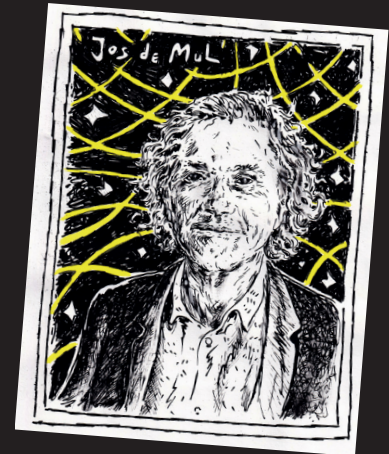


Uncle Sim Wants You! Playful Warfare

Jos de Mul



Abstract

According to Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938), all cultural phenomena should be understood as play, since they follow specific rules. In this sense, playful culture is opposed to the seriousness of life. This even applies to war. Although sometimes fought to the bitter end, the noble betting camp was avoiding unnecessary bloodshed. Huizinga criticizes modern, twentieth-century culture because seriousness and play have become completely intertwined. War games like America's Army, which are not only a tool for propaganda but also for recruitment and military training, illustrate this. Although Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* sharply criticizes Carl Schmitt's war rhetoric, both thinkers share their criticism of the blurring of seriousness and play in modern culture. The crucial difference between Huizinga and Schmitt lies in the fact that where Huizinga advocates play as a neutral and essentially apolitical core of human culture, Schmitt believes that human life acquires its dignity through the political sphere, which ultimately also includes the willingness to kill belongs to the enemy.

Introduction

Since 2018, in Puglia, academics from the University of Bari and representatives of the Italian game industry annually organize a multidisciplinary conference entitled Video Games & High Culture.¹ In the first four editions, the conference, dedicated to the complex and multifaceted world of computer games, focused on education, capitalism, apocalypse, and literature, respectively. In late 2021, a collection of more than four hundred pages, under the title *Homo Cyber Ludens*, edited by Marco Accordi Rickards and medievalist, game designer, and inspirator of the conference series Fabio Belsanti, was published with the fruits of those four editions (Rickards and Belsanti 2021). The fifth, which took place in mid-

1 <https://videogamesandhighculture.com/en/>.

October 2022, is dedicated to the theme of war (see figure 1).² That choice is not surprising.

Because of the war in Ukraine, the theme is on everyone's lips. For Europeans, this war is not a far-from-our-bed show, not only because it takes place in Europe but also because the European Union (EU) is increasingly being pulled into the war by the sanctions against Russia and the arms deliveries to Ukraine. Moreover, following the annexation of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions, the proxy war has inadvertently turned into a more direct involvement, as the struggle in those regions supported by the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries was framed by Putin as an attack by these organizations on Russia. And since the use of tactical nuclear weapons according to the Russian nuclear weapons doctrine is no longer excluded, the threat of nuclear war in Europe is also back again.



Figure 1. Poster Conference Video Games—War—High Culture (2022).

In the gaming industry—the world's biggest player in the entertainment sector—war has never gone away. War games, ranging from simple first-person shooters to complex simulators and multiplayer online strategy games, are among the most popular genres of computer games. The origins of such games lie in nineteenth-century Prussia, where war simulations with pawns on a map were used to train military officers in tactical, operational, and strategic thinking to reconstruct historical battles and wars and to predict the course of possible future conflicts. With the development of the electronic computer, the first war simulations for mainframe computers were programmed in the United States in the fifties and sixties. The development of game consoles in the seventies and the personal computer in the eighties subsequently led to a large-scale commercialization and democratization of war games. And with the growing computer power and availability of the internet in the nineties, multiplayer online war games, in which you can participate via PCs, game consoles, and smartphones, became immensely popular.

Huizinga on Play and War

If we want to better understand the close interweaving of computer play and warfare, the work of Johan Huizinga can help us on our way. The title of the collection *Homo Cyber Ludens* and the aforementioned website dedicated to the series of conferences reveal that the work of the Dutch historian is an important source of inspiration for the organizers. After all, that title refers to his famous book *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* first appeared in print in Dutch in 1938 and was soon translated into many languages.³

In the sixties, the book was rediscovered by situationists, Provo, and other artistic and political avant-gardes, whereby the word “playful” derived from the book aptly expressed the playful basic attitude of that time. Huizinga's book was, to give just one example, an important source of inspiration for the *New*

2 This essay is an extended version of the invited talk Jos de Mul gave at the fifth Video Games & High Culture Conference in Bari, Italy, on October 17, 2022. A Dutch translation of the shorter version is published under the title “Uncle Sim Wants You! Ludieke oorlogsvoering” in the magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer*, on February 6, 2023 (De Mul 2023).

