosity but also influencing between the *studia humanitatis* and modern science is as old as modern science itself. An argument may or may not be made that a non-scientific or humanist study of humanity has, in the mean time, become an anachronism, in particular within the confines of modern research universities (Arndt, 2006). I have here tried to show that such a study can, in any case, not ignore the insights, gained through the scientific study of the world (epistemic consilience) and that the absolute (methodological, epistemic, and vocational) separation between, on the one hand, the humanities and, on the other hand, the natural and social sciences that Huizinga defended, is untenable.

*Homo Ludens* can be considered the epitomization of a humanist masterpiece. It struck (and still strikes) a nerve because of its eruditeness, attractive literary style, humanism (i.e. the attractive idea of man as the playing species), and romantic pessimism. It may not have been (primarily) conceived as a truly and objectively explanatory treatise about the role of play in cultures, but that is, inevitably, how it was and is perceived by many of its readers, both inside and outside academia. Unfortunately, in this second, explanatory sense, it was anything but a masterpiece. Due to its strong play instinct and to the many, myriad ways in which this instinct expresses itself in its behavior, our species may indeed be called *Homo ludens*. However, the credibility of Huizinga's humanist elaboration of this idea was undermined by his dogmatic belief in a strict separation between the study of nature and culture, by his historical pessimism, by a humanist focus on a specific, esthetic part of cultures (high culture) and by an equally humanist obsession with one kind of human play (agonistic play). Paradoxically, *Homo Ludens* does not do right to *Homo ludens*. I have tried to tentatively illustrate that it is only from the very scientific and particularly biological perspective that the arch-humanist Huizinga detested that we can gain a full and thorough understanding of the importance and pluriform meaning that human play, in all its bewildering manifestations, has for our cultures. It is in this sense that the case of *Homo Ludens* exemplifies the need of various forms of (soft) consilience between science and the humanities.

### Funding

The author received no direct funding for this research.

### Author details

Koen B. Tanghe<sup>1</sup>

E-mail: [koenbernard.tanghe@ugent.be](mailto:koenbernard.tanghe@ugent.be)

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5090-4767>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Philosophy, Universiteit Gent, Blandijnberg 2, Ghent 9000, Belgium.

### Citation information

Cite this article as: *Homo Ludens* (1938) and the crisis in the humanities, Koen B. Tanghe, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2016), 3: 1245087.

### Notes

1. According to a recent report by Harvard's Division of Arts and Humanities (Mateos, 2013), Bachelor's degree completions in the humanities have, since the late 1960s, halved in the United States (from 14 to 7% of all degrees taken).
2. Else professed, in a contribution ("The old and the new humanities") to a special issue of *Daedalus*, dedicated to the future of the humanities, that the humanities would be faced with "increasing confusion and disillusionment" (Else, 1969, p. 808) if they did not succeed in bringing their theoretical claims to the position and the values that were associated with the old, tightly focused humanities curriculum closer together with their more mundane contemporary practice, characterized by "a diffuse, 'democratic,' and relatively passive line, trying to be all things to all men" (ibid.). The old humanities were characterized by a formative focus on languages and the mind. This was not a goal in itself but aimed at

developing educated judgment and persuasiveness and, ultimately, educating the *homo politicus*: the responsible, politically active citizen, and political leader. It thus had moral and political action as its ultimate objective, whereas the modern humanities tended to focus "upon certain quasi-passive modes of feeling and understanding" (p. 807). A fact of major importance was, furthermore, that in this latest endeavor, they were increasingly surpassed and replaced by the social sciences, who were, "constantly trying, with increasing success, to be more scientific" (ibid.).

