

Games are Culture.

Dau Barcelona Games Festival

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0. Are games culture?

When we were children, we used to play games. As we get older our interest wanders and wanes. By the time we're grownups, we've all but forgotten how to play games and don't know how to get back in the habit. All too often we prefer other company, other cultural distractions, other ways of interacting with others. We know that reading, travelling, theatre, film and music are all forms of culture, but we easily forget that games are part of culture as well.

When we're asked why we don't play games, we can always fall back on the excuse that games are for children or that we don't have the time.

Games are a key part of culture, and have been so in all times and places. Right from humankind's humble beginnings, when games were scared and magic ceremonies, and then when they became liturgical and dramatic performances, and then competitions, through to today's mass-produced games, people all over the world have seen games as space for relating and communicating with others linked to the imagination and everyday life—in short, a space for culture.

1. Notes on the history of board games

If the invention of a game at least 4,600 years ago doesn't count as culture, then what does? This was a game, in fact, much like today's, with a board, dice, counters and rules for moving and taking pieces. In 1926 Sir Leonard Woolley, head of the archaeological expedition to the rich Sumerian city of Ur, in what is now southern Iraq, found what is now known as the Royal Game of Ur in the royal tomb. This game had a wooden board and drawers inlaid with mother-of-pearl, lapis lazuli and red limestone and is now on display in the British Museum. It's a beautiful, sumptuously ornamented object that must have accompanied more than one emperor to the next world.

So, around 4,600 years ago someone took the time to invent something as useless as a game. The Royal Game of Ur is a race game in which two players move around the same circuit in opposite directions, and it included lucky squares where you couldn't be hit. Players moved their counters by throwing tetrahedral dice. This highly elaborate game might well have been a distant forerunner to today's backgammon.

And what about a game like oware? Oware is a game we know very little about. It was invented somewhere in Africa thousands of years ago and either the game itself or one of its parents might be the most widespread game in the world. In fact, oware is just one of the many popular mancala games.

Mancala games have a board, normally made out of wood, with two to four lines of pits. Players move seeds, small stones or shells from one pit to another. Both players use the same seeds, stones or shells. This is one of the striking features of mancala games: both players share the same counters. Odd? Very strange: in most board games throughout history, one player uses white counters and the other has black ones. In ludo there are four colours of counters. We have to leap forwards thousands of years after the appearance of the first mancala game to find games such as card games, dominoes and Scrabble where all players share the same pieces.

Today mancala games are studied in great depth by mathematicians and anthropologists. And they are also a great example of innovation and constant change. From the first mancala game (we don't know when or where it was invented) this huge family of games has grown, spread and reinvented itself time and time again. Rooted in the same basic idea (shared seeds sown one by one, usually in circular fashion), mancala games can be found throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, the Philippines and the Caribbean. All with the same features yet all different, all recreated in different ways by different peoples in different situations. In 2014, French author Bruno Cathala published the game Five Tribes, which follows the same mechanics as mancala.

Ever since long ago in the Sumerian city of Ur, humankind has not stopped playing games. Let's head east, to China, home to the game Go.

Go is a simple game that can be learnt in just a few minutes. In the West, we are familiar with chess but have never heard of Go. We know that chess has different pieces that move in particular ways and that players can use a series of crafty moves (castling, en passant, promotion, etc).

In contrast to chess, Go ("the chess of the East", in the words of Jorge Luis Borges) is a deceptively simple game that uses a set of identical black and white stones that don't move in the whole game. The trick is to think in global terms and apply this strategy to every part of the board. All that Go players do is form lines of stones to encircle their opponent's stones. This chess of the East is about 3,000 years old and it is played today in almost exactly the same way as when it was invented. If that's not perfection, it must be pretty close.

Let's go back to ludo, or the popular Spanish version: parchís. In terms of games, as in much else in life, we often think the world revolves around us. But it turns out that we're simply very adept at appropriating inventions from other cultures. Ludo and parchís are both derived from the game of pachisi, which originated in ancient India (notably the cradle of many games) some 400 years ago. The first version of pachisi we know about is a huge board carved in stone in the garden of the palace of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, where the counters were comely young slaves dressed in bright robes. So, the quintessentially Spanish parchís isn't actually Spanish at all.

