

Prince of Persia: Hybrid Persian Game Culture in the Netherlands

22 January 2019

Venue: Lipsius, Room 148



## Program

09.00 Opening Sybille Lammes and Asghar Seyed-Gohrab

09.15 Sybille Lammes,

*Hybridity, play and the (dis)oriental*

10.00 Asghar Seyed-Gohrab,

*Homo Ludens*

*Manifestations of Play in Iranian Islamic Culture*

10.45 Coffee & tea

11.00 Moozhan Shakeri,

*Design Thinking, Expandable Rationality and Ludic Fallacy  
in Western Problem-Solving Processes*

11.45 Lunch

14.00 Saeedeh Shahnahpur,

*“Destruction Operation”: Iranian-made Digital Games of the Iran-Iraq War*

14.45 Angus A.A. Mol & Aris Politopoulos,

*From the Stone Age to the Space Age:*

*The Progressive Past in Sid Meier’s Civilization Series –  
with a special focus on its representation of Persia*

15.30 Coffee & tea

15.45 Siavash Rafiee Rad,

*Politics of Language in Videogames:  
Identity Games and Representations of Iran*

16.30 Ellis Bartholomeus,

*Games as a Tool*



Sybille Lammes,

*Hybridity, play and the (dis)oriental*

In this presentation I will shed light how we can understand play as a creative ontological space in which one can make translations or hybridisations between cultural tropes or positions. Starting with unpacking how play offers a unique and ambiguous ‘mental state’ (Sutton-Smith 2001) for making worlds (Sicart 2018), I will sketch the debate on functions of play in relation to cultural expression. With a strong focus on how play relates to hybridity and computer games, I will relate this to how computer games deal with the ‘other’ and how this has been theorised in game-studies vis-à-vis the empire, postcolonialism and orientalism. This will allow me to come to a first proposal of a theoretical framework to understand Persian game culture in terms of hybridity and play.

**Sybille Lammes** is professor of New Media and Digital Culture at The Centre for the Arts in Society (LUCAS) at Leiden University. She has been a visiting Senior Research Fellow at The University of Manchester, and has worked as a researcher at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies at the University of Warwick, as well as the media-studies departments of Utrecht University and the University of Amsterdam. Her background is in media-studies and play-studies, which she has always approached from an interdisciplinary angle, including cultural studies, science and technology studies, postcolonial studies, and critical geography. She is co-editor of *Playful Identities* (2015), *Mapping Time* (2018), *The Routledge Handbook of Interdisciplinary Research Methods* (2018) and *The Playful Citizen* (2018). She is an ERC laureate and has been the PI of numerous research projects.



Asghar Seyed-Gohrab,

*Homo Ludens*  
*Manifestations of Play in Iranian Islamic Culture*

In his opening sentence, the celebrated Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) states that the notion of play predates culture, elaborating upon play element of culture and how it manifests itself in different cultural domains, from poetry to law, and from linguistics to philosophy, demonstrating how play is more than an intrinsic human instinct which enables us to understand the world, to know oneself, and to acquire skills. He rightly observes that the fun-element which characterizes the essence of play, is “an absolutely primary category of life, familiar to everybody at a glance right down to the animal level.” In this introductory paper, I examine the notion of ‘play’ in (and of) Persian culture, giving attention to the role of ‘play’ in various cultural, religious, political and artistic domains, especially in the Koran, in the Islamic theological writings, and in Persian art and poetry. I will investigate how the tensions between forbidden and permissible, playfulness and seriousness are discussed in various sources to understand how the notions of game and play are perceived in modern Iran. What are the typological distinctions of play? Why is Islam so critical of many games in general, particularly ritual games? Why is play often associated with gambling in Islam? Why does the Qur’ān objects to plays, games and entertainment? How is this Qur’ānic objection received in modern Iranian politics in which gaming, especially computer games have become part of the state processes? Why does Islamic Republic of Iran consider certain computer games valid while other sorts of games are frowned upon or even forbidden?

**Asghar Seyed-Gohrab** received his PhD from Leiden University where he has been teaching since 1997. He is Associate Professor of Persian at the Department of Middle Eastern Studies and is the track-leader of the Persian and Iranian Studies program. In addition to many articles, and chapters, he has authored, edited, and translated several books on Persian literature and culture, cinema, Sufism, and manuscript tradition. His publications include *The Layered Heart: Essays on Persian Poetry* (2019); *The True Dream: Indictment of the Shiite Clerics of Isfahan*, (2017 together with S. McGlenn); *Soefism: Een levende traditie*, (2015); *Literature of the Early Twentieth Century: From the Constitutional Period to Reza Shah* (ed., 2015); *Mirror of Dew: The Poetry of Ālam-Tāj Zhāle Qā'em-Maqāmi*, (2015); *Conflict and Development in Iranian Film*, (ed. together with K. Talattof, 2013); *Metaphor and Imagery in Persian Poetry*,

