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Am I being ludic(rous)?

Exploring the ludic in contemporary British death and dying

Dr Jennifer Riley

British comedian Angela Barnes has hosted two series of her BBC Radio 4 comedy show 'You Can't Take It With you.' I commend it – it was on BBC Sounds last I checked. She uses her dad, Derek's grave goods, as a launchpad.

Angela Barnes

'You Can't Take it With You' (2014, 2016)

https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0001v7y

"We put insulin, hypodermic needles and plenty of Mars Bars in his coffin with him, to make sure that he stayed well...

...Despite the fact he was dead. I never said any of this made sense."

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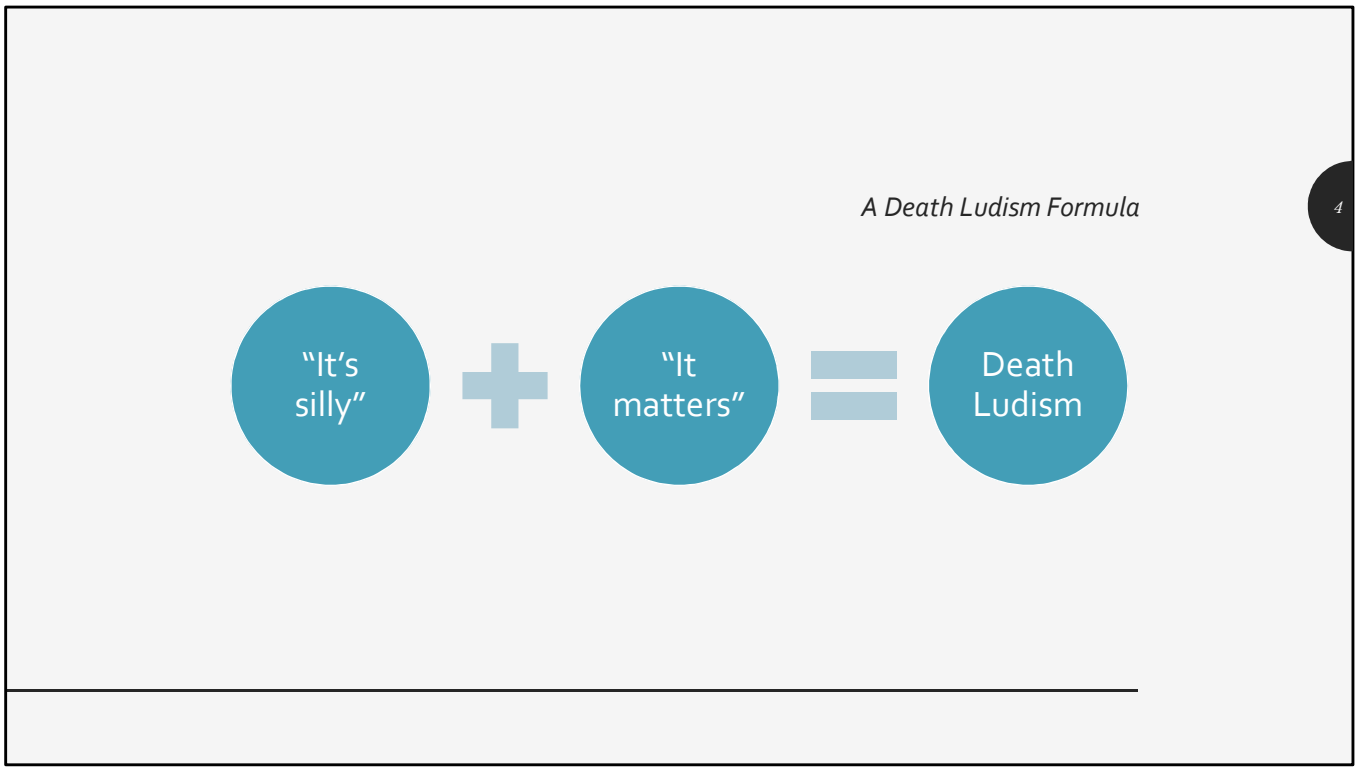
Describing Derek's well-packed coffin, she explains: "We put insulin, hypodermic needles and plenty of Mars Bars in his coffin with him, to make sure that he stayed well." She then hesitates for effect, before clarifying: "Despite the fact he was dead. I never said any of this made sense."