3. Pinker points out that this consilience is already a *fait accompli* in archeology, linguistics, and the philosophy of mind. Arndt (2006) also gives several examples of humanities that have been recast in the mold of the sciences or of attempts to do so: the classics, for example, have become largely a branch of philology. Especially noteworthy, in this respect, is the "New Humanities" program at Binghamton University, jointly conceived by the evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson and Leslie Heywood, a professor of English, and aimed at integrating, on the one hand, the humanities and, on the other hand, the sciences and in particular evolutionary theory and the mechanistic branches of the human sciences such as cognitive psychology and neurobiology (Wilson & Heywood, 2008). In a similar vein, Gottschall (2008) "represents a bold new response to the crisis in academic literary studies (...), offers a sweeping critique of [dominant] paradigms, and sketches outlines of a new paradigm inspired by scientific theories, methods, and attitudes."
4. In 1909, Johannes Andreas ("André") Jolles, a Dutch-German poet, art historian, literary scholar, philologist, and important correspondent of Huizinga (until he joined, in 1933, Hitler's NSDAP), described Huizinga's

- deepest longing as an aiming for “a charming amalgam, an electron out of the gold of art and the silver of science” (cited in Tollebeek, 2007, p. 201).
5. See, for the influence of his study of Sanskrit and the history of Indian culture on his work as a historian of the Middle Ages and in particular on *The Waning of the Middle Ages*: Krul (1990, ch. 3).
  6. His son, the writer Leonard Huizinga (1963, p. 194), likewise had doubts about *The Waning* and called *Homo Ludens* a masterpiece of construction, thought and vision.
  7. Logher (1947, p. 102) believed *Homo Ludens* to be a book of “unbelievable erudition.”
  8. It is “the hobgoblin of animal behavior, mischievously tempting us to succeed in what, judging from the number of failed attempts, seems a futile task: defining play” (Mitchell, 1990, p. 197). Power (2000, p. 391) believes that, “Given its elusive nature, it is unlikely that researchers will ever come up with a satisfactory definition of play.”
  9. He thus treated it as a modern cultural anthropologist ought to treat it, according to Franz Boas’ interpretation of culture and according to his dictum *omnis cultura ex cultura*. The ethnologist, one of Boas’ students declared, “will account for a given cultural fact by demonstrating some other cultural fact out of which it has developed” (quoted in Cravens, 1988, p. 89). Huizinga met Boas and many other social scientists during his visit of the United States in 1926.
  10. He also detested psychology; see in this respect Krul (1990, p. 233).
  11. Krul (2007, p. 18) nevertheless argues that he did not explain the economic roots of the crisis and that he clung to the primacy of culture! In a similar vein, the celebrated Dutch historian Geyl (1963, p. 245), in a critical essay about Huizinga, defined his colleague as “the man who wanted us to look upon culture in isolation, as an exclusively spiritual process, flourishing or declining according to its own rhythm. The man who never faced the question as to which political and economic factors had raised National Socialism to power, nor exactly where.”
  12. Burghardt (1997, 2006) adds a fifth aim to Tinbergen’s (1963) famous four ethological aims in order to rectify the omission of an animal’s “private experience” in the study of play: private experience. The fact that play has an important mental dimension does indeed not mean that it is not a biological phenomenon.
  13. Although he does acknowledge that it is nature that gave us play. Indeed, “human civilization has added no essential feature to the general idea of play. Animals play just like men. We have only to watch young dogs to see that all the essentials of human play are present in the merry gambols” (Huizinga, 1955, p. 1; see, e.g. also Dissanayake, 1992: she says exactly the same about a play topic *par excellence*: art). One might therefore assume that there indeed exists a natural explanation for this behavior. However, Huizinga thinks not: the fun of playing “resists all analysis, all logical interpretation” (1955, p. 2).
