

## What is Ludology?

### Reclaiming the Name

Ever since Gonzalo Frasca coined the term “ludology” in his 1999 PhD thesis<sup>1</sup>, many game studies theorists and practitioners have eagerly adopted the term “ludology” as a name to refer exclusively to the study of games. Considering that the term “ludology” itself will no doubt be of paramount importance to future study and understanding of play in both humans and other complex organisms -- due, in part, to its direct derivation from the latin play noun “ludus” -- I think it prudent for us to examine and question the validity of this growing application of the term. While such adoption may seem reasonable to accept at first, I would argue that arbitrarily appropriating the term “ludology” to an alias to the study of games exclusively to be a bit negligent.

First off, though Frasca’s thesis does place an emphasis on *ludology* as a study of games, and derives “ludology” from the Latin noun form “ludus” as used for the latin word for “game,” Frasca’s own words set out the term ludology to define a “discipline that studies game and play activities;” a definition which, as is clearly seen by the inclusion of “play activities,” does not treat games exclusively. Yet, for some reason, even Frasca’s own words seem to have -- in practice at least -- been widely interpreted as claiming that ludology is exclusively a study of games, despite the fact that games comprise only a part of Frasca’s originally proposed definition.

In addition to Frasca’s original proposed definition, let us also consider the term “ludus” as well as its etymological origins, as this is critical to deriving a reasonable application for such a term as “ludology” which is derived from it. As painstakingly pointed out by Johan Huizinga in his pioneering 1938 study *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element of Culture*<sup>2</sup>, the Latin “ludus” covers more than just “games,” and in fact “covers children’s games, recreation, contests, liturgical and theatrical representations, and games of chance.”(35) Likewise, many contemporary Latin dictionaries also show the term “ludus” widely used to refer to a training, a practice, a school, a dramatic or theatrical play, a game and a number of other things. Furthermore, the Latin “ludere” -- the closest related verb form which shares a root with the noun “ludus” -- describes many play-like actions such as feigning, roleplaying/acting, light-hearted joking, and more -- even the verbs allude, collude, and delude derive from this same etymological root, according to Huizinga.

---

<sup>1</sup>Frasca, G. (1999). *Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and differences between (video)games and narrative*.

<sup>2</sup>Huizinga, J. (1950). *Homo ludens, a study of the play-element in culture*. Oxford, England: Roy.

[Forward of the 1950 publication] Study of the translated german and english texts makes it apparent that Huizinga had reason to cling to his original title. Using “in” instead of “of” applies to the title the implication that play is, as it were, an elemental building block, piece or part of culture, or that it is wholly owned, enclosed or encompassed by culture. Rather Huizinga’s asserted intention was to address “how far culture itself bears the character of play” -- in other words, how “play-like” culture is. In English, this “Play-Element” of the title appears to refer to “Culture” itself. Therefore, it seems a more easily understandable title for native English speakers would be something akin to “A Study of Culture’s Play Characteristics”.

Therefore, based on an analysis of the language involved, and research done already by Huizinga in *Homo ludens*, it seems clear to me that anyone with a complete and genuine understanding of the broad range of concepts encapsulated by the word “ludus” would be hard-pressed not to immediately see the arbitrary and unreasonable narrowing of scope imposed on the term “ludology” if it continues to be applied as the name for the study of games without consideration for the full conceptual range of “ludus” and “ludere” from which lud- root the name “ludology” was derived by Frasca.

However, despite both Frasca’s own definition of “ludology” and the word’s proposed etymological origins, two decades have now passed since Frasca’s dissertation and none have yet come forward to challenge the growing use of the term “ludology” as a synonym for “game studies.” Furthermore, as the perfectly viable name “game studies” is already widely used -- and is also significantly more accurate of a term from an etymological perspective -- it appears to me that using “ludology” to refer to the same field serves only to add additional confusion to the matter. For these reasons, it is my ardent hope that too much damage has not already been done to the foundation of play studies by the use of the term in this manner.

Therefore, it is my firm conviction that such a narrow application of “ludology” -- as currently used to refer to “game studies” -- poses a major threat to the future comprehension of the study of play behaviors and activities, including games. It is for this reason that I now whole-heartedly and fiercely advocate for Frasca’s original definition of “ludology” to be adopted by the more etymologically accurate term “ludiology” and for the term “ludology” to acquire a more broad, natural and appropriate definition in both theory and in practice; that definition being “the comprehensive study of play, including play behaviors and activities.”

For those interested in adopting more etymologically appropriate nomenclature for “game studies” and other subfields of Ludology derived from classical Greek, Latin and English, I propose a partial framework of new and existing terms relating some of these subfields to one another in the chapter on Ludiology.