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Game Studies in the Cinquecento.
Prolegomena **to a historical analysis**
of the rhetorics of play

The framework of game studies

Digital games – their ubiquity and commercial importance – are the motive force behind the emergence of game studies (Mäyrä 2008) as a metadiscipline studying games as objects of critical, aesthetic and speculative enquiry. In terms of its institutional elements – journals, conferences and key figures – it has its origins in the "Digital Arts and Culture" conferences of the late 1990s. In an effort to understand the conditions of reception and the dynamics of the games under study, play became a critical category, and digital games were placed within a lineage of cultural forms that included boardgames, sports, and playful performance. Game studies within a humanist frame take their objects – games, toys, sessions of play – in the way that art history and theory have taken another constellation of objects as their own. Unlike art history, however, game studies do not enjoy an unbroken intellectual continuity with its historical precedents, even if practitioners have sought to historicize their work by taking on older forms of play and games as research objects (Flanagan 2009). As a consequence of the effective recency of the discipline, non-digital games, and games and play in non-contemporary contexts, are subsumed into game studies using the interpretive frames and categories that were produced for the study of digital games.
Sutton-Smith (1997) described seven rhetorics surrounding 'play', different framings and interpretations of play as concept and activity, from developmental rhetorics of progress (play as part of childhood, play as the precedent of the serious) to rhetorics of identity (play as creating communities, play as shared practice) to play as frivolous and wasteful. Though he does distinguish certain

rhetorics as falling in and out of fashion (for example, play as fate being a largely pre-modern rhetoric), his model did not attain to the level of a full intellectual history of play. Our project seeks to historicize game studies as a discipline by identifying periods of substantial intellectual and critical activity regarding games and play, through the texts left behind from those periods. In particular, we focus on those texts which address specific, named and richly described play-activities and games, to provide a historiographical account that allows us to play off the relationship between actually-played games and the contemporary intellectual activity which framed, interpreted, criticized and contextualized them. While Sutton-Smith's play rhetorics provide a high-level typology for this project, we move closer to cultural and even material history to situate these texts – and the games they consider – in the periods and places in which they occurred. The production of intellectual activity around games and play is not constant: in certain epochs and places they are given considerably more attention than in others. The Italian Cinquecento is among them.

Rhetorics of play in the Italian Cinquecento

Play and the characterization of games emerge in the Italian Cinquecento as matters for consideration by the literate classes. While in the 15th century, games were the occasional subjects of frescoes and paintings, especially in the north eastern area of Italy (Barletta 1993, p. 242), the modern sensitivity shaped by books such as Baldassarre Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (Castiglione 1960, first published in 1528) steered away from metaphysical speculation and towards both the documentation and interpretation of contemporary play and games. Furthermore, play became an arena in which the values and habits of the emerging urban intelligentsia were shaped and contested. Historians such as Gherardo Ortalli (2013-2014) and George McClure (2013) have

described the 1500s in Italy as the century in which the politics of play were freed from the normativity of the early Reinaissance – that generally understood games as a lesser form of intellectual engagement, bearing a stigma similar to that of gambling. In this context writers, philosophers and, ultimately, players started confronting and discussing the implications of play and its relevance as a widespread social practice. A significant corpus of texts, dealing with all aspects of play, started to emerge from the *accademie*, the courts, and the Universities of central and northern Italy. More specifically, gathering sites such as the Accademia degli Intronati in Siena became an 'alternate sphere' (McClure 2013, p. 23), both physically and socially, where the rhetorics and politics of play could be confronted and rehearsed. In our research on primary sources on play in the Italian Cinquecento, we came into contact with three distinct modes of writing and discourse addressing play and games: theoretical essays on play and games, collections of games, and narrative accounts of play or proto-ethnographies. Most of the writing from this period contains elements from each mode: yet these rhetorics are plainly distinguishable from each other and clear examples of each can be identified.

Theories of play

The most influential theoretical contribution to the subject is Tasso's diptych (Tasso 1858) *Romeo* e *Il Gonzaga secondo*, written in 1579 and 1581. In the two dialogues – which are in fact two slightly but interestingly different versions of the same text (see McClure 2008) – Margherita Bentivoglia, a young noblewoman, confronts Giulio Gonzaga and Annibale Pocaterra on the nature of play, its history, and social implications. The two main subjects of the dialogue may be said to represent the core of the Italian reflection on play in the 16th century: play as a gendered activity and the relation between play and the intellect. On the one hand, Margherita explicitly links play with

other intellectual activities when, in the first dialogue, she asks Annibale Pocaterra to discuss the issue of play in light of the man's philosophical inclination ("se vero è, che niuna cosa sia, la cui natura da' filosofi non sia considerata, non deve a voi meno esser nota la natura del giuoco," Tasso 1858, p. 30), thus introducing what Forno (2005, p. 23) describes as the "argumentative tone" of Tasso's dialogues on play. On the other hand, Margherita herself often reveals the inequalities of gender relations in the context of play; for example when she claims that "Quella degli uomini, che da voi è stimata creanza e cortesia, da me è riputata inganno ed artificio; perciochè gli uomini molte fiate si lascian vincere, per vincer le donne in altri contrasti di maggior importanza" (Tasso 1858, p. 76).