I disagree, Angela. It does make sense. I'm going to argue, specifically, that it makes *ludic,* sense. I'm going to identify and explore a phenomenon that has now recurred for some years across research interviews. It's a phenomenon with a formula:
"It's silly" + "It matters" → Death Ludism

Cathy

"You want to make sure that the body is comfortable. I mean, it's totally irrational but you wouldn't want it too squashed would you? [...] I think that's really important."

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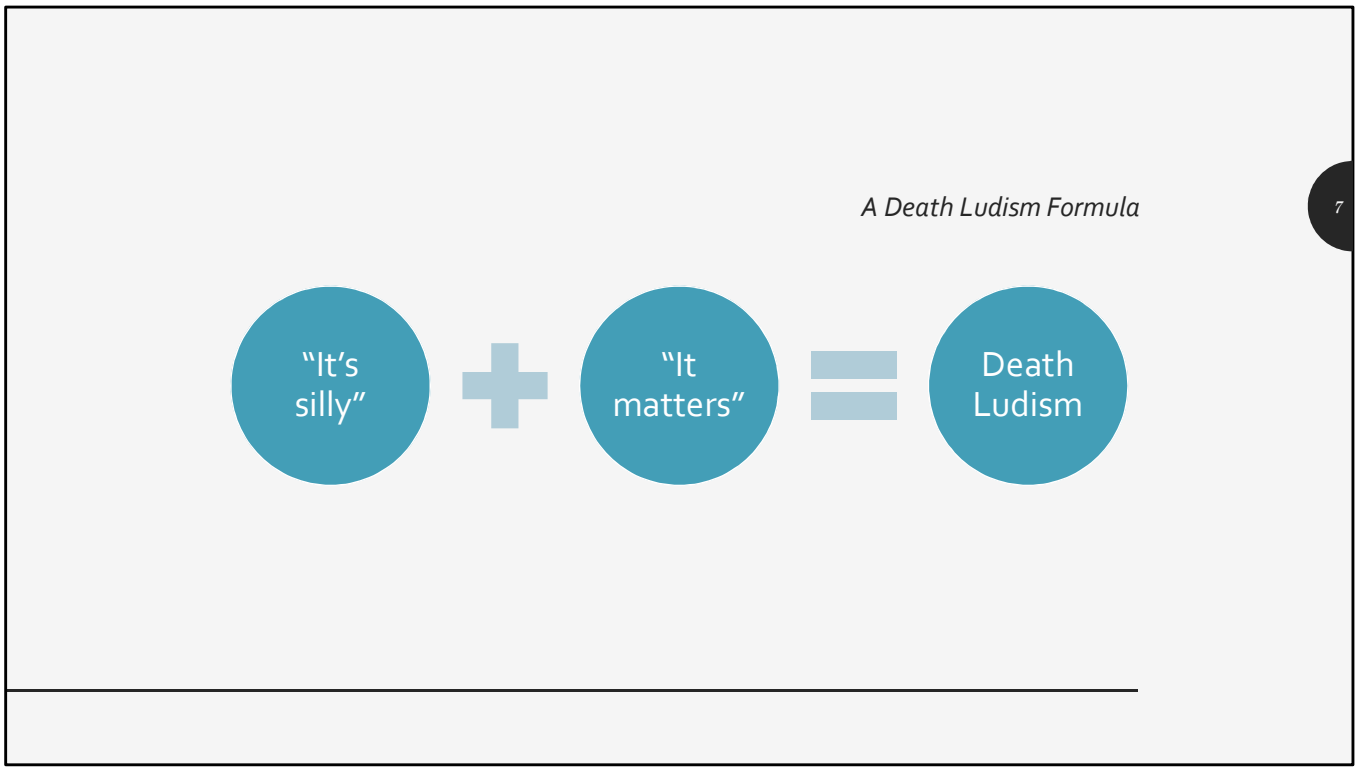
To give an example: When her uncle died, Cathy helped prepare his body:
"You want to make sure that the body is comfortable. I mean, it's totally irrational but you wouldn't want it too squashed would you? […] I think that's really important."
Interviewees often talk about death – and especially death's materiality and the dead body - in two incongruous registers, often so adjacently it's almost simultaneous. They are quick to highlight the strangeness, or irrationality, of worrying about the dead feeling squashed, or cold, or lonely.

