

Call for Papers – Erving Goffman and Play

International Conference in La Chaux-de-Fonds (Switzerland) March 12 – 14, 2027

Sociologist Erving Goffman (1922–1982) developed a singular body of work by treating face-to-face encounters and gatherings as privileged sites for observing social life. In doing so, he brought to light a repertoire of “grammars” (Berger et al. 2026) through which what he called the “interaction order” is sustained or comes apart (Goffman 1983). Read and reread for several decades, his work has continually raised new questions for sociology and other disciplines. It also provides a powerful lens for understanding situations of interaction, and play situations are no exception.

Play occupies a place in Goffman’s work that is both central and understated. While it appears here and there as an example or analytical resource (1959, 1981), Goffman also addressed it directly on numerous occasions (1961, 1967, 1969, 1974), notably in his exploration of the casino (1967, 1974), which Dmitri Shalin (2016) describes as the “prototype of action”. The casino condenses several problems that run throughout Goffman’s work: the uncertainty of action, exposure to the gaze of others, risk-taking, the revelation of character, and the ways in which individuals publicly confront the consequences of their choices. While these texts are permeated by the “game analogy” (Geertz 1983), Goffman also showed, well before the idea became widely established, just how deeply “play is entangled with everyday life, from the mundane to the epic” (Pearce 2024, 11). For him, play situations are “world-making activities”, creating worlds that are, by their very nature, always fragile.

This conference offers an opportunity to bring into conversation contemporary engagements with Goffman’s work through empirical research on play and games in all their forms. Gaming encounters (Goffman 1961) provide particularly fertile ground for testing some of the most productive tensions in his work. How do participants in a gaming encounter define the playframe in practice? How do they maintain a distinction between play and everyday life when the membrane separating them remains porous (Henricks 2006)? What conditions make fun possible in a game or in the act of playing (Henriot 2023 [1989]), and how does that fun falter? How do participants manage shifts in footing between registers of action? We seek contributions that draw on Goffman’s “observational theory of action” (Conein 1989) to investigate gaming encounters and objects of play, drawing on Goffman while also moving beyond his work and the many questions it leaves open. Possible objects of inquiry include board games, tabletop and live-action role-playing games, digital games, pervasive games (Montola et al. 2009), spectatorship practices, prototype playtesting, and gatherings such as festivals and conventions (Prince and Wynn 2022; Narmanli 2026).

The conference is organized around four themes which address, in turn, the definition and boundaries of gaming encounters; the forms of involvement they elicit; the issues of self-presentation that emerge within them; and the theoretical extensions that situate these encounters within broader temporalities, groups, and power relations. Paper proposals, written in English or French, may address one or more of these themes.

Theme 1: Playframes and Participation

Celia Pearce (2024) writes that, with *Encounters* (1961), Goffman “lays down the first stone on the garden path to frame analysis and plants the seeds from which many other theories followed” (Pearce 2024, 10). This path leads from “Fun in Games” (1961), where play is examined as an encounter with fragile boundaries, to *Frame Analysis* (1974), which investigates the principles that enable participants to recognize “what is going on here” and the transformations through which an activity can be understood as play. Goffman’s theoretical toolkit thus makes it possible to describe in detail the “situational properties” of gaming encounters and the diversity of the “participation statuses” of those involved (Goffman 1963). These distinctions are complemented by the notion of “footing” (Goffman 1981), which refers to shifts in alignment manifested particularly in the ways utterances are produced and received. Within a single gaming encounter, a participant may thus shift from player to

commentator, adviser, temporary referee, someone joking out of character, or spectator of their own activity. Such shifts do not necessarily take participants outside the playframe, but they alter the modes of participation at particular moments, and the definition of what is taking place. These concepts allow us to distinguish between the overall definition of the activity, the positions from which people participate in it, and the local shifts in alignment that occur as it unfolds. Play can therefore be examined as an activity whose frame, boundaries, participation statuses, and shifts in footing are continually “accomplished” (Garfinkel 1967; Reeves et al. 2017), that is, produced, recognized, negotiated, or contested.

Paper proposals may explore questions such as the following: How do participants make a situation recognizable as play and negotiate its boundaries? How are these boundaries made visible or recognizable through signs, conventions, objects, or spatial arrangements? Under what circumstances does a shift in footing remain compatible with the playframe, and when does it threaten to disrupt it? How are disagreements over the definition of “what is going on here” expressed, negotiated, and resolved? Finally, how are frames and participation statuses reconfigured in tabletop role-playing games, live-action role-playing games, digital games, pervasive games, or gaming situations broadcast online?

