

## Project Description

### Concept and Objectives

The research project *Ludological Investigations* explores game systems as cultural artefacts and media-technical configurations. Adopting a cultural techniques perspective on play and design, the project examines how games—both analogue and digital—emerge, are shaped, transmitted and transformed as cultural practices. Its goal is to understand game mechanics not merely as forms of aesthetic experience or narrative construction, but as media-technical operations in which cultural knowledge, social norms and political orders are condensed and processed.

At the core lies the assumption that games cultivate basic procedures of distinction, allocation, and rule formation—precisely those fundamental cultural techniques that also structure reading, writing, and arithmetic (cf. Siegert 2020). Through their specific materiality, their often physically embedded action schemas, and their rule-based design, games open up not only fields of representation but also spaces for the rehearsal, reproduction, and variation of systems of order.

### Research Questions

- Which cultural and technical dispositifs (e.g., card decks, game boards, arcade machines, game engines, licensing systems) shape game processes even before play begins?
- How can game mechanics be described as historical expressions of social, political, and epistemic distinctions?
- In what ways are games themselves media for the transmission of knowledge and the generation of cultural meaning—beyond their narrative content?
- What role does the materiality of games (paper, wood, chip, code) play in shaping their playability, dissemination, and cultural coding?
- How can methods from cultural techniques research, media archaeology, and game analysis be productively combined to develop a critical ludology?

As a feasibility study for a coherent *science of games*—that is, a dedicated discipline rather than the multidisciplinary field currently known as Game Studies—this project questions what the actual object of research should be. It cannot be "the game" in general, as the family resemblance among games does not allow for a sharply defined research field. Instead, the project focuses on the process of *ludification*: the crystallisation of a childlike play impulse into formalised rule systems. Following Huizinga (1938), one might say that culture is "played" in its early stages—and that play can in turn retreat from culture. These are his two "indigestible theses" (Pfaller 2002).

The social and spatial rules of collective game invention, cultivation, and later economic exploitation by the culture industry emerge as key topics of ludological research. This cultural-scientific focus can in turn help define the profile of the cultural sciences themselves. Aleida Assmann (2016) has diagnosed a "boundlessness" in the wake of a series of disciplinary "turns" (linguistic, visual, spatial, etc.), a tension between materiality and narrativity that also characterises Game Studies. Should we make silent witnesses of lived practice speak—or understand the implicit logic of narration as a cultural principle? *Ludological Investigations* seeks a dialectical integration of what Caillois (1958) famously distinguished as *paidia* and *ludus*. This allows us to describe social transformations without ignoring material contexts. The project reflects on the situatedness of scientific knowledge itself.

## Methodology

The *Ludological Symposia* follow a clear structure: For each session, two enquiries (*Enquêtes*) are announced, each devoted to one game-related operation. The moderators of these enquiries bring an object that serves as a prototype of the operation in question. A short impulse offers insight into the tacit knowledge surrounding the object and its historical background, which is then expanded in open discussion and related to other cases.

As the symposia progressed, participation became increasingly demanding. INTRA funding enabled the organisation of a full-day workshop with international guests. *The Anatomy of Games* followed a similar structure: game objects formed the material framework for subsequent discussions. One session explored card game design as a research practice. Another focused on menstrual cycles, offering a contrasting perspective on the widely popular—and rarely questioned—concept of cognitive flow.

Across all levels—material, social dynamics, and aesthetic terminology—the project cultivates conditions for a genuinely ludological approach.

The research follows a media-archaeological methodology that focuses less on the meanings games generate and more on the technical, material, and operational conditions of play. Games are treated as cultural interfaces through which anthropotechnical routines and technological conjunctures become visible.

The methodological framework combines:

- historical source work in media studies,
- interface-analytical observations,
- game-theoretical modelling,
- experimental artistic formats (game jams, workshops, speculative design).

## Expected Outcomes

The project aims to lay the groundwork for a *critical ludology*, analysing game mechanics not merely in terms of cultural significance but in their operational structure and media-technical foundations. Initial efforts at isolating distinct game operations suggested the possibility of a systematic taxonomy—a *periodic table* of cultural elements.

However, a more fruitful model has been the *anatomy of games*. By analysing the functional contributions of individual gaming practices—like organ systems—one can identify necessary and sufficient conditions under which a system of rules is recognised by a given culture as a game.

Current work includes:

- a *methodological handbook* for analysing game design as a cultural practice (in print and online),
- *workshops, public events, and teaching formats* (e.g., at the University of Applied Arts Vienna and FH BFI Vienna),

- impulses for critical reflection in the gaming industry, which—unlike other entertainment sectors—still lacks substantial analytical frameworks (relying mostly on pedagogical consumer guidance).

#### Funded by INTRA

Initially an independent initiative, the project has been elevated to full research status through the support of INTRA. This funding aligns closely with the project's inter- and transdisciplinary orientation, which encourages collaboration with practitioners from game design and supports experimental approaches at the intersection of art, science, and technology. *Ludological Investigations* thus positions itself not only as a contribution to Game Studies but as an attempt to explore new forms of knowledge production—where theory, artistic practice, and technological reflection intersect.

#### Relevance

In a time when game cultures are largely shaped by digital markets, platforms, and gamification discourses, *Ludological Investigations* highlights that games can also serve as arenas of critique, boundary negotiation, and cultural reprogramming. Taking this epistemological dimension of play seriously is a timely contribution to reaffirming the relevance of the cultural sciences in an increasingly technologised world.

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