The things people put in other people's coffins or graves when they die, knowing that they will almost certainly never get them back

It's a particularly important theme in my ongoing project *Baggage for the Beyond,* which explores contemporary UK grave goods – i.e. objects and items put in people's coffins, which cannot (typically) be retrieved after burial or cremation.



And people often describe grave goods with the caveat that they "know it's irrational!" or "probably sounds bonkers!" or "doesn't make sense." Yet their next word is, very often, 'but.' They then explain why that object, or that aspect of caring for the dead, mattered and matters.

Geoffrey Scarre, Death, *2007*

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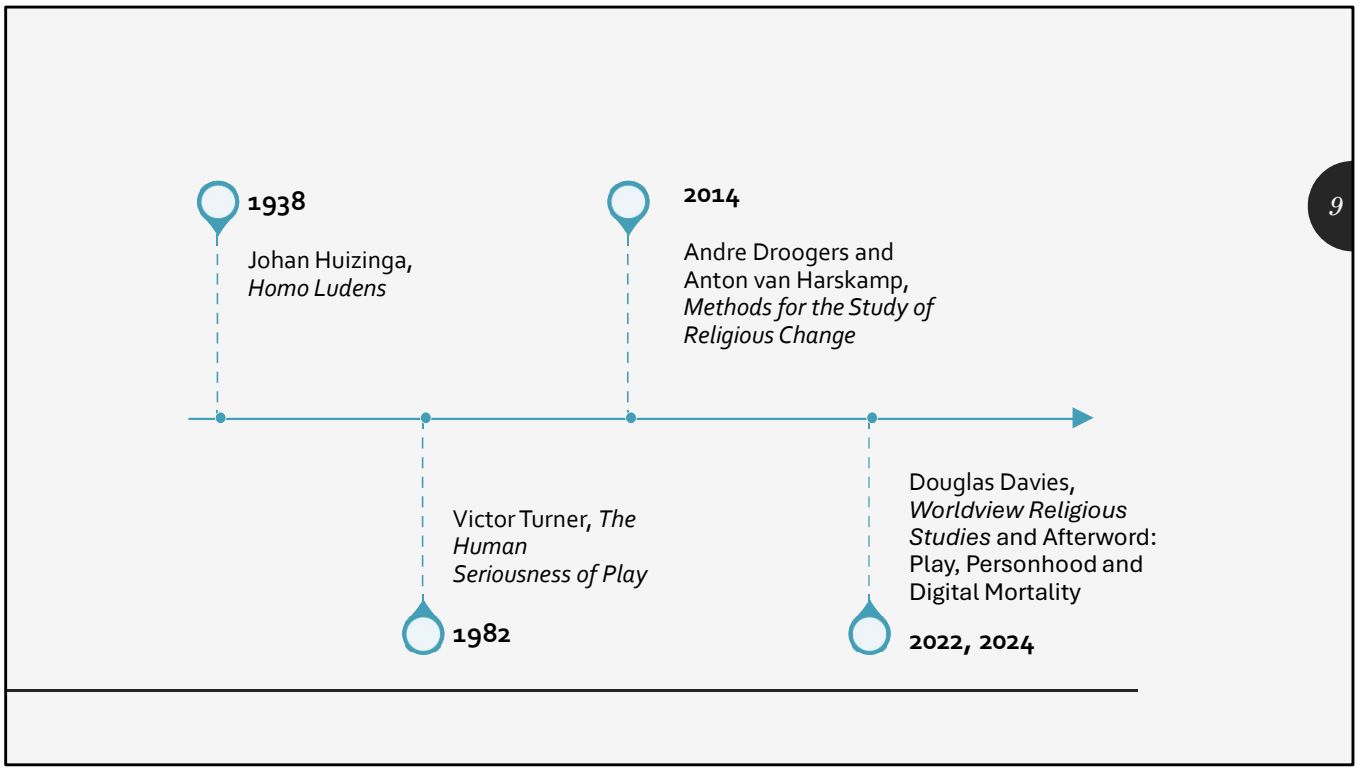
" [One might] cast some doubts on the rationality of the funerary practices of disbelievers in an afterlife who [...] are acting for the sake of people who they think no longer exist"