Theme 2: Involvement in Play

In “Fun in Games” (1961), Goffman examines the conditions that enable a gaming encounter to hold its participants’ attention and “ensure euphoria”, when actions and expectations align and the situation seems to work “as it should”. Yet this balance remains fragile: intrusions, spillovers, or elements deemed irrelevant may produce dysphoria and undermine the activity’s appeal or meaning. In *Behavior in Public Places* (1963), Goffman distinguishes “main involvement”, which constitutes the recognized focus of participants’ attention and participation, from “side involvements”, which are usually subordinate to it. These involvements may coexist, but they may also compete with one another and disrupt the encounter. Likewise, self-consciousness or heightened awareness of being observed by others may “flood out”, drawing participants’ attention away from the ongoing activity. Drawing on these concepts, Jean-Emmanuel Barbier (2022) shows that involvement in play is subject to reciprocal expectations and assessments: a participant may be judged underinvolved in the stakes of the game or, conversely, overinvolved in the pursuit of victory, to the detriment of the encounter’s sociability. Involvement thus appears less as an internal, homogeneous, and continuous state than as a situated, multifaceted, and fluctuating accomplishment. Structured by “high points” (*temps forts*) and “low points” (*temps faibles*) (Boutet et al. 2014; Caïra 2018) and distributed across multiple objects and temporalities (Calleja 2011), it is continually assessed, negotiated, and regulated by participants.

This theme invites consideration of the following questions: How do participants display their involvement in a gaming encounter, and through what signs do they recognize an appropriate level of involvement? How do main involvement and side involvements coexist, intersect, or compete over the course of play? How are underinvolvement and overinvolvement perceived, assessed, tolerated, criticized, or regulated by participants? How do participants navigate shifts between euphoria and dysphoria, high points and low points, while sustaining interest in the encounter?

Theme 3: The Presentation of Self and Face-Work

When people find themselves in one another's presence, they seek to gather information in order to define the situation and anticipate one another's conduct. Each person, intentionally or otherwise, conveys a particular expression of self from which others form an impression. Building on this interactional problem, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) develops a "dramaturgical model": individuals organize their "performances", mobilize a front, and cooperate in sustaining a shared definition of the situation. Gaming encounters make these processes especially visible. Participants may seek to present themselves as players who are competent, experienced, fair, easygoing, or humorous, while sometimes also taking on a character or a role specific to the game.

This presentation of self nevertheless remains vulnerable to mistakes, embarrassing moments (Deterding 2018), defeats, and the judgments of others. The analysis is further developed in "On Face-Work", included in *Interaction Ritual* (1967), through the study of face-work, that is, the customary practices through which participants prevent or repair events that might threaten their own face, others' face, or the ritual equilibrium of the encounter. As Samuel Bordreuil (2007) emphasizes, this work notably relies on tact and the "protection of the other's face". Vulnerability therefore appears not only as a risk to be contained, but also as a condition of social bonds: playing together entails exposing oneself to the judgment of others, allowing oneself to be affected by them, and relying on their cooperation.

The playframe may also transform the meaning of conduct that would ordinarily threaten face. Mockery, irony, provocation, and even certain insults may be treated as acceptable components of the activity and reinforce a sense of camaraderie among participants (Berry 2012). Yet the playframe alone does not render them harmless: their acceptability depends on how they are produced, understood, and received. An utterance treated as a joke or as an attack "within the game" may thus be reframed as a serious or personal offense. Rule violations, potentially embarrassing moments, defeats, jokes, accusations of cheating, and conduct deemed inappropriate therefore provide opportunities to observe how participants protect, test, or repair their relationships.

Contributions may examine questions such as the following: How do participants construct a presentation of self as competent, experienced, fair, novice, or casual players? How do mistakes, embarrassing moments, defeats, or unfamiliarity with the rules threaten participants' faces? What forms of tact, avoidance, humor, or repair help protect others' face and sustain the gaming encounter? How are tensions among competition, self-exposure, vulnerability, and cooperation negotiated over the course of play?

Theme 4: Beyond Goffman

The analytical richness of Goffman's work lies as much in the tools it provides as in the questions it leaves open. Although it allows for a fine-grained description of the situated organization of gaming encounters, these encounters cannot be entirely detached from the situations that precede and follow them, the groups that give them meaning, or the organizations and institutions that shape their possibilities. Goffman (1983) himself describes the relationship between the interaction order and social structures as one of "loose coupling": the properties of an encounter cannot be mechanically deduced from the positions occupied within the social order, yet neither are they independent of them. The question, then, is how hierarchies, institutions, and social inequalities take shape, are transformed, or are temporarily suspended in situations of play.

Situations consequently form "webs" linked by past experiences, shared memories, and common anticipations (Fine and Tavory 2019). They also unfold within material and institutional environments whose affordances contribute to the conditions under which play becomes possible, opening up, encouraging, or legitimizing certain possibilities for action while restricting others. Understanding these situations also requires learning to see what matters to players and grasping the forms of competence specific to each play activity (Livingston 2012). A memorable game, a recurring joke, a disagreement over a rule, or an incident recounted afterward may connect several encounters and contribute to the culture of a gaming table, club, guild, or play community. Fun is therefore not limited to a momentary state of euphoria: its stories and memories foster lasting attachment to

the group and connect encounters over time (Fine and Corte 2017), much like “interaction ritual chains”, which generate emotional energy and solidarity (Collins 2004; Corte 2022).