  14. Traditional behaviorists and evolutionary biologists, from their side, also did not and often still do not see play as a biological phenomenon because of the same reason that Huizinga believed it to be a topic for the humanities: because they believe(d) that “having fun” is the defining feature of play and that “fun” is impossible to study in animals (Burghardt, 2004). See, however, note 12.
  15. For Huizinga’s anti-positivism, see Tollebeek (2007, ch. 3). It is around this time that Franz Boas and other social scientists began to liberate their sciences “from the assumptions and models of the natural sciences by proclaiming the modern social scientific theory of culture” (Cravens, 1988, p. 90).
  16. However, it is maybe interesting to point out that the biological “understanding” of life also used to be idiographic and speculative-interpretative (idealist). 19th century English naturalists, by contrast, “began to view their endeavors as nomothetic—oriented toward the establishment of general laws—in contrast to the ideographic impulse (a concern for individual phenomena) which dominated their predecessors in the eighteenth century” (Rehbock, 1983, p. 7).
  17. It should be noted though, that, according to modern neo-Darwinism, evolution is largely externally determined.
  18. Scholars still disagree about the question, but there is something to be said for the thesis (Wootton, 2015) that “science” is a relatively modern invention (17th century) and that it is foremost characterized by the critical and often experimental investigation or “interrogation” of nature, whereas earlier empirical observations almost always rather started out from preconceived and absolute (i.e. not to be questioned) models and theories about nature.
  19. The concept “morphology” was very popular in contemporary German culture science. As Krul (1990, p. 234, note 1) points out: Huizinga must have known that it, just like the rejected term “evolution,” originated in biology. Morphologists study biological forms both diachronically (i.e. from an evolutionary perspective) and synchronically while physiologists primarily study biological functions.
  20. Dommering (2011) calls Huizinga a phenomenologist *avant la lettre* who, in *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, tries to evocate the phenomena, rather than to explain them. Nagel (1998) has, in a critical essay on *Homo Ludens*, likewise argued that “Huizinga’s method resembles in a striking fashion the phenomenological method of Heidegger (...)” (p. 19). He in particular shares with the phenomenologists a “predilection for an origin (*Ursprung!*), that is, they emphasize that which is original, early or primordial” (p. 20).
  21. Thomassen also points out that, in 1938, Huizinga became vice-president of one of the League of Nations’ organizations: the International Committee of Intellectual Cooperation. His alarm at the rise of fascism had already inspired *In the Shadow of Tomorrow, A Diagnosis of the Spiritual Suffering of Our Times* (1936) (see also *Geschonden Wereld* 1946). There are also intriguing parallels with the life and work of Norbert Elias (who, at the time, was working on his *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation, 1939; The Civilizing Process, 1969–1982*). “Both Huizinga and Elias realized the urgent need to understand, historically, what was happening with ‘culture’” (Thomassen, 2014, p. 147).
  22. Huizinga indeed was a romantic or “neo-romantic” (Geyl, 1963, p. 242). He believed that we still live in the Romantic era (see Huizinga, 1950, p. 437) and tried to distinguish between a “good” Romanticism and a “bad” Romanticism. One escape route for romantics was Huizinga’s much beloved Middle Ages, “the same epoch that the Enlightenment despised as the Dark Ages and attacked as an era of superstition and clerical tyranny” (Herman, 1997, p. 48). Another escape route was, of course, Orientalism. The philosopher Friedrich Schlegel “proclaimed that ‘it is in the Orient that we must seek the highest Romanticism’” (Herman, 1997, p. 49). Leonard also called his father a romantic (see Huizinga, 1963, p. 24). Gombrich (1973, p. 285) points out that “the romantic aestheticism he had always tried to keep under strict control [eventually] offered

