



COURSE UNIT (MODULE) DESCRIPTION

Course unit (module) title		Code
PLAY THEORY AND CULTURE		
Academic staff		Core academic unit(s)
Assoc. Prof. dr. Ieva Steponavičiūtė Aleksiejūnienė		VU Faculty of Philology
Study cycle		Type of the course unit
Master		Optional
Mode of delivery	Semester or period when it is delivered	Language of instruction
Lectures, seminars, project work, out-of-classroom activities	Autumn	English
Requisites		
Prerequisites: English language proficiency level min. B2	Co-requisites: Prior study of theory in the fields of philosophy, psychology, and literary/cultural studies would be an advantage	

Number of ECTS credits allocated	Student's workload (total)	Contact hours	Individual work
5	130	32	98

Goals of the course		
<p>The idea of this course is to help students acquire the necessary knowledge and analytical tools for the independent study of the cultural and social dimensions of play. The course aims to introduce key theoretical approaches to play and to develop students' ability to critically engage with concepts of play across different cultural and disciplinary contexts. It also encourages students to reflect on how play functions as a social, symbolic, and cultural phenomenon, and to apply theoretical perspectives in their own analyses of empirical and cultural examples. In addition, the course offers opportunities to observe and experience how play is adapted in real-life cultural and educational contexts, as well as to experiment with creating one's own play structures in relation to a chosen field or area of interest.</p> <p>General skills: <i>Analytical, critical and creative thinking:</i> to critically evaluate, systematize and process information from various sources; to improve existing and generate new ideas. <i>Problem-solving, social and communicative skills:</i> to identify relevant problems to be solved, to discuss alternative choices; to offer and apply problem-solving solutions; to make informed decisions, based on facts and experience; to engage in constructive teamwork. <i>Academic and professional ethics:</i> understand and respect ethical requirements; to comply with the principles of responsibility and integrity; to engage in dialogue and seek mutual understanding.</p> <p>Subject-related skills: Application of the theories and methods of the field; creative, explorative and (self)reflective abilities; ability to formulate a research question and to communicate research findings to different audiences.</p>		
Learning outcomes	Study methods	Assessment methods

Students will have the opportunity to experience and test theoretical approaches in practice, as well as develop creative and analytic skills when interpreting different aspects of the studied phenomena.	Out-of-classroom activities, creative workshop, reflections, group discussions, developing of the course project					Peer-to-peer evaluations; (individual or group); assessment of project results.
Topics	Lectures	Tutorials	Seminars	Total	Self-study	Assignments
1. What Are Play and Games? (your own perspective); Presentation of the Course Goals, Structure, and Forms of Assessment; The Relevance of the Concept of Play Across Different Disciplines			2	2	4	<i>Watch</i> the Danish director Jørgen Leth’s film <i>World of Play</i> (Det legende menneske, 1986). <i>Reflect</i> on the following: what meanings does play acquire in this film, in what forms does it manifest itself, and who/what are its subjects and objects?
2. “The Code of Play”: Introduction to Play from Anthropological and Philosophical Perspectives	2		2	4	8	<i>Read</i> chapters in Huizinga (1955): “Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon”, “The Play Concept as Expressed in Language”, and “Play and Contest as Civilizing Functions” in Huizinga; <i>Reflect</i> on how concepts of play and game are expressed in your native language (or other that you know well). <i>Read</i> chapters in Caillois (2001): “The Definition of Play; The Classification of Games“. <i>Choose a game</i> of your choice and <i>reflect</i> on its type and its position on the paidia–ludus continuum. Prepare for the classroom discussion
3. Play as a Symbol of the World in Eugen Fink’s Philosophy			2	2	4	<i>Read</i> Fink (2016). Prepare for the classroom discussion.
4. Play in Digital Media Studies. Digital Games as Structures			2	2	4	<i>Read</i> the two chapters in Salen and Zimmerman (2004)
5. Playing with Games and Software – Beyond the “Magic Circle.” Miguel Sicart’s Concept.			2	2	4	<i>Watch</i> the video “ Seminar on video games and visual art pt. 2: Miguel Angel Sicart – All Games and No Play ”, read Ch. 1 “Playing” in Sicart (2023).
6. Theoretical assignment in class: e.g. compare two theories studied in relation to the specified aspects	2			2	10	<i>Revise</i> the theory studied.
7. Play in Education. Can (and should) Play be Instrumentalised?			2	2	4	<i>Find examples</i> of how play structures are applied to language learning, fostering motivation to read, and other educational or developmental contexts. <i>Read</i> the assigned case studies. Prepare for the classroom discussion.