3 I will quote the book from the first English edition (Huizinga 1955).

Babylon project (1956–1974) by the artist Constant Nieuwenhuys, an impressive series of designs for a futuristic residence of the *Homo ludens*, a play palace without fixed walls and institutions (De Mul 2010).

With the rise of academic game studies (also referred to as ludology) in the nineties, *Homo Ludens* was in the spotlight again. There is virtually no introduction to this discipline in which Huizinga's book is not discussed as a precursor. *New Babylon* also came back into the spotlight, because this future play world, in which the color of the sky is generated by computers according to the visionary Constant, now retroactively resembled virtual worlds such as Alphaworld (1994) and Second Life (2003), in which the “residents” could play to their heart's content experiment with the surroundings, roles, lifestyles, and identities (De Mul 2010, 8; see figure 2). But the fact that Constant's depictions of the New Babylon over the years have included an increasingly bloody and more ominous character, shows that this utopian world also demonstrates that *Homo ludens* is not free from war violence (De Mul 2010, 13; see figure 3).

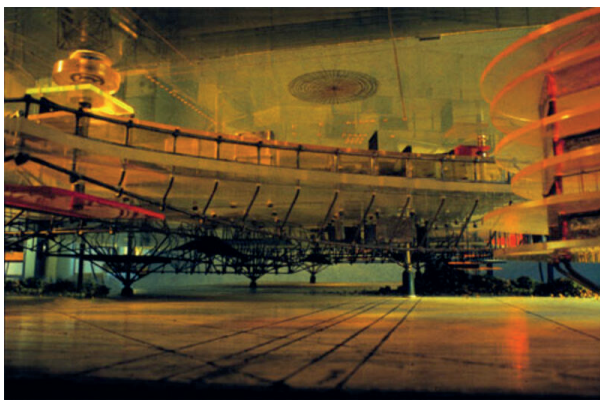


Figure 2. Constant, New Babylon, Orange Sector (detail), 1968.



Figure 3. Constant, Massacre, 1972.

Anyone who had read Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* carefully would not be surprised. In spite of the title, *Homo Ludens* is by no means a cheerful book. Not only is the chapter “Play and War” entirely devoted to the theme of war, but the book also ends with a gloomy diagnosis of Western culture, which, according to the author, threatens to fall into the “barbarism and chaos,” of which World War I (1914–1918) offered a first manifestation. Huizinga crosses swords again—after he had opened the attack in *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* (Huizinga 1936), originally published in Dutch in 1935—with Carl Schmitt, the later “crown lawyer” of the Third Reich, who, according to Huizinga, “warfully reduces all real political relations between peoples and states to ‘the “friend-enemy” principle’” (Huizinga 1955, 209).

Huizinga's critique of Schmitt and Schmitt's response to it make *Homo Ludens* topical again, not only when we try to understand the hybrid blending of war and play in war games but also to understand a hybrid war like the one in Ukraine. To make that clear, I must first briefly discuss the basic idea of *Homo Ludens*. The radical idea—partly inspired by Friedrich Schiller's analysis of the human play drive (*Spieltrieb*) in *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (Schiller 1981 [1794])—that Huizinga unfolds in his book is that the entire human culture arises from play. Contrary to popular misunderstanding—a thought that also underlies the erroneous translation of the book's subtitle in the English edition: *A Study of the Play-Element*

*in Culture*⁴—Huizinga’s analysis focuses not only and not primarily on the role of play *in* culture, but he also believes that all cultural phenomena, including war, should be understood *as* play. In the penultimate chapter, “Civilizations and epochs sub specie ludi,” he summarizes his study as follows:

