Looking at the history of video games through the prism of ludicisation processes

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Serious games, news games and persuasive games show that games today permeate numerous other spheres of activity previously considered as separate from the gaming sphere, thus reciprocally blurring the definition of what a game actually is. It seems clear that the characteristics and dichotomies which are habitually used to defined games now need to be put into some perspective. For example, a game is no longer necessarily part of an activity which is carefully separated from the rest of a player's existence as argued by Caillois (1958) while omnipresent incitements to play games bombard users of all digital devices. The emergence of these new game forms has led to the break-up of the "canonical model" of games defined by Johan Huizinga (1951) and taken up by Caillois, a model which had however provided a robust structure for a large number of theoretical frameworks used in games studies (Schmoll, 2010) and within which games were defined according to a set of intrinsic criteria (unproductivity, freedom, separation from everyday life etc.). Conversely this emergence of previously unseen ludic phenomena has breathed new life into other approaches to games which had perhaps received less coverage in studies of the subject and particularly the ideas developed by Henriot (1989). This philosopher considers that there may be an invariable anthropological ludic attitude in humans (which, as we shall see, is a particular cognitive style) who nonetheless have quite distinct ideas regarding this phenomenon and the objects concerned this attitude (Henriot, 1989: 83-84). Among other things, this creates conceptual and linguistic differences between one culture and another. The

French word "*jeu*" refers to both the ludic attitude and the objects which are associated with this activity, whereas in English there are two distinct notions, *play* (an equivalent of ludic attitude) and *game* (the objects associated with the ludic attitude). Ludic phenomena also have different connotations and meanings according to location and era; for example the relationship between play, seriousness and entertainment fluctuates greatly. To sum up, Jacques Henriot posits the view that the definition of a game will always be likely to evolve over time and space which corresponds to the more recent findings of an author like Malaby (2007) who sees games more as processes in a state of perpetual transformation with the potential to continually generate new practices and connotations. Today, the multiplication and mutation of ludic phenomena tends to support the theory that the definitions and characteristics of what makes up a game are in fact socio-cultural constructs. The characteristics and the ludic dimension of an object must not be considered unchangeable if we are to understand the phenomena of contagion and mutation of games. On the contrary, these characteristics need to be questioned to describe the processes governing how we come to reconsider our ideas about what constitutes a game and how, in doing so, certain objects not previously thought of as games gradually become labeled as such. We propose to call the processes by which situations are transformed into games "ludicisation" processes, thereby choosing to make a distinction between this idea and other notions such as that of gamification which does not take into account the shifting, process-linked aspects of ludic phenomena, preferring instead to attribute fixed characteristics to these phenomena.

According to the concept of gamification, intrinsic elements of games just need to be exported to other situations to turn them into games, which is an opposite way of looking at things to our approach because we consider no game characteristics to be unchangeable. Simply adding the chance factor or an element of competition to a situation (to use Caillois's categories), or perhaps a points system, does not suffice to necessarily turn a situation into a game. As Deterding, Dixon, Khaled & Nacke point out "*it does not answer the question of how to identify game elements. One solution is to treat game elements as a*

set of building blocks or features shared by games (rather than a set of necessary conditions for a game), comparable to Wittgensteinian family resemblances. A very strict interpretation of this approach – accepting only elements that are unique or specific to games – would produce an empty or very constrained set. A very liberal interpretation – any element that can be found in any game – would be boundless. We therefore suggest restricting "gamification" to the description of elements that are characteristic to games – elements that are found in most (but not necessarily all) games, readily associated with games, and found to play a significant role in gameplay. Of course, this is a heuristic definition with much room for debate over what is "characteristic" for games". One objective underlying our approach is to concentrate on this latter problem. The aim is to understand the processes though which game characteristics evolve and how certain elements of a situation come to take on a ludic appearance. In other words, it is necessary to understand how an object or some elements of a situation become typical of what a game is in a given era and society.