In his book 'Death' (2007) Geoffrey Scarre, questions the point of 'elaborate funeral ceremonies and mourning rites' in contexts where people 'do not expect the dead to respond.' He asks 'why people go to so much trouble,' suggesting such practices might 'cast some doubts on the rationality of the funerary practices of disbelievers in an afterlife who […] are acting for the sake of people who they think no longer exist.'

And yet here people are, caring and acting for the dead with this curious self-critique and self-awareness. I'm going to suggest this formula – "I know it's silly, but" - is better framed as 'ludic' engagement with death, rather than the more heavily laden term 'irrational'.



The term ludic typically emerges in research about play, understood quite literally – Ludo being the Latin word for 'play.' Perhaps children learning through play, or gaming mythology and cultures.

The direction I'm taking is less literal, drawing on: Huizinga's work from the early 20th century, Turner's later in the 20th century, and Droogers and van Harskamp's, as well as Davies', in the early 21st.

Andre Droogers and Anton von Harskamp, Methods for the Study of Religious Change, *2014*

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Ludism - *the "capacity to deal simultaneously and subjectively with two or more ways of classifying reality"*

Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938) argued that the ludic – play - is essential to the development of culture and society, albeit that these cannot be reduced to play. It's been suggested that the English translation doesn't capture the rich resonance of the Latin or Huizinga's original Dutch, which can be applied to activities including sport, games and school.

It's expansive – which is how Andre Droogers and Anton van Harskamp use it. In their 2014 *Methods for the Study of Religious Change*, they present ludism as a fundamental human:
capacity to deal simultaneously and subjectively with two or more ways of classifying reality. (Droogers & van Harskamp, 2014, p.69).

Davies, 'Afterword: Play, Personhood and Digital Mortality', Social Sciences *13(8) 2024*

"To speak of play in relation to death online is, then, not to deploy an inappropriate category and does not degrade the seriousness of mortality."

Here, the straightforward English language resonance of the word 'play' may mislead. Because 'play' can read frivolously – it's not "real" and therefore it's not "serious." But Victor Turner's work, *The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982) – stresses that such play is very real, and can be very serious indeed. For Douglas Davies, then, it is a fitting and versatile tool for exploring death–

To speak of play in relation to death online is, then, not to deploy an inappropriate category and does not degrade the seriousness of mortality. (Davies, 2024, p.8)

Ludism, then, is the perfectly serious entertaining of reality in two or more different ways – in multiple registers.

"Some people think football is a matter of life and death. I assure them it is much more serious than that"

- Bill Shankly

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Indulge me, for a moment, with an analogy.
As I regularly point out to my husband – ideally when Liverpool are losing – there is an extent to which football is not 'real'. It's – just - a game. They're playing. It has its own 'world,' or logic, rules and rationales. And yet, as I am reminded in turn, it is very real. And it is very serious. My Dad has, for over 25 years, proudly sported a t-shirt which reads "People say football is a matter of life and death. I can assure them it's much more serious than that" – attributed, so I have been told, to Bill Shankly, the former Liverpool manager. I have bought him other t-shirts.