Catalogues of games

The second mode of writing is more encyclopaedic. Innocenzo Ringhieri's *Cento giuochi liberali* (Ringhieri 1551) depicts a hundred social games played in the area of Bologna and complements their descriptions with short poems. In Ringhieri's book every game is dedicated to women, even when the very nature or tone of the games would suggest otherwise, as in the case of *Giuoco dell'Inferno*, "ove solo di Tormenti, di Miserie, e di Pene, i dannati si pascono" (p. 61), that the author claims is in fact well-suited to noble women, since literates such as Luciano and Boccaccio, "re della nostra lingua" (p. 61), devoted some of their best writing to the subject. Girolamo Bargagli's *Dialogo de' giuochi* (Bargagli G. 1581, first published in 1572) compiles the games played in Accademia degli Intronati in Siena, a gathering place for intellectuals where culture and politics were discussed. These are *giochi di veglia*, games that need to be played indoors, with friends, usually after dinner. Although similar in its format to Ringhieri's lengthy list of games, Bargagli's *Dialogo* enacts a curatorial gesture on the games, dividing them

into "gravi" and "piacevoli", and, maybe more significantly, engaging in a reflection on their seriousness that distinguishes between games "d'ingegno" and "di scherzo" (p. 52). Nevertheless, by employing an encyclopaedic rhetoric, both books seem to aim at stabilizing, through writing, the dynamism of play, eventually engendering a form of consumption in which readers are invited to play and, implicitly, to imitate and reproduce previous instances of play.

Documentaries of play

Girolamo Bargagli's brother, Scipione, is the author of *I trattenimenti* (Bargagli S. 1989, first published in 1587), where he claims to have put his brother's theory into practice (Riccò 1989, p. xli), a divide that permeates most of the debates around play in the 15th century. While Girolamo's book was a collection of games whose rules were fleshed out and used as a backdrop for witty dialogues, Scipione makes a move towards documentations with a collection of short stories featuring play practices, a collection of amphibious texts that conflate ludic theory and a narrative "corpus pseudodecameroniano" (Riccò 1989, p. xiii). Ascanio De' Mori's *Giuoco piacevole* is a uniquely detailed documentary of play in that it is entirely devoted to one single match. Much like Yasunari Kawabata's *The Master of Go* (Kawabata 1972), De' Mori's book is an in-depth description of a play session through which the author reflects on social conventions and their relation with play. In both cases, the reader is implicitly invited to see the game(s) as playable. Unlike Ringhieri's catalogue, play is here associated with nameable and often well-known contemporaries. While Girolamo's book seems to be merely "a manual for use in the future" (McClure 2013, p. 56), Scipione Bargagli's and Ascanio De' Mori's works seem to aim at creating an economy of aspiration for readers and would-be players.

Towards an analysis of 16th century game design

The analysis of the corpus of texts forming the canon of 16th century play theory led us to describe a continuum between the form of the catalogue or collection and that of the theoretical speculation: on the one hand, the pragmatics of play, the description of rulesets and expected behaviours, and the collection of variants and versions of different games; on the other, a peculiarly *cinquecentesco* interest in the nature and history of play and games. Another field of inquiry discloses a different, although interconnected set of rhetorics. By analyzing the rules of games played in the 16th century, as described by the aforementioned authors, and defining the implications of their design, it is possible to claim that they offer a significant vantage point on a number of cultural and social issues found in early modern Italy, such as gender relations, the interaction between play and the arts, and the distinction between 'high' and 'low' forms of recreation. For the purpose of this inquiry, we will briefly analyze two games found in the corpus of texts described earlier.

Let us start with *Giuoco piacevole*, described in Ascanio De' Mori's eponymous book, also known as *giuoco delle lettere o dell'osteria*. Like most games described in 16th century literature, this is a game of memory, invention and improvisation. All players are assigned a letter (A for the first player, B for the second, and so on). Players then take turns narrating short stories that feature primarily that letter. In the play session described by De' Mori, nine players, five men and four women, have to make up a short narrative containing the following elements: City, Hostel, Host, Garden, Tree, Nymph, Animal, Bird, Motto, Sonnet, Riddle. Some of these elements must start with the appointed letter. For example, signora Beatrice, one of the players is assigned the letter A and concocts a story set in the city of Ancona, in the garden of Altamira, where she meets a nymph