- itself as the only refuge from the modern world from which he felt increasingly alienated." It is probably more correct to say that it was his Romanticism that caused him to feel increasingly alienated from the modern world (see, in this respect, Gombrich, 1973, p. 289). Sutton-Smith (1997, p. 136) speaks, in connection with *Homo Ludens*, of a "romantic nostalgia for the primitive and for childhood (...)"
23. Nagel (1998, p. 21) writes that Huizinga's purpose in treating play as a cultural phenomenon is precisely to restrict the study "to the aesthetic quality of play."
24. In the preface, Huizinga points out that his hosts in Zürich, Vienna and London wanted to change the title of his lecture "The play element of culture" in "The play element in culture." Each time, he protested and clung to the genitive because it was not his object to define the place of play among all the other manifestations of culture but rather to ascertain how far culture itself bears the character of play. The latter title may indeed have been more appropriate.
25. In *Over de Grenzen van Spel en Ernst in de Cultuur* (1940), he called this ("a contest about something") the third feature of play. It was maybe even more important than the two first features (a stepping out of real life and a demonstration of something), even though it was not always present.
26. Huizinga repeatedly referred to this article as one of his sources of inspiration, see Krul (1990, p. 225, note 4).
27. The title of his *New York Times* obituary read: "Brian Sutton-Smith, Scholar of What's Fun, Dies at 90."
28. For a critical analysis of this idea, see Shea (1989). Certain features, such as our long legs, seem to be in contradiction with the neoteny notion: some of our adult features are neotenous, others are not.
29. Huizinga gives a particularly nasty example of "playful" sadism in *The Waning of the Middle Ages*: "The people of Bruges, in 1488, cannot get their fill of seeing the tortures inflicted, on a high platform in the middle of the market-place, on the magistrates suspected of treason. The unfortunates are refused the death-blow which they implore, that the people may feast again, upon their torments" (Huizinga, 1924, p. 15).
30. This idea is of course not completely new. Power (2000, p. 289), for example, observes that the major forms of social object play, identified in humans (sociodramatic play and games with rules) appear to be uniquely human and are apparent consequences of symbolic, communicative, and other cognitive abilities.
31. Gombrich (1973, p. 293) made in this respect an interesting remark: "The fact that the boat of the Cambridge crew arrives at the winning post before that of Oxford is taken to mean that Cambridge is the better University. I confess I suffer from a rare disability in this respect. I find it hard to understand the feeling that 'we have won' merely because someone has won."
- ### References
- Arndt, A. (2006). The two cultures and the crisis in the humanities. *Forum on Public Policy*. Retrieved from <http://forumonpublicpolicy.com/archive07/arndt.pdf>
- Bérubé, M. (2013). The humanities, declining? Not according to the numbers. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Humanities-Declining-Not/140093/>
- Bouterse, J., & Karstens, B. (2015). A diversity of divisions: Tracing the history of the demarcation between the sciences and the humanities. *Isis*, 106, 341–352. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/681995>
- Brown, S. L. (2010). *Play: How it shapes the brain, opens the imagination, and invigorates the soul*. New York, NY: Avery.
- Burckhardt, J. (1898–1902). *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* [Greek cultural history]. Berlin: W. Spemann.