As we shall see, our view is that games should be considered socio-cultural assemblages and that the role of a ludologist is to use a purpose-built set of theoretical tools and notions to understand and describe the processes by which these assemblages form and evolve. How may we understand what makes up a game if the criteria required to define the phenomenon are unstable and shifting? Which processes come into to play to bring an objet, situation or practice into the game sphere? How should these ludicisation processes be analyzed and described? Several of Henriot's ideas on this approach to games as a shifting phenomenon have still to be fully developed ; further study along those lines would enable the construction of a theoretical framework for reporting on games' evolution processes and also for listing past evolutions - a largely uncultivated research field. The aim of this article then is take Jacques Henriot's ideas as a starting point for the construction of a framework for the analysis of ludicisation processes providing the necessary tools to retrace current and past changes.

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Kinephanos, ISSN 1916-985X
History of Games International Conference Proceedings, January 2014, www.kinephanos.ca
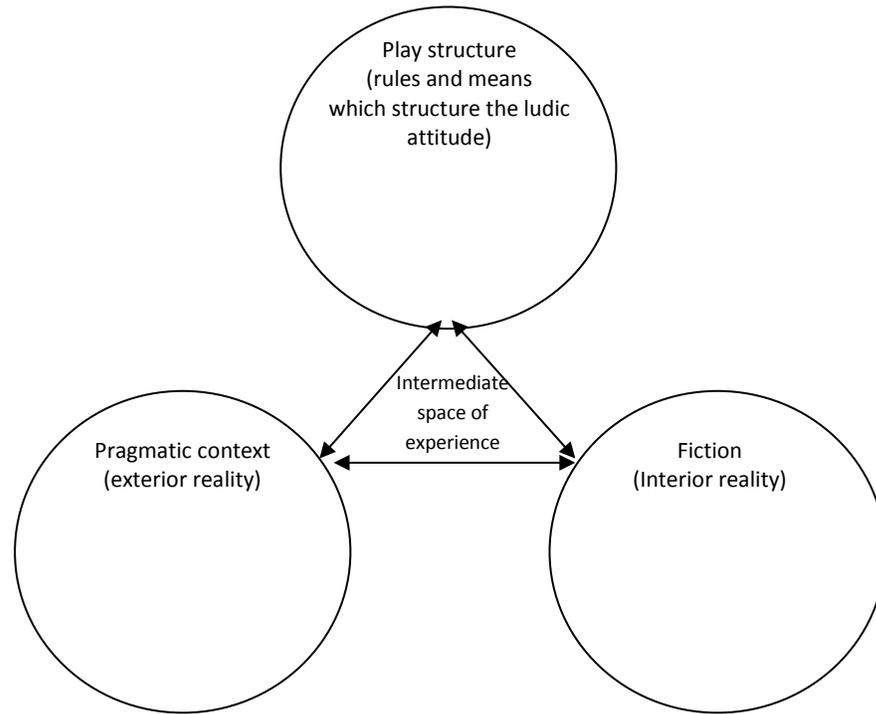
The ludic attitude and the assemblage of play

When studying games as a shifting, transient process, Henriot first noted that it is above all a player's ludic attitude which transforms a situation into a game. One only needs to watch children playing to notice how they can make a game out of any situation. "For a ludic structure that dare not speak its name to be the subject of a conceptual approach and investigation leading to it being attributed this name, all that is required is that one adopts the same attitude towards it as one would adopt to a game" (Henriot, 1989 : 45). Software like *Flight Simulator* may be seen as a flight simulation program for pilots and also as a game by an individual using it during his or her leisure time. As Jean-Marie Schaeffer (1999) or Gregory Bateson (1977) have shown, it can be argued that the ludic attitude adopted by the individual as player is a cognitive style, a mental framework characterized by the fact that players act as if what they are doing is a different, distinct activity which is not nonetheless devoid of links to reality. As such, playing is not dreaming. As Donald W. Winnicott (1975) points out, a player's actions occur in an intermediate space of experience located between exterior and interior realities. Within this framework, adopting a ludic attitude also involves adopting a set of rules which structure behavior whether or not these rules have been formally pre-defined (playing involves a set of rules that may be formal, informal and even implicit[1]). Playing at airplanes is not the same as playing at trains. There is however a condition for players to be able to adopt this attitude, as both Henriot and Malaby have stressed. The situation in which players find themselves needs to guarantee a degree of contingency in the way events unfold. According to Henriot, playing means "assembling" a set of means giving a more or less random outcome and players need to be able to do the "exercise of possibilities" (*exercice des possibles*). For example players should feel that they can win or lose or that their actions could have significant repercussions on how events develop, a point which we shall return to later. Overall we can suggest that *when an individual adopts a ludic attitude, he or she carries out an*