named Aretusa and a mythological Alicorno. Other elements of the story do not have to start with the appointed letter, but need to conform to the narrative. For example, the motto "non con altre armi" is seen by Beatrice beside the Alicorno. Finally, the riddle does not need to conform to the rule of the letter nor to the general narrative, but is conceived as a standalone expansion of the turn. This complex interaction between regulated game-like elements, demonstrations of literary proficiency, and free-form dialogue, often found in the *giochi di veglia* described by Bargagli and other authors, is reflective of a context in which play practices are inextricably connected with a wider palette of cultural and intellectual activities. In *Giuoco piacevole* players demonstrate both their improvisational skills and their knowledge of the current literary canon by concocting *imprese* and riddles that resonate with contemporary culture. It should be noted that, in the case of games that are informed, at least to a degree, by literary proficiency, both texts from 'high' culture and popular romances are used as tools for mnemonic play. This is particularly revelatory of how gender issues were addressed in the context of games played in Senese academies and other contexts. Women needed to be prepared to confront men on the typically manly terrain of high culture, while men had to 'lower' their habits of cultural consumption and read Spanish romance novels, then considered literature for women. While it is true that in *giochi di veglia* men and women are often described as competing on equal grounds, a rift between them, consistent with contemporary gender mores, is unambiguously evident. While De' Mori's description of *Giuoco piacevole* hints at a game that is designed to appeal to (and at the same time produce an image of) "il perfetto giocatore aristocratico" (Sanjust 1988, p. 13), some of the games described by Girolamo Bargagli require players to engage in erratic and potentially subversive activities. The *Giuoco delle bestemmie*

ridiculose, described in Bargagli's *Dialogo* (Bargagli G. 1581, pp. 51-53) stands out as a conflation of physical interaction and carnivalesque behaviour. This game requires players to utter the most insulting and ridiculous blasphemy they can think of. After this phase, one of the players is randomly selected to be tickled by other players; s/he has to remember and yell all the blasphemies while being tickled in order to be set free. The game parodies the canon of memory-games established in Ringhieri's catalogue and De' Mori's proto-ethnography. While players are usually required to remember fragments of poems or compose idyllic narratives, in the game of ridiculous blasphemies an unusual amount of physical interaction is coupled with a perilous, subversive approach to contemporary mores. The game requires players to test the limits of social acceptability and, notably, gender conventions, as both men and women may be selected for tickling others. Even more interestingly, this characteristically unruly game is coupled with one of Bargagli's most in-depth theoretical ventures. After describing the rules of the game, Bargagli has one of the characters of the dialogue muse on the implications of describing some games as "giuochi di scherzo", as opposed to other, more "serious" games. Finally il Frastagliato (a member of the academy and a character in Bargagli's dialogue) ponders whether "simili giuochi di scherzo, non si possano anche nominare di spirito, poi che nel farli bene non poco d'ingegno, e d'acutezza ne fa di mestieri" (p. 52), explicitly addressing the rift between 'high' and 'low' forms of play found in a great number of similar texts.

Discourses and design: two oscillations

Our approach to the historical analysis of the rhetorics of play proposes to consider two types of sources. On the one hand, the texts in which the games are discussed and collected are employed as a means of identifying certain discursive configurations, and

analyzed as the most persistent traces of the different interpretations of play found in a specific social and historical context. On the other, the games described in these texts, their rules and intended use, that is to say, their design, are considered as possessing their own rhetorical features and aspirations (Bogost 2007). In other words, we claim that discourse and rhetorics of play should be derived both from textual evidence and sources and, when possible, from the games themselves, which should be read as an agglomeration of a set of rules, an intended use, and a multitude of actual play sessions. Games themselves can be read as parts of the construction of a rhetorical discourse.

With the present case studies, this two-pronged approach led us to consider two main oscillatory movements. The first axis involves theory and practice. Tasso's highly theoretical dialogue is here ideally opposed to Ringhieri's encyclopaedic collection of games. While different in their epistemological agenda and reach, these two textual configurations clearly point to specific values and discourses associated with play in the Italian Cinquecento. Both Tasso and Ringhieri (and the Bargaglis as well) engage with specific issues of gender (should women play or spectate? is it appropriate for a woman to win a game?), intellectual status (are games a way to demonstrate one's engagement with high culture?), and artistic merit (is play a form of art? is it akin to poetry?). The second oscillation is between decorum and transgression. The dynamics of play described by De' Mori and Bargagli as constitutive of *Giuoco piacevole* and *Giuoco delle bestemmie ridiculose* inform a perspective on play in which games function alternatively as sanctions for a certain social status ("il perfetto giocatore aristocratico") and arenas in which subversive activities are tolerated. In this sense, the context of play is key. De' Mori describes a play session held in Brescia, where the heritage of pseudo-ludic social past-times such as *giochi di veglia*

or *filò* is likely to be still relevant; Bargagli's game is set in Siena's Accademia degli Intronati, a gathering place for intellectuals who were eager to differentiate themselves from the dwellers of both the courts and the *salotti*. The identification of this second continuum between socially acceptable and socially problematic play ("giuochi d'ingegno" and "giuochi di scherzo") is thus the result of the intersection of the analysis of texts and the discussion of game design characteristics, two sites where the rhetorics of play are constructed.

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