The same could be said of chess, “the great game of the West”. Chess is an excellent example of evolution with sparks of innovation. It evolved from the ancient Indian game of chaturanga in the 6th century to the game of chess we know today by taking the same idea (two identical armies made up of fighters with different moves and powers, representing a medieval army, whose only goal is to capture the opponent’s king) and letting it be polished and perfected by many hands and brains, as shown by the later addition of the queen and the thousands of variations we know today.

You might think that humanity’s vast appetite for creating games might now be sated: in these few lines we’ve already covered mancala games, Go, chess and ludo and touched on cards, dominoes, backgammon and Scrabble.

And we shouldn’t forget draughts, the Game of the Goose and noughts and crosses. So is this the end of the road? Not at all. The 20th century saw an unparalleled burst of creativity in the field of board games that led to some of the best games of the century: Monopoly, Cluedo, Risk, Scrabble, Stratego. None of these games has any direct link to the long tradition of board games. And the burst of creativity in the last century didn’t end with these icons of contemporary culture. The end of the 20th century and the start of the 21st century have been even more fruitful: we are currently undergoing a true renaissance in games in society, where the focus is on easily understandable rules, keen interaction between the players, a wide range of subjects and dynamics and a healthy balance between skill and luck.

This golden age is due to the combination of several factors: the appearance of first-rate creators (Sid Sackson, Alex Randolph and Robert Abbott, followed by many others), the creation of a prize in Germany that catapulted games into the media spotlight and saw sales soar (Spiel des Jahres, since 1979), the launch of games fairs and the appearance of specialist publications that brought modern games to a wider audience, together with an industry that is increasingly open to creativity.

2. What are games for?

It’s easy to agree that games form part of humanity’s cultural heritage and should be conserved and studied for their creative value.

But what exactly are games for? Are they just pure entertainment with no greater purpose than simply passing the time? Are they merely a way for children to learn? What do games offer? Social interaction, communication, intellectual challenges, the urge to improve, training and experimentation, competition, manual skills, interpretation, a gateway to the imagination, hopes and dreams, knowledge, seduction and, above all, fun: all these things and many more. Obviously, not all games have the same features. As in many other areas of knowledge and culture, it’s a matter of personal taste.

There isn’t any single defining feature of all games. Perhaps playing games is nothing more than sharing a space separate from everyday life, a space where other things can happen.

As we've seen on our lightening tour of Mesopotamia, Africa and the Far East, people play games all over the world and do so in strangely similar ways. But the abstract concept and the word used to denote it have appeared at different times in different places and acquired different meanings, so that the word or words used to express the concept of *play* in different languages don't always coincide. Languages have equivalent words for fingers, hands or feet, but that's not the case with abstract concepts, and even less so when it comes to games and play. The word *play* is a fairly late arrival, as shown by the fact that it has no common Indo-European root and that several ancient languages such as Greek and Sanskrit have different words for *play*.

In contrast to Spanish and Catalan, in English, French and German *play*, *jouer* and *spiele* are be used as verbs not only with games but also with instruments and characters in a play, thus linking games with music and the theatre. In both games and the theatre, players and actors escape from everyday reality to venture briefly into another real or fictitious reality, but never their own reality. In the theatre and in games, actors and players have a role to play and a goal to accomplish that has nothing to do with their own lives. We could say that the key to both theatre and games is deception—being someone other than yourself.

In the last century, two scholars, Dutch philosopher and historian Johan Huizinga and French writer Roger Caillois, came up with a definition of *play* that places it fairly and squarely within the field of culture. Since the different languages in the world lack a single word for play, Huizinga said we had to understand each other through the *concept* of play. In his 1938 book *Homo ludens* he gives what has become the canonical definition, slightly modified by Caillois in *Les jeux et les hommes* (1958). For Huizinga and Caillois, "Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed as a fiction within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding. It utterly absorbs those involved and has an uncertain ending. It is unproductive in that it creates no wealth. Its aim is itself and it is accompanied by feelings of tension and joy and an awareness that it is different from ordinary life."