[1] See Salen, Zimmerman, 2004 on the distinction between these different types of rules.

assemblage of a set of means and rules (which structure his or her ludic attitude), *a fictional world* (as playing is "behaving as if") *and a pragmatic context* (the outside world in which the game is portrayed* and which also plays a role in shaping the game)[2]. As Deleuze suggests, an assemblage is "a multiplicity which includes many heterogeneous terms and which creates links and relations between these […]. In this way co-functioning is the only unit of assemblage"[3] (Deleuze, Parnet, 1977 : 84). As the following schema shows, analyzing the assemblages produced by the ludic attitude involves understanding all of the following: how the rules take shape within a given pragmatic context (which will also affect their formulation with current technological capacities influencing which games actually can be invented); how this context may itself provide a format for fiction (the ludic attitude wavers between interior and exterior reality, between involvement and distancing [Henriot, 1989 : 260]) ; and how this fiction is governed by rules which the fiction also enables players to approach and understand (the use of medieval fantasy is very helpful for video games in that it makes identifying enemies or potential supporters easy through playing on inter-textual and inter-media references).

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[2] Considering games through the notion of assemblage is increasingly gaining credit, in particular see Taylor (2011: 336) who uses the notion of *assemblage of play* while referring to a broad disciplinary area: "I am very loosely using the term assemblage—sometimes in the work of science technology scholars, sometimes tied to the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), sometimes grounded in a particular form of artistic practice—to prompt an alternate heuristic for analysis". Our objective is to develop this concept by firmly basing ourselves on the Deleuzian definition of the term while, as we shall see, requires it to be linked to other concepts from which it cannot be disassociated once one opts for the Deleuzian perspective.
[3] Our translation from French.

Play structure
(rules and means
which structure the ludic
attitude)

Intermediate
space of
experience

Pragmatic context
(exterior reality)

Fiction
(Interior reality)

The contents and expressions of assemblages of play

According to Jacques Henriot, even if the ludic attitude is the first factor in how a situation becomes a game, it is also undeniable that "everyone knows that there are objects which are designed, produced and sold to be used as play tools"[4] (1989 : 101). Designing a game therefore involves a fundamentally communicational dimension and requires understanding the modalities for the transmission of a shared meaning of play: a structure which "aims" to be seen as a game requires the target user to possess knowledge of certain ludic

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[4] Our translation from French.

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History of Games International Conference Proceedings, January 2014, www.kinephanos.ca

information through the pragmatic markers which incite that user to adopt a ludic attitude. This means it is necessary to describe the ways in which objects claiming to be games may *to some extent* conform to the dimensions usually associated with the activity in order to be recognized as such. It is possible, as Bogost (2007) has shown, to create links between rhetoric and video games and we therefore consider that the attributes which serve as ludic mediators (to persuade the user that they are in fact games) make up what we shall call the oeuvre's ludic ethos. According to Pignier (2008 : 52), the concept of ethos, which comes from classical rhetoric, refers to the traits of character a speaker needs to display to an audience to confer authority on his words and provide guarantees regarding his speech. The idea then is to construct a universe where a user may "feel at home" and evolve "in complicity". Ethos should also be understood as a notion which conveys "a value system". In the case of our work, this led us to analyze the values conferred on the ludic activity by a software program in order to appropriate it as a game. In their book *Digital Play* (2003), Kline, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter identified, for example, the predominance of themes linked to what they called "militarized masculinity" in the very first video games. These themes paved the way for the boom in video games given that the main target audience was male teenagers and that the first places the games were played, bars and arcades, acted as a field for experimentation to develop the games for use on the first home consoles.