- Burghardt, G. M. (1997). Amending Tinbergen: A fifth aim for ethology. In R. W. Mitchell, N. S. Thompson, & H. L. Miles (Eds.), *Anthropomorphism, anecdotes, and animals* (pp. 254–276). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Burghardt, G. M. (2004). Play: How evolution can explain the most mysterious behavior of all. In A. Moya & E. Font (Eds.), *Evolution: From molecules to ecosystems* (pp. 231–246). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Burghardt, G. M. (2006). *The genesis of animal play: Testing the limits*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Cantor, N. (1991). *Inventing the Middle Ages. The lives, works, and ideas of the great medievalists of the twentieth century*. New York, NY: William Morrow.
- Cohen, H. F. (1994). *The Scientific Revolution: A historiographical inquiry*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Cravens, H. (1988). *The triumph of evolution: The heredity-environment controversy, 1900–1941*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Curtis, V. (2013). Manners maketh man: How disgust shaped human evolution. *New Scientist*, 219, 28–29. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0262-4079\(13\)62290-3](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0262-4079(13)62290-3)
- Dissanayake, E. (1992). *Homo aestheticus: Where art comes from and why*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Dommering, E. (2011). *Menno ter Braak, Johan Huizinga en Homo Ludens*. Retrieved from [http://www.mennoterbraak.nl/pdf/DOMMERING\\_2011.pdf](http://www.mennoterbraak.nl/pdf/DOMMERING_2011.pdf)
- Elias, N. (1939). *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und Psychogenetische Untersuchungen. Band 1: Wandlungen des Verhaltens in den weltlichen Oberschichten des Abendlandes (LXXXI, 333 S.) / Band 2: Wandlungen der Gesellschaft: Entwurf zu einer Theorie der Zivilisation (491 S.)* [On the civilizing process. Sociogenetic and psychogenetic investigations. Volume 1: Behavioral changes in the secular upper classes of the Western world (LXXXI, 333 pp.)/Volume 2: Societal changes: A draft of a civilization theory (491 pp.)]. Basel: Verlag Haus zum Falken.
- Elias, N. (1969). *The civilizing process, Volume I: The history of manners*. (E. Jephcott, Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Elias, N. (1982). *The civilizing process, Volume II: State formation and civilization*. (E. Jephcott, Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Else, G. F. (1969). The old and the new humanities. *Daedalus*, 98, 803–808.
- Fagen, R. M. (1981). *Animal play behavior*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Freud, S. (1959). The relation of the poet to day-dreaming. In J. Strachey (Ed.), *Collected papers by Sigmund Freud* (vol. 4, pp. 173–183). (I. F. Grant Duff, Trans.). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Geyl, P. (1961). Huizinga als aanklager van zijn tijd. *Mededelingen der knaw, afd. Letterkunde, nieuwe reeks*, 24, 137–177. Retrieved from <http://www.dwc.knaw.nl/DL/publications/PU00009781.pdf>
- Geyl, P. (1963). Huizinga as accuser of his age. *History and Theory*, 2, 231–262. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2504105>
- Goldschmidt, T. (2007). Ik word de missing link. *NRC Handelsblad*. Retrieved from [http://vorige.nrc.nl/kunst/article1852519.0e/Tijs\\_Goldschmidt\\_Ik\\_word\\_de\\_missing\\_link](http://vorige.nrc.nl/kunst/article1852519.0e/Tijs_Goldschmidt_Ik_word_de_missing_link)
- Gombrich, E. H. (1973). Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*. *Bijdragen en mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 188, 275–296.
- Gottschall, J. (2008). *Literature, science, and a new humanities*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/9780230615595>
- Gould, S. J. (1980). A biological homage to mickey mouse. In S. J. Gould (Ed.), *The panda's thumb: More reflections in natural history* (pp. 95–107). New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

