

# The Past-at-Play Lab: Research in and as Play

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## Abstract

In his seminal work *Homo Ludens*, the historian Johan Huizinga argued that “civilization arises and unfolds **in and as play**”. This insight has informed many fields since, including game-studies, history, and archaeology. We propose to take Huizinga’s assertion a couple of steps further in a theoretical and practical sense: if histories arise and unfold in and as play, our study of this phenomenon should also unfold in and as play, of both digital and analog varieties.

This idea is given shape in a research lab and public playspace: the Past-at-Play Lab. Based on a synergistic theoretical framework informed by game studies, digital humanities, heritage studies, digital archaeology and archaeogaming, in the Past-at-Play Lab we are working from the premise that when play is culture, it also offers a rich locus for examining history as culture, both in the pre-digital past and the post-digital present. We want to investigate how past civilizations have culturally expressed themselves in play, but also how contemporary games deal with the past as play. This perspective is at the basis of a multidimensional and interdisciplinary take on the relation between play, past, and culture. The Past-at-Play Lab is based on the idea of **understanding play, by playing** and its approach can be illustrated in two fundamental questions:

*How can the study of ancient games played in the present help us understand play in past societies?*

By focusing on the experiential and expressive aspect of play, the Past-at-Play Lab aims to enrich our understanding of this quintessential historical human experience.

*How can play enrich individual and societal engagement with the past?*

Increasingly, people experience and learn about the past through games, instead of textbooks, museums, or even television. By focusing on the process and outcomes of play, the Past-at-Play Lab will enrich our understanding of how play shapes our individual and collective ideas of the past.

Analysis is based on a mixed-methods approach, joining a media and heritage studies and ethno-archaeological framework with a digital humanities toolset. We have conducted a review study on archaeological and textual remains related to ancient board games and contemporary games dealing with the past. This research serves as a basis for informing which games will be played and studied in the Past-at-Play Lab. In the lab, data is gathered before, during, and after play. Students and citizens play games from the past, using replica artefacts and re-constructed rulesets, as well as contemporary games. Part of the resulting dataset is qualitative, focusing on the individual’s experience of play and consisting of intake and exit interviews, focus-group discussions, and participant observation. The quantitative data consists of the recording of

actions taken during games explored with game analytic methods. In the case of analog games, we capture video recordings, analysed using computer vision-aided pattern recognition. By recognizing that scholarship takes place in and for society, we seek to explore this power of play and the past to connect research, outreach, and teaching activities in a project that is both popularly accessible and academically valuable.