Wow! Play is voluntary. If we're forced to play, we lose interest.

Play is fixed in space and time. Imagine what would happen if the events on a chess board took place in real life.

Play is uncertain. It makes no sense to play chess with someone who is far more experienced than you, because both players will know who will win before they have even started playing.

Freely accepted but absolutely binding rules. Obviously, play is fiction. We use our make-believe to invent a second life. But for this second life to work in the short space of time we allow it to exist, there have to be clear, indisputable rules.

3. Board games in 21st century Europe

On 25 January 1974, a French town council eager to boost the town's image decided to join forces with a little-known cultural phenomenon: comics. It invited authors with

little institutional or public recognition and was supported from the start by a growing number of fans. Little by little, thanks above all to the unconditional support from a town of 45,000 inhabitants, for one week every year its streets were thronged with curious, enthusiastic members of the public. It caught the attention of first the local and then the national media. Forty years on, the Angoulême International Comics Festival is now a world benchmark in the field of comics and welcomes 200,000 visitors every year, making it the third biggest cultural event in France after Cannes and Avignon.

Ah yes, Cannes. In 1959 responsibility for film in France was shifted from the Ministry of Trade and Industry to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, which led to official support and recognition of the Cannes International Film Festival—set up some years before—which soon became the huge event it is today. In the wake of this success, Cannes City Council decided to champion the value of games, a little-valued cultural phenomenon. The Cannes International Games Festival has been held since 1987 and attracts players from all over the world: 170,000 people came in 2011. And not only players. Creators are treated as such and attract more and more followers eager to get their signature or hear them speak in the debates. Cannes' initiative has more than accomplished its original purpose: to link the city's image to popular, innovative, cultural values.

We should also mention Essen, an industrial city in the German Ruhr. In 1983 a trade fair specialising in contemporary board games, set up as the venue to award the new Spiel des Jahres prize, attracted some 500 people, mostly from the profession. Some years later, 150,000 people pack the 43,000 m² site, the biggest board games fair open to the public in the world, where publishers and creators present their latest games.

4. Dau Barcelona, the role of games in a large city

Over the last 40 years, games have consolidated themselves as cultural artefacts that bring people together to socialise—a creativity-based industry that seduces young people, families and the media. All the aforementioned festivals share one thing in common: they all took many years to accomplish their aims. Games are more socially accepted now than they were in the 1980s and 1990s, so sooner or later games will achieve the cultural recognition they currently lack in Catalonia and Spain.

Dau Barcelona festival (daubarcelona.bcn.cat) was set up through a farsighted initiative by the Department of Creativity and Innovation at Barcelona City Council's Culture Institute.

It is a young festival: the first edition was held in December 2012. Dau Barcelona was designed as a festival of contemporary board games, a free event for families in Barcelona that would showcase the best games to be found in the shops today. One of the hurdles faced by games is that you have to read, understand and explain the rules before you can play. This may often be the reason so many of us don't play them. It falls to the public administration, then, to help overcome these hurdles at games festivals and municipal facilities, in the same way that it promotes reading and books at public libraries. This should be the best support the public administration can give to a creativity-based industry like the board games industry.

At the same time, Dau Barcelona is also a celebration of creativity. It can't be stressed enough that games only exist thanks to their creators—people eager to express themselves in a game. That's why Barcelona City Council puts them right at the very heart of this festival, in support and recognition of their creative role. And it's not by chance that the festival is being held at the Fabra i Coats Creation Factory in the Sant Andreu neighbourhood of Barcelona.

In 2012 and 2013 the festival layout was very simple: a large space (more than 1,000 m²) full of tables given over board games publishers who had asked for a space at Dau Barcelona.

The event is still open to all publishers in Spain, regardless of their size or market share. There are major companies alongside creators who have published their own work and crowdfunded games.