- Henricks, T. S. (2008). The nature of play: An overview. *American Journal of Play*, 1, 157–180.
- Henry, J. (2008). *The Scientific Revolution and the origins of modern science* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Herman, A. (1997). *The idea of decline in Western history*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Hugenholtz, F. W. N. (1979). Huizinga, Johan (1872–1945). *Biografisch woordenboek van Nederland* (vol. 1). Den Haag: Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis. Retrieved from <http://resources.huylgens.knaw.nl/bwn1880-2000/lemmata/bwn1/huizinga/>
- Huizinga, J. (1905). *Over het aesthetisch bestanddeel van geschiedkundige voorstellingen, rede uitgesproken bij de aanvaarding van het hoogleraarsambt aan de Rijksuniversiteit te Groningen op 4 november 1905* [On the esthetic component of historical representations, speech given at the occasion of the acceptance of the professorship at the State University in Groningen on 4 November 1905]. Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink.
- Huizinga, J. (1919). *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen. Studie over levens- en gedachtenvormen der veertiende en vijftiende eeuw in Frankrijk en de Nederlanden* [The autumn of the Middle Ages. A study of the forms of life and thought in France and the Low Countries in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries]. Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink.
- Huizinga, J. (1924). *The waning of the Middle Ages: A study of the forms of life, thought, and art in France and the Netherlands in the xvth and xvth centuries*. (F. Hopman, Trans.). London: E. Arnold.
- Huizinga, J. (1936). *In the shadow of tomorrow, a diagnosis of the spiritual suffering of our times*. (J. H. Huizinga, Trans.). New York: W. W. Norton.
- Huizinga, J. (1938). *Homo ludens: Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur* [Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture]. Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink.
- Huizinga, J. (1940). *Over de grenzen van spel en ernst in de cultuur, oratio als Rector van de Leidse universiteit* [On the boundaries of play and seriousness in culture, oratio as Rector of Leiden University]. Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink.
- Huizinga, J. (1946). *Geschonden wereld: Een beschouwing over de kansen op herstel van onze beschaving* [Defiled world: A consideration of the chances of recovery of our civilization]. Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink.
- Huizinga, J. (1947). *Mijn weg tot de historie* [My road to history]. Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink.
- Huizinga, J. (1949). *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Huizinga, J. (1950). De taak der cultuurgeschiedenis [The task of cultural history]. In J. Huizinga, L. Brummel, et al. (Eds.), *Verzamelde werken, VII* (pp. 35–94). Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink.
- Huizinga, J. (1955). *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. R. F. C. Hull. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Huizinga, L. (1963). *Herinneringen aan mijn vader* [Memories of my father]. Den Haag: H.P. Leopold.
- Kossmann, E. H. (1973). Postscript. *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 88, 365–376.
- Kronman, A. T. (2007). *Education's end, why our colleges and universities have given up on the meaning of life*. Yale: Yale University Press.
- Krul, W. E. (1990). *Historicus tegen de tijd: Opstellen over leven & werk van J. Huizinga* [Historian against the time: Essays about the life & work of J. Huizinga]. Groningen: Historische uitgeverij.
- Krul, W. E. (2007). Inleiding. In J. Huizinga & W. E. Krul (Eds.), *Verspreide opstellen over de geschiedenis van Nederland* (2<sup>de</sup> druk) (pp. 11–27). Amsterdam: Athenaeum Boekhandel.
- Logher, Th. J. G. (1947). Johan Huizinga (Groningen, 7 December 1872–De Steeg, 1 Februari 1945). *Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandsche Letterkunde te Leiden, 1945–1946* (pp. 88–109). Leiden: E. J. Brill. Retrieved from [http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/\\_jaa003194601\\_01/\\_jaa003194601\\_01\\_0007.php](http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_jaa003194601_01/_jaa003194601_01_0007.php)
- Mateos, J. L. (2013). The crisis in the humanities: A matter of numbers. Retrieved from <http://www.sirisacademic.com/wb/blog/the-crisis-of-the-humanities-a-matter-of-numbers/>
- Mitchell, R. W. (1990). A theory of play. In M. Bekoff & D. Jamieson (Eds.), *Interpretation and explanation in the study of animal behavior, Volume 1: Interpretation, intentionality, and communication* (pp. 197–227). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Mithen, S. (1998). *The prehistory of the mind: A search for the origins of art, religion and science*. London: Phoenix.
- Nagel, M. (1998). Play in culture and the jargon of primordiality: A critique of *Homo Ludens*. In M. C. Duncan, G. E. Chick, & A. Aycock (Eds.), *Play and culture studies, Volume 1: Diversions and divergences in fields of play* (pp. 19–29). Greenwich: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Otterspeer, W. (Ed.). (2009). *De hand van Huizinga* [The hand of Huizinga]. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Otterspeer, W. (2010). *Reading Huizinga*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Peckham, M. (1951). Toward a theory of romanticism. *PMLA*, 66, 5–23. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/459586>
- Pellegrini, A. D. (2009). *The role of play in human development*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195367324.001.0001>
- Pellegrini, A. D., Dupuis, D., & Smith, P. K. (2007). Play in evolution and development. *Developmental Review*, 27, 261–276. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2006.09.001>
- Pinker, S. (2013). Science is not your enemy. *New Republic*. Retrieved from <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/114127/science-not-enemy-humanities>
- Plumb, J. H. (Ed.). (1964). *Crisis in the humanities*. Harmondsworth & Baltimore: Penguin Books.
- Power, T. G. (2000). *Play and exploration in children and animals*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Rehbock, P. F. (1983). *The philosophical naturalists, themes in early nineteenth-century British biology*. Madison, WI: Madison.
- Rickert, H. (1896–1902). *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung. Eine logische Einleitung in die historischen Wissenschaften* [The boundaries of scientific concept formation. A logical introduction to the historical sciences]. Freiburg & Leipzig: Akademische Verlagsbuchhandlung von J. C. B. Mohr.
- Rosen, G. (2014, July 9). Notes on a crisis: The humanities have a PR problem. *Princeton Alumni Weekly*. Retrieved from <https://paw.princeton.edu/issues/2014/07/09/pages/0635/index.xml>
- Russ, S. W. (2003). Play and creativity: Developmental issues. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 47, 291–303. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00313830308594>
- Shea, B. T. (1989). Heterochrony in human evolution: The case for neoteny reconsidered. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 32, 69–101. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ajpa.1330320505/pdf>
- Silbey, D. (2013, June 10). A crisis in the humanities? *The Chronicle of Higher Education Blog Network*. Retrieved from <http://www.chronicle.com/blognetwork/edgeofthewest/2013/06/10/>
- Snow, C. P. (1959). *Two cultures and the Scientific Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Soeiro, R. G., & Tavares, S. (Eds.). (2012). *Rethinking the humanities: Paths and challenges*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars.
- Spencer, H. (1872). *Principles of psychology* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Appleton.