(ed., 2012); *The Great Omar Khayyam: A Global Reception*, (ed., 2012); *Courtly Riddles: Enigmatic Embellishments in Early Persian Poetry*, (2010); *One Word: A 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Persian Treatise Introducing Western Codified Law* (2010, together with S. McGlinn); *The Treasury of Tabriz*, (ed. together with S. McGlinn, 2007); *Gog and Magog: The Clans of Chaos in World Literature*, (together with F. Doufekar-Aerts & S. McGlinn, 2007); *Layli and Majnun: Love, Madness and Mystic Longing in Nizami's Epic Romance*, (2003). He has translated several volumes of modern Persian poetry into Dutch, including the poetry of Sohrāb Sepehri, Forugh Farrokhzād, Mohammad-Rezā Shafi'i-Kadkani, and (together with J.T.P. de Bruijn) Ahmad Shāmlu, Nāder Nāderpur, and Hushang Ebtehāj. His research concentrate on the triangle of literature, politics and religion, examining the application of classical Persian poetry in modern politics. He is the founding general editor of the Iranian Studies Series at Leiden University Press and Chicago University Press (23 books since 2010) and the Modern Persian Poetry Series (15 volumes).



Moozhan Shakeri,

### *Design Thinking, Expandable Rationality and Ludic Fallacy in Western Problem-Solving Processes*

Design thinking and ‘designerly way of knowing’, nowadays, is often talked about as a ‘new democratic and liberating form of creativity’ that will transform social and economic life and revolutionize problem-solving processes. The idea is now embraced by scholars and practitioners in various fields and its impacts have permeated various aspects of our life in an unprecedented way; from our social networks and schools, to work and even our death. The traditional corporate hierarchy is now described as a system that negates creative activity. Governments are thought to be too bureaucratic halting innovative policy thinking. Regulation is now seen as the enemy of flexible, agile and creative work. This version of creativity that has productivity and efficiency in its core however is criticized for its economized and capitalism-friendly nature by many scholars in fields of art and social science.

By reviewing the specific case of use of games in policy making processes, and by drawing on the existing literature in philosophy of design, I will argue that the limitations of contemporary narratives around design thinking and creativity are deep-rooted in rationalism and rejection of the role of ludic fallacy in rethinking problem-solving processes. I will discuss the current narratives around creativity

and design thinking and will critically reflect on the concept of expandable rationality and the struggles that designers are going through to incorporate elements of uncertainty into their problem-solving processes.

**Moozhan Shakeri** is research associate at Newcastle University working in Digital Economy Research Centre (DERC) with Prof. Geoff Vigar. The projects she is working on in collaboration with Open Lab at Newcastle University aim to theorise, design, develop, and evaluate new digitally mediated models of citizen participation that engage different stakeholders in developing the future of local service provision and local democracy. She has a background in urban planning and Geospatial analysis and as a critical social scientist, her main research interest is understanding logic of use of different tools in decision-making and problem-solving processes; from spatial analysis tools to games and new media. She finished her PhD at University of Manchester in 2017 and her dissertation, titled *The Use of Games in Participatory Planning Practices*, is a critical reflection on the role and added value of digital games in participatory planning processes. Having had her MSc MSc on Geoscience and earth observation tools for urban planning in 2012 from University of Twente in the Netherlands, I have also worked as a spatial analyst in various projects and Commute flow (<http://www.commute-flow.net/>) in the Spatial Policy and Analysis Laboratory (previously known as Centre for Urban Policy Studies) at University of Manchester.



Saeedeh Shahnahpur,

### *“Destruction Operation” : Iranian-made Digital Games of the Iran-Iraq War*

In the process of a cultural war against Western productions, the Iranian digital game industry flourished in 2002. Since then, the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) has become the most significant thematic source of designing games, which are used as a visual medium to communicate the cultural and political values of the war to Iranian youth, who were, and still are, the main audience for digital games. Iranian-made games appeared primarily to replace Western war games (ex., *Call of Duty*) with national ones which impart Iranian-Islamic wartime culture, and are colored with ideas about martyrdom and self-sacrifice. In this vein, most of them were modeled after successful Iranian military operations to highlight the heroic acts of soldiers, who willingly took part in the battle and sacrificed their lives for the sake of Islam and Islamic ideals. This paper sheds lights on the rise and evolution of Iranian-made digital games of the Iran-Iraq War to investigate how the games’ narratological elements, such as character, event, and place, are designed to recreate the real setting of the war with emphasis on the official discourse. Furthermore, it also exhibits the role of these elements in

articulation of the Iranian-Islamic national identity, the core ingredients of which are martyrdom and anti-imperialism.