However, as we have suggested, to understand the ways in which a situation may be suitable for the ludic attitude, it should also be noted that this attitude cannot function in all locations and at any time. For example, it would not work with a flood: "This tends to go unsaid through fear of offending people and their sensibilities but above all because the situations which create these kinds of events allow those caught up in them no room for initiative. They have no choice. There is nothing they *can do about it*"[5] (Henriot, 1989 : 193). To sum up then, certain situations display characteristics which do not allow those involved to adopt a ludic attitude towards them (even if they display a ludic ethos) and not being able to carry out an action having significant
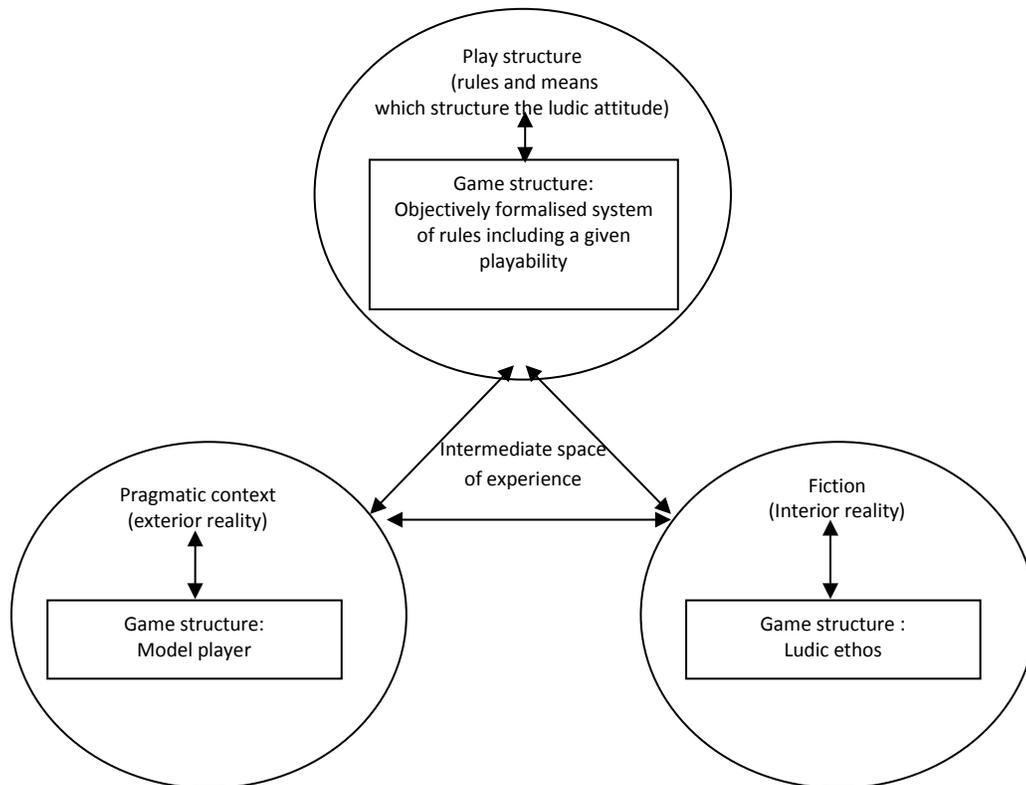
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[5] Our translation from French.

repercussions on the way events unfold is one of those aspects (the player would not be able to do the exercise of all possibilities in this exact case). As Henriot points out, the game needs to be played but to be played it needs to be playable (unplayable games would thus have little chance of being recognized and characterized as being typical of that which is a game). Some situations do not enable an individual to adopt a ludic attitude but conversely others display some traits which mean the attitude can be adopted more easily and thus show a greater level of "playability" and potential to adapt to the ludic attitude. For example for a child it is usually harder to play during a class in school whereas recess is the right time for playing. This does not mean it is impossible to play in class but rather that the structure of the latter situation (its system of rules and limits) has a higher inherent level of playability than the former. Playability does not solely depend on the objects called a game (the playability of a situation being also analyzable based on the degrees of contingency it allows [Genvo, 2011]). It should once again be underlined here that the playability of a situation – its adaptability to a ludic attitude – will depend on the individual who appropriates it. The same situation can quite easily have a high level of playability for one person while being totally unplayable for another which, again, suggests it is best to avoid all essentialism. *Monopoly* is a playable game for people who know how to count with a recommended age for players of 8 years and over.