In addition to a specific space for learning and practising contemporary board games—with a subsection for children's games—at Dau Barcelona there is an area for games offering historical restagings and another area for roleplays, without forgetting a whole host of traditional games such as chess, Scrabble and puzzles. And, as at all festivals, there are presentations and championships for different games. Visitors to Dau Barcelona are also given a catalogue with the best board games currently on offer. Every year there has also been a civic science experiment: an open activity involving participants attending a certain event, in our case a games festival. Researchers from the University of Barcelona, together with scientists from other universities, set up a science experiment based on a game to analyse different aspects of human behaviour when faced with ethical dilemmas or how we take decisions based on the information we have available to us.

Since the market in Catalonia is slow to react, most board games are still sold with instructions printed only in Spanish. Consumers, however, are increasingly calling for games with rules printed in Catalan, because they see games as a cultural product where language plays a key role. Every year the festival has invited the Consorci per a la Normalització Lingüística (a public body that promotes the use of Catalan in all spheres of life) to carry out an awareness-raising campaign under the slogan “Do you play in Catalan?”, alongside Plataforma per la Llengua, a Catalan NGO that actively promotes the use of Catalan in games and toys.

The real stars of the festival, though, are the games creators. Every year some of the leading games creators are invited to come and tell us about how they work, take part in roundtables and play with visitors. In 2013 Dau Barcelona welcomed six top creators from the European scene, and this year it has invited Jason Matthews, from the United States, and Philippe des Pallières and Bruno Faidutti, from France.

Other special guests include Tom Werneck, the founder of the German prize Spiel des Jahres, who gave the opening lecture at Dau Barcelona in 2012, and Nadine Seul, director of Cannes International Games Festival, who will give the opening lecture this year.

In 2013, as a further sign of the festival's support for creators, the Dau Barcelona Prizes were launched in three categories: Lifetime Achievement in Games, Best New Creator of the Year and Best Overall Creator of the year. The first Lifetime Achievement prize was awarded by a jury to Erwin Glonnegger, from Germany, the first board games publisher to work with creators and acknowledge their authorship. The other two prizes were awarded to French creator Antoine Bauza and Belgian creator Etienne Espreman, who were voted for online by games creators from all over the world.

The festival aims to bring the culture of games to the entire city. Every year it carries out an action in a different area of civic life. In 2013 we organised a series of talks on games and literature at four Barcelona libraries, which also held games sessions open to all library users.

This year, after the festival itself takes place on 13 and 14 December, the games will travel to schools in the Sant Andreu neighbourhood, where Dau Barcelona is being held. A group of specialists will visit nearby schools to talk to 11- and 12-year-olds about the history of games and reveal the many different sides to playing games. The idea is to get across the important role played by games and to get the children to play different kinds of games.

In 2014, as well as expanding the festival to three times its size two years ago, while maintaining and extending all the existing sections, Dau Barcelona is taking a giant step forward. It is no longer a board games festival, but a games festival open to all forms of games as a cultural and social activity, from traditional games to roleplays and miniature wargaming, to mention just a few kinds of games that are usually kept separate. Barcelona City Council and the festival organisers firmly believe that games are an important cultural phenomenon that should be promoted and encouraged in everyday life and that at the heart of games is play as an innovative idea, in whatever form it takes.

Under the umbrella of the festival, over fifty people from Barcelona linked professionally or otherwise (publishers, clubs, creators, illustrators, teachers, university lecturers, historians, local associations, etc) to many different forms and aspects of games (board games, traditional games, children's games, games and education, games and cultural heritage, games and history, etc) have come together to set up the thought and action group Barcelona Juga. This group forms part of BarcelonaLab (barcelonalab.cat), a platform set up under the auspices of Barcelona City Council to promote, connect and publicise innovative creative activity carried out in the city.

Barcelona Juga is the start of the path, but we have no doubt that in the near future we'll be able to say that Barcelona is just that little bit happier because it has made games and play part of its everyday life.