

A Turning World

A Multidisciplinary Approach to Spinning
Tops and other Toys and Games



Claudia Lambrugo (ed.)



Milano University Press

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Great Team at Play

Claudia Lambrugo, Chiara Torre

It is only in recent years that historians of literature, language, religion and art have recognized the cultural dimension of play as a subject worthy of scholarly investigation, thus overcoming prejudices that had long been affecting some academic quarters. Indeed, previous scholars were unaware of the import of some seminal theories of play. These include the studies of Huizinga (1938), Caillois (1958) and Geertz (1973) on ludic practices and the creation of individual and collective identity, not to mention Brian Sutton-Smith's more recent work (Smith, Roopnarine 2019).

The development of play studies in the 1990s, including the publication of *The Ambiguity of Play* (Sutton-Smith 1997) and of a number of scientific journals («Ludica», «Nikephoros» and «Homo Ludens») has restored the importance of play in academic disciplines such as classical and medieval studies (e.g., *Cisam* 2018; Kidd 2019). The role of play in modern society, too, has recently been recognized as a defining feature of personal and social identity both in cultural history (Bianchi, Merlotti 2001; Arcangeli 2004; Aceto, Luciola 2019; Burke 2021) and Italian studies (*Passare il tempo* 1993; Quondam 2019). From an anthropological point of view, equally important are Roberte Hamayon's recent studies, which focus on the ambiguity between fiction and reality. Hamayon has convincingly highlighted the intense and multi-faceted impact of play on daily life. The reason for that, she argues, lies in the very complexity of play, which can be construed as a structured mode of interaction, one that is close to ritual performances and thus capable of creating a sense of community by condensing modes of relation and transposing them into a different framework on an everyday basis (Hamayon 2016).

Today, the most remarkable development concerning play in historical studies is the ERC Advanced Project *Locus Ludi. The Cultural Fabric of Play and Games in Classical Antiquity* (2017–2022/2023: see <https://locusludi.ch/the-project/>), directed by Véronique Dasen (Université de Fribourg, Switzerland). True to the mission of ERC projects, *Locus Ludi* covers a wide range of topics and research questions. Since its inception, the project has been fostering multidisciplinary exchanges among archaeologists, historians, philologists, and anthropologists. *Locus Ludi*, whose goals include the identification, classification, and reconstruction of the forms and contexts of play and games in the Classical world, deserves major credit for highlighting the enormous potential of this area of inquiry and for suggesting further research avenues in the cultural history of Europe.

The editor of the present volume, Claudia Lambrugo, as well as several scholars who have contributed their chapters here, currently belong to a research group working on play and games based at the University of Milan “La Statale” (hereafter UNIMI). They have been cooperating with Véronique Dasen and her international team (Fig. 1) for more than ten years, and they fully share the multidisciplinary approach outlined above.



Fig. 1 – A fruitful and amusing moment of shared didactics on *ludus*: Véronique Dasen (Université de Fribourg) and the *Locus Ludi* Project visited Milan in spring 2023 (Lambrugo’s Photograph).

Here are their main achievements through time. The first step was a workshop held in Milan in 2011 on *Play and Games in the Ancient World: Between Material and Immaterial Culture* (Lambrugo, Torre 2013), with the participation of numerous experts. We single out here the contribution by Gherardo Ortalli, the founder, in Italy, of studies on the social history of play. The investigations of the UNIMI group then extended to Italian literature, leading to the publication of a series of essays collected in «Acme» (Capra, Torre 2016, combining ancient and modern material). A new research proposal, funded by UNIMI “Piano di Sviluppo Ricerca” (PSR 2016), resulted in an international conference, *Games and Toys. Words, Objects, and Imagery*, held at UNIMI and at the “Museo del Giocattolo e del Bambino” (Cormano, Milan, spring 2018) as well as in the publication of a collection of essays in «Enthymema», international journal of literary criticism, literary theory, and philosophy of literature (Floridi *et al.* 2019). Additionally, over the years, some members of the UNIMI research group participated in a project, coordinated by Claudia Lambrugo and Fabrizio Slavazzi,

on archaeological materials pertaining to play and games in public collections in Lombardy, most notably the world-renowned collection “Giulio Sambon”, the corner stone of the so-called Museo Teatrale alla Scala in Milan (Lambrugo *et al.* 2012; Lambrugo *et al.* 2015)¹.

In our view, the present volume is a tangible expression of the fruitful cross-fertilization between *Locus Ludi* and the UNIMI team, which relies on shared and, so to speak, ‘playful’ interests. Moreover, the volume builds on the most recent outcome of the UNIMI group, namely the LALLACT project (*Lexicon of Ancient Ludonyms, Ludic Activities and Cultural Tradition: A Prototype*, P.I. C. Lambrugo), funded by UNIMI SEED 2019 (“Bando Straordinario per Progetti Interdipartimentali”). The project came to an end in October 2021 and the relevant work was therefore carried out remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, not only did it prove to be an intense and rewarding adventure in many ways, both from a human and a scientific perspective; what is more, by providing a virtual common space for scientific exchanges and collaborations (Fig. 2), it also turned the very problems raised by the pandemic into an opportunity.



Fig. 2 – The LALLACT Project’s members: Dipartimento di Beni Culturali e Ambientali: Claudia Lambrugo (P.I.), Marina Castoldi, Clemente Marconi, Chiara Torre, Giovanni Colzani, Luca Dal Monte, Agnese Lojacono, Irene Sozzi. Dipartimento di Studi Letterari, Filologici e Linguistici: Edoardo Buroni (CUD), Guglielmo Barucci, Francesco Dedè, Laura Neri, Mario Piotti, Andrea Scala. Dipartimento di Filosofia: Elio Nenci (Lojacono’s Photograph).

1 An agile synthesis of what has been produced so far by UNIMI group on playful theme is now available also in the open access journal «NotoOtto» https://issuu.com/valentino.albini/docs/notootto_studiosissime_ludere.

The LALLACT project successfully created the prototype of a Digital Lexicon of Ludic Activities, complete with a couple of pilot entries (“spinning top” and “blind man’s buff”). By collecting the main outcomes of lively discussions held, at first, within the UNIMI group, and, later, in the wider context of *Locus Ludi*, the present volume provides an in-depth study of spinning top and blind man’s buff. Both are tackled in wide, multidisciplinary perspectives and, more importantly, provide two excellent paradigms that showcase the complex imagery, multifarious traditions and cultural meanings pertaining to the universal activity of play.

Based as it is on archaeological and historical data as well as on literary and linguistic sources, our research on twirlers, spinning tops and blind man’s buff has proved to be a vantage point from which to understand past and present communities and unravel unexpected connections between past and present. People play with spinning tops and twirlers all over the world and have done so throughout history, but they do not play the same games, nor do they assign the same meaning and function to this plaything. Once more, then, play and games emerge as intriguing activities and practices, whose role is far from futile. Indeed, they are integral to the fabric of social, gendered, religious, an ethnic identities and as such they can give us a precious insight into present and past societal values, identities and social imaginary.

In her concluding remarks, Véronique Dasen makes the most of her unmatched experience to summarize the most remarkable outcomes of our joint effort and to suggest new paths for play studies. We want to express our warmest thanks to her, to all contributors, to Andrea Capra, who played the crucial role of volume’s curator, and to the whole board of the Milan University Press.

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