8. Creative Workshop and Experiencing Play in Real Life Contexts (e.g. partaking in an educational activity in a museum). Reflecting on the experience.	2		2	4	6	<i>Study</i> the general information about the site to be visited; <i>complete</i> other assignments.
9. Play and Art. Artistic Representation of Play, and the Play of Form. Reader as (Co)Player	2		2	4	8	<i>Watch</i> Ingmar Bergman's film „The Seventh Seal“; <i>Read</i> Steponavičiūtė Aleksiejūnienė (2026 and 2011); assigned chapters from Edwards 2006; Calinescu (1993); Steponavičiūtė Aleksiejūnienė (2026); Prepare for the classroom discussion.
10. Project Work – brainstorming and preparation of project proposals			2	2	46	<i>Think</i> of possible forms and topics for your project. Submit a proposal. Exchange your ideas with other participants.
11. Project Work – discussion of project proposals			2	2		<i>Reflect</i> on the feedback you received from your peers.
12. Project Work – in groups and independently			2	2		<i>Continue working</i> on your project.
13. Presentations of Project Results	2			2		<i>Prepare</i> oral presentations of your project. Exchange peer-feedback. Submit a reflection or analysis (depending on the type of project)
Total:	10		22	32	98	

Assessment strategy	Weight %	Deadline	Assessment criteria
<p>Project work (group or individual): You may choose either to analyse a cultural phenomenon (such as a literary text, theatre performance, or exhibition) from the perspective of play, or to design a play structure for a specific educational or social purpose followed by a short (2-3 p.) written reflection.</p> <p>Weight: 80 %</p>		During the exam session period	<p><i>Assessment on the 0-8 scale based on the following criteria:</i></p> <p>1. <i>Analysis of a cultural phenomenon:</i> Ability to apply theories of play in a critical way; quality of interpretation; clarity, coherence, and logical organisation of the analysis; compliance with academic writing standards</p> <p>2. <i>Design of a play structure + reflection):</i> Ability to meaningfully integrate theories of play into the design of a play-based structure; coherence of your concept, feasibility of implementation, and creativity. Your reflection will be assessed based on the quality of critical discussion of aims, design choices; integration of theory; clear articulation of how theoretical concepts inform both the design and its intended purpose; clarity of expression and adherence to academic writing conventions.</p>

Participation in the course: preparation for the seminars, engagement in discussions and peer-to-peer activities, timely delivery of project work (20 %)	During the term	
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Readings

Caillois, Roger. *Man, Play and Games*. Trans. Meyer Barash. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001 [orig. 1958];
 Călinescu, Matei. *Rereading*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.
 Edwards, Brian. *Theories of Play and Postmodern Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1997. Reprinted 2006.
 Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955 [orig. 1938].
 Fink, Eugen. "Oasis of Happiness: Thoughts toward an Ontology of Play." In *Play as Symbol of the World and Other Writings*, translated by Ian Alexander Moore and Christopher Turner, 20–42. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016.
 Salen, Katie, and Eric Zimmerman. "Chapter 7: Defining Games." In *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, 69–76. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.
 Salen, Katie, and Eric Zimmerman. "Chapter 22: Defining Play." In *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, 303–311. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.
 Sicart, Miguel. *Playing Software: Homo Ludens in Computational Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023.
 Steponavičiūtė Aleksiejūnienė, Ieva. On Play, in *Collaborative Handbook of Academic Practices*, ser. *Berliner Beiträge zur Skandinavistik*, eds. C. Raethel and Lill-Ann Körber, 9-15. Berlin: Nordeuropa-Institut der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2006.
 Steponavičiūtė, Ieva. Chapter Two. In *Texts at Play: The Ludic Aspect of Karen Blixen's Writings*. Vilnius: Vilnius University Press, 2011.

For a more detailed list of assigned and recommended readings, please check the updates on the course moodle page.

Revised on 24th of April, 2026