**Saeedeh Shahnahpur** is a researcher at Leiden University Institute for Area Studies (LIAS). She successfully defended her PhD dissertation, entitled: *Words and Laments: A Narratological Analysis of Esmā'il Fasih's War Novel, The Winter of 1983 (Zemestān-e 62)* in September 2016 at Leiden University. Her research interests primarily directed towards the Iran–Iraq War and its impact on the development of cultural productions in Iran. Saeedeh has published several articles on the Iran–Iraq War novels, focusing on Esmā'il Fasih and his contribution to the body of Iranian war literature. Her dissertation is under review at Peter Lang Publishers in New York. This is the first monograph in English, offering a complete account of Esmā'il Fasih's life, works, and position in contemporary Iranian literature. It uses a narratological analysis of Fasih's wartime novel *Zemestān-e 62* (The Winter of '83, 1985) as a case study, illustrating how it became an example for anti-war novels in Iran.



Angus A.A. Mol & Aris Politopoulos,

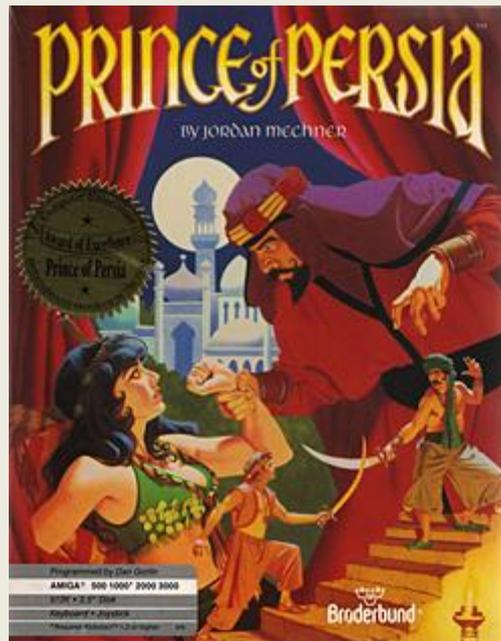
*From the Stone Age to the Space Age  
The Progressive Past in Sid Meier's Civilization Series –  
with a special focus on its representation of Persia*

Video games are one of the present's quintessential virtual media and cultural forms, but also have a surprising and many-sided relation with the past. This certainly holds true for Sid Meier's Civilization (1991-2016), which is a series of turn-based, strategy video games in which you lead a historic culture from "the dawn of civilization to the space age." Civilization, often simply referred to as Civ, allows players to engage with past and present technological advances, social systems, and built heritage in a playful history that is closely analogous but always different to our own. Since its 1991 debut, Civ has sold more than 37 million copies worldwide. With 2 million copies sold in the first two weeks after publication and changing many of the previous games mechanics, the newest iteration Civ VI (2016) is the fastest selling game in the series yet. In short, Civ is an enduring and massive commercial

and critical success. Yet at the same time it also has a complex, and sometimes problematic, relation with its subject matter: heritage and history. This paper will provide a critical reevaluation of some of the core concepts underlying civilization and illustrate these with case-studies. Among these will be a detailed look at how Persian culture is represented in Civ. Persia is one of the few cultures that was featured in the game already since Civ II (1996), and has been one of the go-to civilizations to be included in every installation. Through the years, the Persian empire in Civ has been quite dynamic: multiple kings have been featured as leaders, different cities have acted as capitals, and different units and buildings have been presented as “core” of the civilization. At the same time, the representation of Persia has been exclusively classical, focusing exclusively on the Achaemenid period of the Persian culture. We will be investigating and evaluating these changes to present a case study on how historical perspectives might change, or remain the same, with the evolution of Civ. At the same time, we will be looking at issues of representation particularly connected to a classical and westernized view of the Persian empire.

**Angus Mol** is an assistant professor at Leiden University’s Centre for Digital Humanities. In his research he combines the study of history using a digital approach with the study of how today’s digital cultures are entwined with history. In particular, he looks at how contemporary play functions as a mirror of the past as well as how games can be used to democratize access to the past. He has authored several papers on the topic and crowd-funded, an Open Access edited volume with chapters from scholars and professionals from the creative industry. He is one of the founding members of VALUE (<http://value-foundation.org/>). With a PhD in Archaeology, Angus has also had a keen interest in projects that combine social theory, material culture, and digital media and tools. For instance, he uses network analyses and agent-based models to explore and explain how things and people are entangled over time. The focal point in all his research lies on interactions across cultural and social boundaries, owing to his PhD and Postdoc research on networks in the culturally diverse, indigenous and colonial Caribbean.