It has not been difficult to show that a certain play-factor was extremely active all through the cultural process and that it produces many of the fundamental forms of social life. The spirit of playful competition is, as a social impulse, older than culture itself and pervades all life like a veritable ferment. Ritual grew up in sacred play; poetry was born in play and nourished on play; music and dancing were pure play. Wisdom and philosophy found expression in words and forms derived from religious contests. The rules of warfare, the conventions of noble living were built up on play-patterns. We have to conclude, therefore, that civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come from play like a babe detaching itself from the womb: it arises in and as play, and never leaves it. (Huizinga 1955, 173)

In his book, Huizinga points out the fundamental distinction that exists between play and seriousness. According to him, play is preeminently an expression of human freedom, because it has its purpose in itself and takes place “outside and above the necessities and seriousness of everyday life” (Huizinga 1955, 26). The game takes place according to specific rules, within a “magic circle” (Huizinga 1955, 10), which demarcates it from the serious world of space and time. This applies not only to the sports competition and the theater performance but also to the religious ritual, the judiciary, the scientific research, and the military battle. These examples make it clear that the game is by no means frivolous. The game not only provides pleasure but also establishes a sense of community and is indispensable for the well-being of the community. That is why, Huizinga argues, we play the game in spite of its nonserious pretend character with “holy seriousness” (Huizinga 1955, 23).

In doing so, Huizinga seems to put the sharp distinction between play and seriousness into perspective.⁵ Play is vital and as such a serious matter. The chapter on the war makes it clear that the distinction is not absolute for another reason either. In the practice of war, play and seriousness often form a hybrid connection. Huizinga assumes that in the earliest cultural phases, “[t]he violence of savage peoples expresses itself in predatory expeditions, assassinations, man-hunts, head-hunting, etc., whether it be from hunger, fear, religion or mere cruelty” (Huizinga 1955, 95). Cultural civilization first occurred when the fighting was bound by rules of play.⁶ Initially, these applied only to their own group, whose members were recognized as equals or at least equals, but not to barbarians, devils, heathens, heretics, and other “lesser breeds without the law, [. . .] deprived of human rights” (Huizinga 1955, 90). Huizinga, who already made a name for himself internationally with his magisterial *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (Huizinga 1924 [1919]), focuses in *Homo Ludens* on the medieval betting camp between two individuals or small groups, which often replaced the battle of all against all. Such betting camps were based on

4 The Dutch subtitle reads “*Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur*” (my italics), which should have been translated as *A Study of the Play-Element of Culture*. Moreover, the English translation, based on the German edition published in Switzerland in 1944 and Huizinga’s own English translation of the text, is somewhat abbreviated and does not always follow the Dutch original ad verbum (this is partly due to the fact that Huizinga rewrote some of the text after the outbreak of World War II).

5 For a more detailed analysis of the ambiguities in Huizinga’s distinction between play and seriousness, see Frissen et al. (2015, 11–21).

6 About the rules of war, see chapter 7 of Marin van Crefeld’s *The Culture of War* (Van Creveld 2008).

chivalrous courtesy, honor, and virtue and bound to a specific time and place and strict rules of the game. Although such a civilized struggle was a serious matter and “sometimes fought to the bitter end” (Huizinga 1955, 93), the noble betting camp was “avoiding unnecessary bloodshed” (Huizinga 1955, 92). According to Huizinga, this idea of the “ludic war” has continued into modern times, in which the ideal of chivalry was declared applicable to ever larger groups and resulted in the establishment of people’s and ultimately universal human rights. Huizinga acknowledges, however, that in the everyday practice of “the serious war,” these rights are often violated because of “the political objectives of the war, which lie outside the immediate sphere of contest: conquest, subjection or domination of another people” (Huizinga 1955, 90). Nevertheless, even if they are only partly respected, they help to moderate the violence and suffering of war.

Huizinga vs. Schmitt

It is against this background that Huizinga in the last chapter of *Homo Ludens* focuses his criticism on the “friend-foe principle” to which Carl Schmitt’s in *Der Begriff des Politischen* (Schmitt 2008 [1927/1932]) reduces all forms of politics (Huizinga 1955, 209). According to Schmitt, politics comes down to distinguishing between friend and foe and, ultimately, the preparedness to kill the enemy. For Schmitt, Huizinga notes, the war is exclusively an *Ernstfall* (a serious case) and thus ignores the playful dimension of civilized war:

All “real” relationships between nations and states, so they say, are dominated by this ineluctable principle. Any “other” group is always either your friend or your enemy. Enemy, of course, is not to be understood as *inimicus* (*echthros*) a person you hate, let alone a wicked person, but purely and simply as *hostis* (*polemios*), the stranger or foreigner who is in your group’s way. The theory refuses to regard the enemy even as a rival or adversary. He is merely in your way and is thus to be made away with. (Huizinga 1955, 209)

It does not surprise that Huizinga’s verdict is utmost critical:

I know of no sadder or deeper fall from human reason than Schmitt’s barbarous and pathetic delusion about the friend-foe principle. His inhuman cerebrations do not even hold water as a piece of formal logic. For it is not war [*Ernstfall*—JdM] that is serious, but peace. War and everything to do with it remains fast in the daemonic and magical bonds of play. Only by transcending that pitiable friend-foe relationship will mankind enter into the dignity of man’s estate. (Huizinga 1955, 209)

Schmitt’s emphasis on the autonomy of the political means that he refuses to judge the political on the basis of moral or other nonpolitical standards. This inevitably leads, as Huizinga had already concluded two years earlier in *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* (1936), “to the unqualified recognition of the principle: *Might is Right* [. . .] In the shadow of the recognition of absolute independence of the political as such, therefore, stand the recognition of anarchy” (Huizinga 1936, 123–24). And in the posthumously published *Geschonden wereld. Een beschouwing over de kansen op herstel van onze beschaving* (Huizinga 1950 [1945]) [*Violated World. A reflection on the chances of restoring our civilization*], Huizinga points to the resulting militarism and “insane hypernationalism” as the main causes of cultural loss (Huizinga 1945., 530).⁷

7 Quoted from the Dutch edition of Huizinga’s collected works, vol. VII; translation JdM.

Given the crimes against humanity of National Socialist Germany, which Huizinga warned about early on—as rector of Leiden University, already in 1933, he had denied the German Johann von Leers, who had published an anti-Semitic pamphlet, access to the university campus—the fierceness of his attack on Schmitt is understandable. However, this criticism is not entirely justified. Schmitt argues that the willingness to kill is the ultimate consequence of politics, but not that every enemy should be killed in all circumstances. Rather, it is a question of pointing the enemy back within its own borders. Moreover, Schmitt also seems to join in a certain sense with the chivalrous tradition on which Huizinga relies. For example, he looks back with a certain nostalgia to the nineteenth century, where wars still took place neatly among nation-states, within a certain time and space and according to certain rules of the game. His greatest fear was a chaotic civil war, which threatened the shaky Weimar Republic until it came to an end with the National Socialist seizure of power. He also believes that an enemy—and for Schmitt this was mainly communist Russia—is a necessary condition for the constitution of our identity because he enables us to shape and demarcate our own identity in contrast to him. After all, anyone who denies the enemy his humanity and seeks to destroy him completely thereby also destroys the political atmosphere that is necessary to realize his own identity. The fact that Schmitt put himself in the service of the Third Reich and by that also defended its anti-Semitic politics testifies to his cynical opportunism, but it does not necessarily follow from his theoretical writings.

The crucial difference between Huizinga and Schmitt, as Alexander Lambrow argues in “The Seriousness of Play: Johan Huizinga and Carl Schmitt on Play and the Political,” lies in the fact that where Huizinga sees play as a neutral and essentially apolitical core of human culture, Schmitt believes that human life believed that human life acquires its dignity through the political sphere (Lambrow 2021, 829). In “Neutralität und Neutralisierungen,” Schmitt fulminates against the decadent spirit of neutrality:

It turns politics into politics into the antithesis of everything spiritual and cultural and a weak center of Europe, predestined to be the battleground of future wars, into an ethical and esthetic ideal. In Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia, but also inside of Germany, this spirit has countless champions and allies. Cities like Basel and Amsterdam are its residence. Names like Burckhardt, Nietzsche, Langbehn, Stefan George, Thomas Mann, Siegmund [sic] Freud, Huizinga, and Karl Barth appear on this cultural front, whose ultimate goal is depoliticization, neutralization, decisionlessness, nihilism, and finally bolshevism. (Schmitt 1940, 271)

The critique of aesthetic ideals does not mean that Schmitt rejects art as such but the view that art is politically neutral. In *Hamlet oder Hecuba* (1956), he argues that the meaning of Shakespeare’s Hamlet lies in the fact that it has its origins in a political *Ernstfall*, the murder of James I, and as such constitutes, in the play of the imagination, a rupture (*Einbruch*) of the political (Schmitt 2009, 44).