- Sutton-Smith, B. (1997). *The ambiguity of play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Thomassen, B. (2014). *Liminality and the modern: Living through the in-between*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Tinbergen, N. (1963). On aims and methods of ethology. *Zeitschrift für Tierpsychologie*, 20, 410–433.
- Tollebeek, J. (2007). *De toga van Fruin. Denken over geschiedenis in Nederland sinds 1860* [The toga of Fruin. Thinking about history in the Netherlands since 1860]. Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek.
- Usener, H. (1904). Heilige Handlung [Holy deed]. *Archiv für Rel.-wiss.* VII, 281–339.
- Van der Lem, A. (1993). *Johan Huizinga: Leven en werk in beelden & documenten* [Johan Huizinga: Life and work in images & documents]. Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek.
- Wallerstein, I., & Lee, R. (2004). *Overcoming the two cultures: Science versus the humanities in the modern world-system (Fernand Braudel Center Series)*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.
- Weisbuch, R. (1999, March 26). Six proposals to revive the humanities. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, B4–5.
- Wilson, D. S., & Heywood, L. (2008). *Integrating the humanities and sciences: A campus-wide program at Binghamton University that addresses a general problem in higher education*. Retrieved from <http://neuroanthropology.files.wordpress.com/2008/05/new-humanities-proposal.pdf>
- Wootton, D. (2015). *The invention of science: A new history of the Scientific Revolution*. London: Allen Lane.
- Yates, F. A. (1964). *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic tradition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.



© 2016 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.

You are free to:

Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format  
Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially.  
The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms:

Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made.  
You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.  
No additional restrictions

You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.



**Cogent Arts & Humanities (ISSN: 2331-1983) is published by Cogent OA, part of Taylor & Francis Group.**

**Publishing with Cogent OA ensures:**

- Immediate, universal access to your article on publication
- High visibility and discoverability via the Cogent OA website as well as Taylor & Francis Online
- Download and citation statistics for your article
- Rapid online publication
- Input from, and dialog with, expert editors and editorial boards
- Retention of full copyright of your article
- Guaranteed legacy preservation of your article
- Discounts and waivers for authors in developing regions

**Submit your manuscript to a Cogent OA journal at [www.CogentOA.com](http://www.CogentOA.com)**