In this way, by including a given playability and a given ethos, a structure designed to be recognized and appropriated as a game will also appeal to certain types of players who are likely to either possess or be able to acquire a certain "ludic skill"[6]. Overall this structure sketches out the profile of a certain "model player", who may not necessarily be the empirical player but who in any case personifies the interpretative strategy required to shape the game structure and thus constitute all its legitimable interpretations. The model player represents the pragmatic context for which the game was initially designed although this does not mean reappropriation cannot occur.

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[6] For more on the notion of ludic skill see C. Duflo, *Jouer et philosopher*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, "Pratiques théoriques", 1997.

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Understanding the role played by the initial context in shaping the model player and the itinerary of how and when successive appropriations of the structure occurred could be the subject of an as yet unwritten sociohistory of video games. Many video games, such as the *Sim City* series (Maxis, 1989 – 2011) for example are now used in schools despite this not being their initial vocation. Some features of *Sim City* may seem unsuitable for these new contexts like, for example, the time it takes to play. The schema shown above may then be modified to take all these considerations:

As in all assemblages (Deleuze, Guattari, 1980 : 629), a distinction can be made between the levels of contents (the game structure) and expression (appropriation and modification of the structure by ludic attitude, play), both being reciprocally presupposed. The model player becomes part of a pragmatic

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context but also incites the latter to be produced through a certain analyzable interpretative strategy[7]. The ludic ethos draws from fictional reference points to build up a value system whose vocation will be to persuade the person it is aimed at to adopt a ludic attitude through the representations conveyed. The game structure's rules include a given playability that will partly structure the ludic attitude which in turn is capable of bringing about modifications to the rules either by adding new rules or by making the game's structure itself evolve through the game being played. Furthermore, some games (such as MMORPG) present ever evolving structures (through patches, add-on or even remakes) which integrate some of the implicit rules created by players.

It is important to note here that the act of playing situates itself in a territory which in turn renders each assemblage unique: "Each assemblage is firstly territorial and the first concrete rule regarding assemblages is to find which territoriality they cover given that assemblages depend on territory"[8] (Deleuze, Guattari, 1980 : 629). Play territory is of course the intermediate space of experience which links the three spheres as shown in the schema. To analyze play territories requires an understanding of how all the terms included in this schema make up a particular assemblage through friction between them and complementary factors on levels of both content and expression. *Spacewar*[9], as it was developed by Steve Russel in 1962, was the product of a given territory, the MIT, developed as it was by engineering students who possessed certain of the ludic skills required to appropriate it, certain shared fictional reference points (such as a fascination for science fiction) and certain of the ludic activity's values. This logically fitted into a practice of *hacking* which amongst other things advocated the free circulation of information and openness to objects being modified by their users. *Computer Space* (1971),

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[7] Our concept of model player is an adaptation of the concept of model lector by Umberto Eco (1985)

[8] Our translation from French.

[9] Many histories of video games cite *Spacewar* as one of the first video games to be designed. That design resulted from its developers using one of MIT's supercalculators. The idea of the game was for players to bring two space ships into confrontation. It spread through American campuses via Arpanet and its players contributed many modifications to the game.

Bushnell's commercial version of the previous game, was part of a different territory which meant it formed a quite different assemblage. The game was developed to be played in bars and arcades and Bushnell modified its structure to fit with a business model, namely that of gaming arcade owners. Even though the fictional reference points were the same, the values conferred on the activity were radically different to those of the hackers who had created *Spacewar.* As Kline, Dyer-Whiteford and De Peuter have shown (2003: 56), the commodification of play brings restrictions of usage and a logic of standardization which were a source of friction with the promises of free, ludic exploration originally implied with this area given that the hacker community had considerably contributed to its birth. However the model player of *Computer Space* was neither modified nor adapted to its new pragmatic context (arcades) and the ludic skills required remained the same as that required of engineering students in technology institutes which led to the failure of *Computer Space.* This example shows the need to consider a game structure as the result of a process of mutations and transformations and not as a static, unchangeable form. Indeed game structure is intrinsically always likely to change and may also invade new territories. Hence this itself contributes to modifying the meaning attributed to these objects and to broadening the idea of what a game is to involve other realities: "Assemblage may also divide along another axis. Its territoriality (content and expression included) is only its first aspect; the other is made up of the *lines of deterritorialization* which run through it and carry it away"[10] (Deleuze, 1986 : 630).