Although Huizinga and Schmitt’s basic intuitions about the foundation of human culture—play versus politics—are diametrically opposed to each other, at the same time we see a remarkable similarity: both criticize the increasing impurity of war. For Schmitt, this impurity lies in the fact that with the war in the twentieth century, less martial, liberal democracy has become polluted with nonpolitical elements. The war has spread from the military battlefield to the “neutral” spheres of parliament, economy, and media. Huizinga also regrets the demise of the traditional war, but in his case, he sees the problem in an ever-

greater mixture of play and seriousness, breaking the magic circle. Huizinga expresses it in *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*:

The most fundamental characteristic of all true play, whether it be a cult, or a festivity, is that at a certain moment it is *over*. The spectators go home, the players take off their masks, the performance has ended. And here the evil of our time shows itself. For nowadays play in many cases never ends and hence it is not true play. A far-reaching contamination of play and serious activity has taken place. The two spheres are getting mixed up. In the activities of an outwardly serious nature hides an element of play. Recognized play, on the other hand, is no longer able to maintain its true play-character as a result of being taken too seriously and being technically over-organized. (Huizinga 1936, 177)

This quote makes it clear that, according to Huizinga, contamination does not only occur in the field of war but also characterizes modern culture as such: “In making mention of the contamination of play and seriousness in modern life, we enter upon a fundamental problem of culture. [. . .] The phenomenon shows itself partly in a semi-serious attitude towards work, duty, fate and life, partly in the attribution of great importance to what a clear judgement would qualify as trivial, and in the treatment of truly important things with the instincts and gestures of play” (idem, 179).

In “The play-element in contemporary civilization,” the last, rather pessimistic chapter of *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga mentions examples like the commercialization of the sport, in which the game is increasingly in the grip of economic interests, and gambling on the stock market, where the “seriousness of everyday life” (Huizinga 1955, 195–200) increasingly is becoming what is nowadays referred to as “casino capitalism.” According to Huizinga, these contaminations involve “false play,” pretending to play the game fairly according to the rules, whereas one intentionally does not do so, and “spoilsport,” the complete evasion of the rules of the game, which amounts to the destruction of community and culture. Huizinga sees such phenomena as manifestations of puerilism, a “blend of adolescence and barbarity which has been rampant all over the world for the last two or three decades” (Huizinga 1955, 205), caused or facilitated by “the techniques of modern mental traffic”⁸ in the then new media like radio and film. Huizinga sees puerilism preeminently expressed in “yells or other signs of greeting, the wearing of badges and sundry items of political haberdashery, walking in marching order or at a special pace and the whole rigmarole of collective voodoo and mumbo-jumbo” (Huizinga 1955, 205). In *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*, he also mentions the use of slogans like “Blood and Soil” (Huizinga 1936, 180). Although he refers to national socialism and communism in this context, he sees “national puerilism” “most thoroughly in all its aspects, from the innocent and even attractive to the criminal” embodied in the culture of the United States. “For America is younger and more youthful than Europe” (Huizinga 1936, 172–73). In American culture, the mixture of playfulness and seriousness, which characterizes puerilism, takes its most extreme form.

Although Huizinga and Schmitt criticize each other, their diagnoses of the crisis of contemporary culture complement each other when it comes to understanding the hybrid entanglement of play and seriousness in war games and contemporary warfare, as it comes to the fore in contemporary American culture.

8 This reference—in Dutch “de techniek van het moderne geestelijk verkeer” (Huizinga 2008, 237)—is missing in the English translation.



Figure 4. America's Army.



Figure 5. America's Army Comics.

America's Army

This can be illustrated well by the computer game America's Army, developed by the US Army and was launched in 2002, shortly after 9/11, and was free to download on the US Army website until May 2020 (see figures).⁹ In this multiplayer tactical shooter (see figure 4), based on the seven core values of the US military (loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage), the player becomes a member of the US Army and receives—and less often they—a “basic combat training” in the single-player mode, which is mainly focused on the use of weapons used in the US Army, but where he also learns all kinds of other relevant skills, such as driving a Humvee all-terrain vehicle and performing operational medical treatments. If he succeeds, he and a group of fellow players must successfully complete various military missions, taking on other groups of players.

