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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 cultural forms that included non-digital games, and games and 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 Renaissance – 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;
perciòché gli uomini molte fiate si
fascian vincere, per vincere 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. 1889, first published
in 1587), where he claims to have
put his brother’s theory into practice
(RICCÒ 1889, 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 1889, p. xiii).
Asciano 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 Asciano 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
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 Asciano 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 Gioco 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 Gioco 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 Gioco 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 Gioco piacevole and Gioco 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 filo 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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