Diagrams of ludicisation and ludic strata

All assemblages of play are thus crossed by lines of deterritorialization which precede it and instill it with possibilities of facts. For Deleuze and Guattari, the vectors of mutation or variation are one of the components of any assemblage and move it towards its future form. These lines trace an abstract diagram which for Deleuze is a complementary notion which goes hand in hand with that of the assemblage. The diagram is a potentiality of facts. Each

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[10] Our translation from French.

assemblage of play is a unique actualization of ludicisation diagrams. The notion of video games genres and its role in practices show how assemblages of play are crossed by an abstract diagram which rules them and builds, through them, a future reality and points of potentiality. For example, a game structure often proposes that the way known and used mechanisms function be modified while also bringing certain variations to the original system. This is the case of a game like *Half-Life* (Sierra, 1998) which used more complex versions of some of the main game mechanisms from *Doom* (Id Software, 1993). A game structure may also offer a majority of new action modalities. Certain of these modalities may achieve the status of "references" and be used as foundation stones for the structures of other games so that these too may be recognized as potential games. For example, for some time games which were similar to the game produced by Id Software were referred to as "*Doom-like*". "The video game genre brings into play the most important thing for players, their way of playing. A quick look at some of the terms used to categorize games noticeably brings out references to players' activities. For example, platform games (players have to jump from one platform to another), shooting games (shooting at monsters), role playing games (players have to concentrate on their character - or *persona* – to progress), adventure games (*adventura*, that which "advents" or is brought about, as the game's underlying principle put it, where the idea is to make events or a story unfold by solving puzzles)"[11] (Letourneux, 2006 : 40).
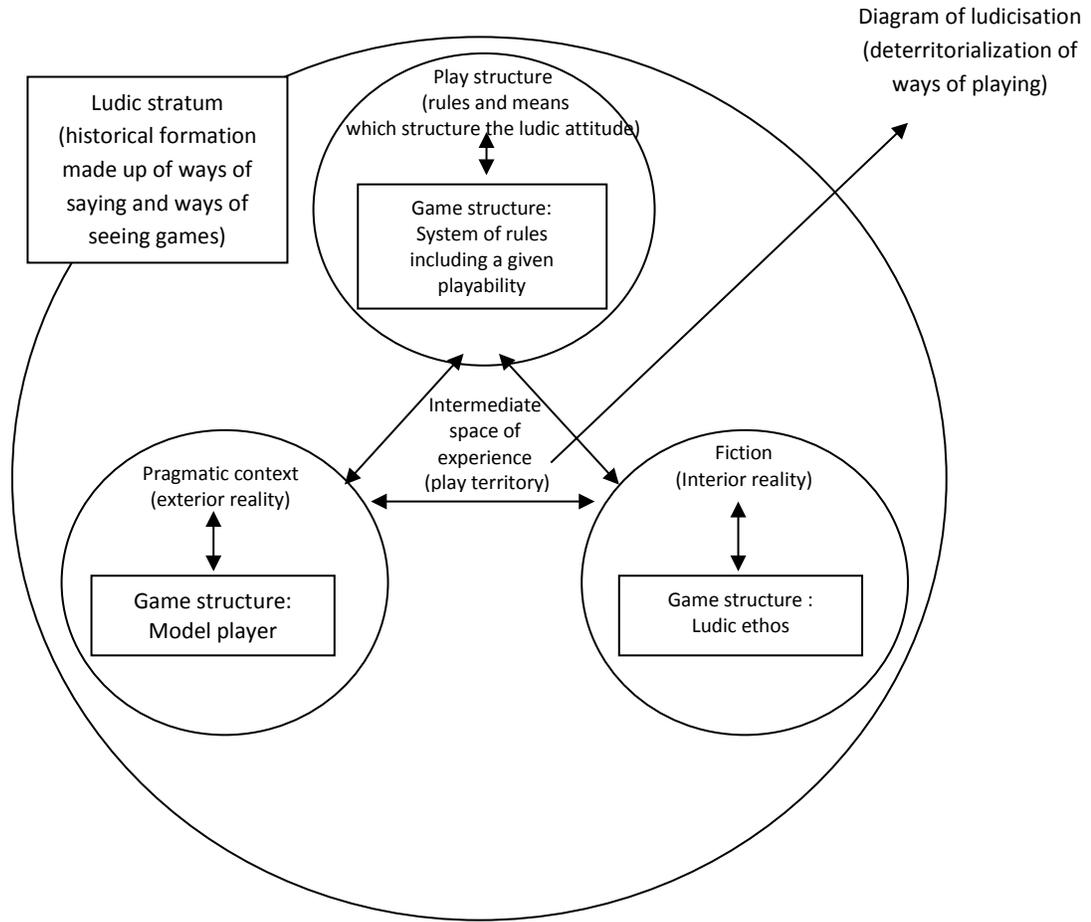
To sum up, a ludicisation process depends on spreading a way of playing from a territory to different other ones. However a way of playing does not give advance notice of its function or value. Any given way of playing may have a multitude of assemblages, functions (entertainment, education, providing information etc) and rules which shape this mechanism; there may also be fictional constructs that flesh it out, values conferred upon it or model players for example. This means that certain assemblages in a given context will appear more typical of that which we consider a game than others (this view may of course evolve). There can be periods of stabilization and variation.