America's Army, of which sequels appeared in 2003, 2008, and 2015, has been downloaded more than 20 million times in its 20 years of existence, and its users have successfully completed some 180 million missions. Various spin-offs also saw the light of day, such as a Virtual Army Experience simulator (2007), which was used during public events; a Technology Education Program (2007); a webinar (2008); an Army Experience Center in Philadelphia (2010); and an America's Army Digital Comics Series (2013), all intended to inform young people in particular about military missions in the game world and the real world (see figure 5). The fact that the support of the game was recently stopped is not so much due to a lack of success but to the adaptation of tactics to the developments in the game world. In recent years, the US Army, Navy, National Guard, and Air Force have set up esports teams, consisting of active-duty military personnel, who provide digital demonstrations of their skills at game events.

In 1960, upon leaving the White House, US president Eisenhower warned of the undermining of democracy by what he referred to as the military-industrial complex, the alliance of arms industry, military, and influential politicians (Ottosen 2009). And in 1996, the US National Research Council pointed out that this military-industrial complex has become increasingly intertwined with the entertainment industry. Where film and television initially played the leading role in this “military-entertainment complex,” in recent decades that leading role has increasingly been taken over by computer games (Lenoir and Caldwell 2018).

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/America%27s_Army (See De Mul 2005; Nieborg 2009).

In addition, there is a mutual influence between the military and the game industry. The US military used America's Army as a successful *propaganda weapon*. A 2008 MIT study found that 30 percent of all US 16 to 24-year-olds had gained a more positive view of the military through the game, and the fact that the player in the game can only take on the role of an American soldier and never that of the enemy—who is, among other things, in a desertlike landscape and often has an Arab appearance—has provoked criticism that the game promotes militant nationalism. (Ironically, while every player plays from the perspective of an American soldier, the enemy is also made up of American soldiers, which basically makes the game a Civil War simulator.) At the same time, America's Army, which is based in part on war simulations designed and used by the military, is an effective *training tool*, playfully teaching the player the military skills that prepare for a career in the US military. Gaming becomes seriously real! And finally, the game has also proven to be an efficient *recruitment tool*. On the website, after playing work done, one could apply for no less than two hundred exciting positions in an “unstoppable team” that learns “lifetime skills” (how long such a lifetime lasts exactly, the website did not mention).

Conversely, the game industry provided the military with *user-friendly human-machine interfaces*. For example, the popular Nintendo WiiMote controller (the Joypad) was soon used to control the military robots (“Packbots”) and drones used in Afghanistan and Iraq (Kambayashi 2008). And in the Carmel—a military combat vehicle introduced by the Israeli army in 2020, which has no windows but has a panoramic display—all operations, from controlling to operating the combat systems, are carried out using a Microsoft Xbox game controller (Kambayashi 2008). And the Ukrainian soldiers who follow the five-day course to operate the increasingly important military drones on the battlefield at the Dronarium training center near Kyiv are partly selected on the basis of their Sony PlayStation skills (Sheridan 2022). This continuity not only increases the training value of war games (learned young is done old) but also blurs the distinction between computer games, war simulators, and the control panels of the weapon of war, and with it the distinction between game and reality—that is, until the moment the player is swept away by enemy fire on the battlefield and no replay is possible anymore.

The hybrid character of today's war shows itself in the war in Ukraine not only in the entanglement of seriousness and play complained of by Huizinga—embodied in the “military-entertainment complex”—and in false play (Putin lying that he did not attack Ukraine but that “the West” has attacked Russia instead) and breaking the rules (Putin violating the international laws of war and thus placing himself outside the international community) but also in the entanglement of military, economic, and medial warfare, detested by Huizinga and Schmitt, which causes a constant confusion in Europe as to whether or not we are at war with Russia. That also explains the ridiculousness of the outrage over the fact that Gazprom is not fulfilling its gas supply obligations. Europe keeps disavowing that it is at war. Maybe this awareness will only emerge when giant mushrooms start to form over European cities. It is to be hoped that someone will press the Ctrl + Z key in time.

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