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# Empty Forms: Vestiges of Sacred Play

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## **Abstract**

In this paper we explore forgotten forms of sacred play and their implications for the design of significant play experiences.

## **Keywords**

Ludology, Game Design, Sacred, Afterlife, Ludic Death, Ludic Philosophy

## **Extended Abstract**

*"In blood harvest you call a horde with crows....And for some reason zombies can't startle the crows."*-the Mayor, Left for Dead Steam Forum, Sep 2009

Giorgio Agamben is better known for his continental political philosophy investigating notions of community, sovereignty and "the state of exception". Written in the hey-day of structuralism, Agamben's early 1978 treatise "Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience" relates structuralist formulations such as diachrony and synchrony to a more philosophical concern with experience.[1] In an essay entitled "In Playland: Reflections on History and Play," drawing substantially from Claude Levi-Strauss' the Savage Mind, Agamben presents a diagram composed of axis's that pull in the direction of either play or ritual. Ritual societies are "cold", are given to cyclical movements and ahistoricity. "Hot Society's" change rapidly and are disconnected from the regularity

of the seasonal calendar, with the diachronic aligned closer to the axis of play. Anthropology has since abandoned such totalizing, cross-cultural comparative classifications, but this early ludic structuralism suggests some promising directions for contemporary ludic researchers.

Despite Agamben's constitution of play as a separate pole from ritual, he cites examples, again borrowed from Levi-Strauss, of "games" where both play and ritual converge in sacred play. Some of these games are funerary ceremonies to appease or transform the ghosts of dead loved ones, such the Native American ritual where the living engage in contests with recently deceased ancestors in masks. However, in a very hot society, players have forgotten the sacred connotations of games, the "circle game that was once an ancient matrimonial rite, games of chance derived from oracular practices; the spinning-top and the chequered board [that once] were tools of divination." Contemporary players are suspended in the timeless meaningless flow of the escapist little boys playland of Lampwick's tale of Pinocchio quoted by Agamben: "Playland is a country whose inhabitants are busy celebrating rituals, and manipulating objects and sacred words, whose sense and purpose they have, however, forgotten".[2] In this essay we contend that contemporary computer games do contain vestigial traces of sacred play, if only in forms that have been emptied of significance. We propose to isolate some of these vestigial structures, adopting a speculative playful archeological approach to sacred ghostly forms persisting in games such as the memorial Half-life mod "Dear Esther" and the narrative game Heavy Rain. In this investigation we will maintain an awareness of the persistent operationality of ludic forms which may

either re-enforce or counter profound sacred resonance. For instance even when emptied of ritual undertones of grief, a play mechanism such as ludic death operates as a "loss" for the contemporary player of a limited renewable game life, time, or a rupture of the "narrative" attachment to a game character developed over the course of the game.[3]

Emptiness itself has been widely accepted as a defining characteristic of play. Despite his fascinating investigation into cultural elements of play in the evolution of such serious domains as the court of law, Johan Huizinga's foundational game study book, *Homo Ludens*, emphasizes the boundaries of his "magic circle" of play, the clear division of play from serious life. In a chapter entitled "the Corruption of Play" in Roger Callois' 1968 *Man the Player*, Callois traces undesirable incursions of what we might call significance into play, that is weighty material consequences of game actions, such as the ups and downs of the professional career of a sportsman. In response to the demand within some academic circles for greater emotional significance in games comparable to the effects of the "mature narrative medium" of cinema, more recent ludologists were quick to defend the boundaries of the magic circle, resisting a demand for significance in a medium where "representation" and deep emotional experiences seemed contrary to the pleasure of engaging in meaningless play mechanics, that is, playing with empty forms.

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray writes that "games are ritual actions that symbolically enact the patterns that give meaning to our lives". [4] She supports this statement with mention of "simple" powerful stories of overcoming adversity. This line of

investigation is not followed through as pioneering Murrey goes on to hypothesize on other areas of future computer game research. We contend that game rituals can be further articulated to include rites of passage and quests, transformations and rebirths, contests between the living and the dead, godly mimesis, and the memorial. As ludic researchers adopting a playful approach to ritual play forms we propose the thought experiment of an "emptiness meter" that measures the quantity of emptiness in a given ritual play form. (When the emptiness meter is full it represents a void, a lack.) But before we deploy our emptiness meter to our selected game examples, let us first ask for WHOM is the vestigial play form empty (or emptied historically) of significance?

Anthropologists in the structuralist era of Ruth Benedict looked for patterns in culture that were not necessarily apparent to the members of the culture under study. Key to the discipline of anthropology is the notion that the outsider who is alien to a culture notices patterns unobservable to cultural insiders. Although this privileged position may recall that of Western colonialists and priests, predecessors of anthropologists, observing "primitive" peoples, cultural anthropology later developed the tenant that familiarity blinds participants to significance even in advanced technological societies. Even the expert interpretations of the shaman or priest may miss the significance carried by a vestigial form. Participants in rituals often do not understand why they are following the elements of the ritual, why the bride wears white in the West and red in the Chinese traditional wedding, only that there is a custom, a ritual to be enacted. In other words, emptiness of form is experienced by participants in both play and non-play rituals, especially in Agamben's "hot societies" of rapid change.

As investigators of sacred play forms we are playing a detective game, looking for significant, potentially disturbing patterns and causalities that may be unobserved or subconsciously repressed by the players

of the game. Games become a kind of historical register, a cultural medium embedded with vestiges. Like the archeologists of the ancient Egyptian game of Senet who propose conflicting hypothetical rules of play leading to the afterlife or the investigators of the mysterious Mesoamerican "Great Game" of rubber ball, ours is a speculative venture. Our hypothetical emptiness meter, if applied to ourselves as ludic detectives, may reveal some meaningful historical patterns over the course of this preliminary study of sacred play forms.

On the other hand, when deployed to the contemporary player of these games, the emptiness meter has implications for the game design of "significant" play experiences where significance is defined as a resonance with life and death themes outside the magic circle of play. Our resonant definition of significant play contrasts to Zimmerman and Salen's popular game design handbook *Rules of Play*, where meaningful play is presented as consequential choices that later generate discernable feedback in the pursuit of a ludic objective. Once these two definitions of meaningful play may have overlapped and re-enforced each other in sacred play, but in a contemporary game what may have once tied into the actual grieving process of a relative becomes a mere ludic loss on the path towards the game's win condition. Closer attention to the interplay of ludic forms with the sacred in contemporary games can foster the design of more significant play experiences, such as the emotional association of an irrevocable death of a character in Heavy Rain with a player's personal experiences of loss, resulting in grieving for a game character. In other words, significant play awakens ghostly resonances if not emptied by the very act of play itself.

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**Citations**

[1] Agamben, G. *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, First published Guilo Einaudi Editiore (1978)

[2] Ibid, p.70.

[3] Rusch, D.C. Mechanisms of the Soul: Tackling the Human Condition in Video Games, Doris C. Rusch,

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[4] Murrey, J. Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace, The Free Press, p. 143, (1997)