**Aris Politopoulos** is a lecturer for the Archaeology of the Near East at the Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University. He studied archaeology at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, and did his MA, specializing in the archaeology of the Ancient Near East, at the Faculty of Archaeology at Leiden. He is currently finishing his doctorate thesis at Leiden University, for which he studies the creation, construction, and function of the capital cities of Assyria. He also has a research interest in the Late Bronze Age world of the Eastern Mediterranean, with a particular focus on the Eastern Aegean/Western Anatolia cross-cultural connections. Aris is a founding member of the VALUE Foundation, a foundation that works at the crossroads of gaming and academia. Together with VALUE he has organized the Interactive Pasts Conference, the world’s first conference series focusing on the topic of the past and video games. He has published several papers on the topic and is co-editor of the book *The Interactive Past: Archaeology, Heritage, and Video Games*.



Siavash Rafiee Rad,

*Politics of Language in Videogames:  
Identity Games and Representations of Iran*

This talk aims to address the role that language plays in shaping opposition political identity in videogames by exploring games dealing with significant contemporary events in the history of Iran.

9

Videogames are no longer exclusively viewed as pastime activities but they are assessed as means of soft power. Like TV dramas, literary works and films, videogames, as a form of popular culture, can be used to investigate cultural and political theories. While the representations of gender and race have received extensive attention in the limited literature of videogame studies, language and its role in understanding the politics of videogames remains an under-researched domain. The contemporary videogame market provides many action-adventure games with an interactive nature, providing (limited) agency to players. The interactivity in such video games is afforded to a great extent through the use of language. The specific linguistic codes in a game allow players to establish affinities and identify with certain groups, such as gangs, sports teams, soldiers of a certain state, political parties, etc.

By exploring linguistic signifiers in video games, this study aims to investigate how language can shed light on the normative approach that videogames take first, in presenting certain cultural and political stereotypes in historical contexts therefore ‘othering’ certain identities, and second, in shaping the identity of players in a way to converge with those norms. Finally, it will be demonstrated how the choice and use of linguistic codes in the game can further (lack of) empathy through selective choice of controversial historical contexts where players indirectly become active participants in fomenting certain political representations, as a result of the player’s in-game identity becoming intertwined with characters in games.

**Dr. Siavash Rafiee Rad** completed his PhD in linguistics at The University of Manchester in the United Kingdom in 2012. He taught at The University of Manchester until August 2016. He then conducted research at the Faculty of Linguistics, Philology and Phonetics at the

University of Oxford before joining the University of Leiden in January 2018. He is currently holding a lectureship position in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies, LIAS, at the University of Leiden. His research interests are semantics, syntax, Iranian linguistics and Persian studies.



Ellis Bartholomeus,

### *Games as a Tool*

There are at least four different ways to go about applying games to make an impact. First, use existing games as an eye-opener for people to break through conventions and connect with others. For example, you can make four players play one Pac-man game and allow each player just one direction-control. They gain firsthand experience in the difficulty and challenge of communication and team play. Second, incorporate the problem into a game. For instance, a simulation around the topic of AIDs in which the player is challenged to “save” a population in a country plagued with HIV infection. Players discover that solutions are not linear, and there is not just one good path in play. A proper balance is only understood after failing several times. Third, apply game-elements around the problem in daily life. Have people literally change their behavior while playing around with habits. They can be helped to learn to deal with changes in a playful manner by teaching how to juggle a problem, first with one ball and then more and more balls. Fourth, have people create their own games around a need or a topic so that they gain ownership. For instance, if you wish to make children learn a specific topic in algebra, ask them to design a game about it in small teams. Have them discuss the topic together, then reconstruct it and add game elements. When prototyping their design, they will realize some players have more problems understanding the game. They will search and find creative solutions to deal with different levels of understanding, and without knowing it, will have become experts on the topic (plus had fun while doing so. When using play as an intervention, assumptions need to be challenged. The player, the context and the issue need to be understood in order to determine why and how the experience inside the magic circle impacts life outside the circle.

**Ellis Bartholomeus** - In 1996 I graduated as a product designer at the Design Academy on ‘Men and Information’. Since then I have created signage, medical interfaces, graphic design, websites, online interactive applications, edutainment and serious games. I got eager to get more in-depth involved with the use of play and game elements as a medium and tool to engage the user truly. How to design, facilitate and enable intrinsic motivation, and how to co-create a state of play and design the user-journey. In the past 8 years I am researching and searching for the holy grail of intrinsic motivation and how not just to engage a user with a product, but how to allow the user to want to interact and play around his experiences to help

for instance patients become the owner of their condition or a student to become the owner of his/her learnings. With my experience in designing and researching these, I wrote a book, give talks and facilitate workshops for organizations to learn to understand the value and power of play and how to apply this to have an impact. But my quest and search as a play alchemist is never ending ...