Yet this cohesion also has a darker side: shared pleasure may draw boundaries, reproduce hierarchies, and exclude those who lack fluency in its codes. Moreover, the interaction order does not rest solely on alignment and repair. Some disruptions damage relationships (Tavory and Fine 2020), while others transform or deepen them. The ability to challenge a rule, interrupt a game, alter its course, provoke others, or claim that an offense was “just a joke” is itself unevenly distributed among participants.

This theme invites contributions that extend, shift, or put Goffman’s theoretical toolkit to the test through questions such as the following: How are gaming encounters embedded in chains or webs of situations connecting past experiences, present activity, and future encounters? How does the “loose coupling” between the interaction order and the social order become manifest in situations of play? How do fun, its memories, and its narratives strengthen group commitment, while also producing boundaries, exclusions, and hierarchies? Under what circumstances do disruptions damage a gaming relationship, and when do they instead help renew or deepen it? How do material arrangements, organizations, institutions, and power relations shape what participants experience as a locally bounded gaming encounter?

Conference Organization and Format

The conference will be held in person from March 12 to 14, 2027, in La Chaux-de-Fonds, during [Ludesco, a low-tech public festival of games and playful experiences](#) that runs continuously throughout the weekend and features board games, tabletop role-playing games, live-action role-playing games (larps), escape rooms, tournaments, and a family area.

One of the conference’s distinctive features will be a **participant-observation workshop** conducted within Ludesco itself and open to both presenters and interested festivalgoers. A methodological introduction on Friday, drawing in particular on Goffman’s “On Fieldwork” (1989), will present observation as a demanding practical skill: learning how to describe situations, identify the organization of interactions, and reflect on one’s own position in the research process. Guidance and shared instructions will nevertheless enable participants with less experience in ethnography to take part in the workshop. Working across different festival spaces and activities, including the main gaming hall, tabletop role-playing games, larps, the family area, and the Protozone, where game prototypes are presented, participants will observe interactions surrounding play and explore issues such as gender relations (Goffman 1979), play cultures (Brougère 2024; Liège Game Lab 2019), forms of facilitation, learning processes, and relationships between festivalgoers and game professionals. An initial collective discussion will take place on Saturday, followed by a public presentation of findings on Sunday. The workshop will thus provide an opportunity to put Goffman’s legacy to the test. His sometimes unconventional and loosely formalized observational practice contributes to the evocative power of his work while also raising methodological and critical questions.

The conference and workshop are coordinated in close collaboration with the Ludesco organizing committee. They are supported by the Haute école de gestion Arc, through its Institute of Communication and Experiential Marketing, the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland (HES-SO), and the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). The organizing committee consists of Michael Perret, Alain Bovet, and Patrick Ischer (Haute école de gestion Arc, HES-SO); Solène Froidevaux and Nils Kapferer (Ludesco); Fabián Ruz (Gamelab Lausanne, University of Geneva); and Thomas Jammet (School of Social Work Fribourg, HES-SO).

Timeline

Paper proposals, in either French or English, must be submitted by email to GoffmanAndPlay@he-arc.ch no later than November 15, 2026. Proposals should not exceed 500 words, excluding references.

The first page of the document should include the paper title, the name(s) of the author(s), their institutional affiliation(s), and a short biography for each author (maximum 700 characters, including spaces). Beginning on the second page, the document should include the paper title, the proposal, and the reference list. From the second page onward, the submitted version must contain no personal or professional information identifying the author(s).

Authors whose proposals are accepted will be invited to submit a written paper after the conference. The paper should not exceed 30,000 characters, including spaces and references. Depending on the quality and coherence of the final papers received, the publication of an edited volume or a special issue of an academic journal will be considered.

Further timeline:

- Late December 2026: notification of decisions to applicants
- Early 2027: publication of the detailed conference program
- March 12–14, 2027: in-person conference held at Ludesco (La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland)
- April 30, 2027: deadline for submitting full papers

Practical Information

La Chaux-de-Fonds is just over four hours from Paris by train and approximately two hours from Geneva and Zurich. Presenters are advised to book their accommodation as early as possible, as the conference will take place during Ludesco, a festival of games and playful experiences that attracts many out-of-town festivalgoers. In addition, La Chaux-de-Fonds will be the [Swiss Capital of Culture in 2027](#) and will host numerous related events, further limiting the availability of accommodation in the city. The conference organizers are available to assist presenters with these arrangements.

Conference registration and admission to the Ludesco festival will be free of charge for accepted presenters. Thanks to the support of the Ludesco organizing committee, meals and beverages will be provided throughout the conference.

Scientific Committee

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