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[11] Our translation from French.

It is important to detect the constitution of "ludic strata" and the links that may develop between them. For Deleuze a stratum is a "historical formation" made up of "ways of saying and ways of seeing", "each stratum is made up of a combination of the two and from one stratum to another there is a variation in both and also in how they combine"[12] (Deleuze, 1986 : 56). There are ways of saying games and ways of seeing them which may vary and combine in different ways and it is up to historians to date these strata and draw up a map of the dynamic forces working within each of them. The *hackers* at the American technology institutes of the seventies, had their own ways of saying and seeing what made up a game – amongst other things games were viewed as a model for the free circulation of information and conveyed their designers' fascination for technological experimentation (playing and programing were intimately linked as Nick Monfort showed [2003] in the case of the first text-based adventure games). For the first commercial promoters of video games (particularly Atari), digital games foretold the advent of experiential products to be consumed in their usage and were thus seen as technical objects with built-in short-term obsolescence. For certain modern day artists and theorists video games are seen as a new form of expression with possible political, social and individual claims to put forward (the *September 12th*[13] [Newsgaming, 2003] by Gonzalo Frasca springs to mind). The schema below integrates these ideas on diagrams and ludic strata.

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[12] Our translation from French.

[13] In this game the player controls the sights of a missile aimed at a typical village in the Middle East where terrorists are walking around amongst the locals. If the player tries to kill them, the enormous missile almost automatically misses the target causing a great deal of collateral damage and generating even more terrorists. There is no way of winning the game in fact. *September 12th* is therefore against the United States' post 9/11 interventionist policy.

Conclusion

As Jacques Henriot pointed out (1989 : 32), "the idea that play is continually and increasingly spreading and that people play more games more often remains a relatively banal observation which only scratches the surface of the problem. It ignores the most important aspect namely that the very *idea* of play and game is now being applied to realities, situations and modes of behavior when its use in those contexts would only recently have appeared

misplaced and even absurd or scandalous. We speak about game increasingly readily but above all *differently*. In this respect we are experiencing a real mutation in which we are more or less consciously taking part. This is not just because ludic practices are multiplying and diversifying to the extreme but also because personal characteristics and behavior previously seen as "serious" and even "dramatic" are now being referred to as games or ways of play"[14].

To sum up, we moved into a new ludic stratum.

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[14] Our translation from French.

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Kinephanos, ISSN 1916-985X
History of Games International Conference Proceedings, January 2014, www.kinephanos.ca