Matthew

‘It was a bit difficult to get [it] off and the nurse kept speaking, like “Oh, I’m sorry” […] on the one hand it seems quite strange saying to a dead body, I’m sorry. But I thought that was very caring actually to do that’

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Matthew’s mother-in-law died during the pandemic, in hospital, wearing an eternity ring. He explained,
‘It was a bit difficult to get [it] off and the nurse kept speaking, like “Oh, I’m sorry” […] on the one hand it seems quite strange saying to a dead body, I’m sorry. But I thought that was very caring actually to do that’
Matthew juxtaposes care and strangeness. His ‘one hand’ / ‘but’ language signals him moving between two different registers or realities, both of which are very real and have their own measure of seriousness: one in which it’s ‘strange’ to apologise to a dead body, because his mother-in-law is dead; and another in which doing so was a very ‘caring’ thing to do, *as though* his mother-in-law could perceive it.

Joanne

"Yes, oh yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. Because when I go up to her graveside and I put flowers down, I know she's not on her own in that box. I know she's got things with her that are from her family. [...] She had things with her. And I know it sounds silly, because she's not there. But I know that's there."

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Joanne's mother planned her funeral to a tee – down to selecting three outfits – A, B or C – for her daughters to pick between. Joanne also buried her Mum with some photographs, some carefully selected pieces of jewellery, flowers, and letters and drawings from her grandchildren. I asked whether she was pleased with her decisions, twenty years on. Joanne explained:

"Yes, oh yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. Because when I go up to her graveside and I put flowers down, I know she's not on her own in that box. I know she's got things with her that are from her family. […] She had things with her. And I know it sounds silly, because she's not there. But I know that's there."

When Joanne talked about her mother's grave goods, she notes it could be 'silly, because she's 'not there' – yet, she's simultaneously talking about her Mum as though she somehow is. Importantly, Joanne highlights her own experiences and grief: "I know that's there"; "When I go up to her graveside, I know".

Because, of course, deaths are not just about the person who died, but also those still living - their relationships, beliefs, perceptions and needs. That's such a familiar idea to so many of us that it would be easy to skip past it, but we mustn't. There are multiple players in this ludic game.

Harry

‘I believe that she was dead, but I thought if she was alive, I don’t know [...] it would have made her smile. [And] if the Egyptians were right, and you had all these [...] grave goods that you would find some use for in the afterlife [...] there’s part of me thinks [about her] in the afterlife thinking “Bloody hell, you sent me here with a rabbit?!”’

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I interviewed Harry shortly after the anniversary of his daughter’s death. We talked about her wicked sense of humour, the toy rabbit collection he sifted through for her coffin, the fact that neither he nor his daughter believed in an afterlife, and the difference between Ancient Egypt and contemporary Britain. Which led us here:

I believe that she was dead, but I thought if she was alive, I don’t know […] it would have made her smile. [And] if the Egyptians were right, and you had all these […] grave goods that you would find some use for in the afterlife […] there’s part of me thinks [about her] in the afterlife thinking “Bloody hell, you sent me here with a rabbit?!”

But here, again, are multiple versions of reality. Harry doesn’t believe his daughter’s hanging out with Anubis and Thoth with her stuffed rabbit – but he imagines it, and happily imagines her reactions, both the smiley and the sardonic. That imagination might not ‘rational’ sense, but it makes a lived sense – emotional sense. Which is part of the reason I’m wary of Scarre’s language of ‘irrationality’. Things can make sense without being rational.

Context

- Retrospective, rose- (or rational-)tinted
- Research encounter
- Specific afterlife conceptualizations

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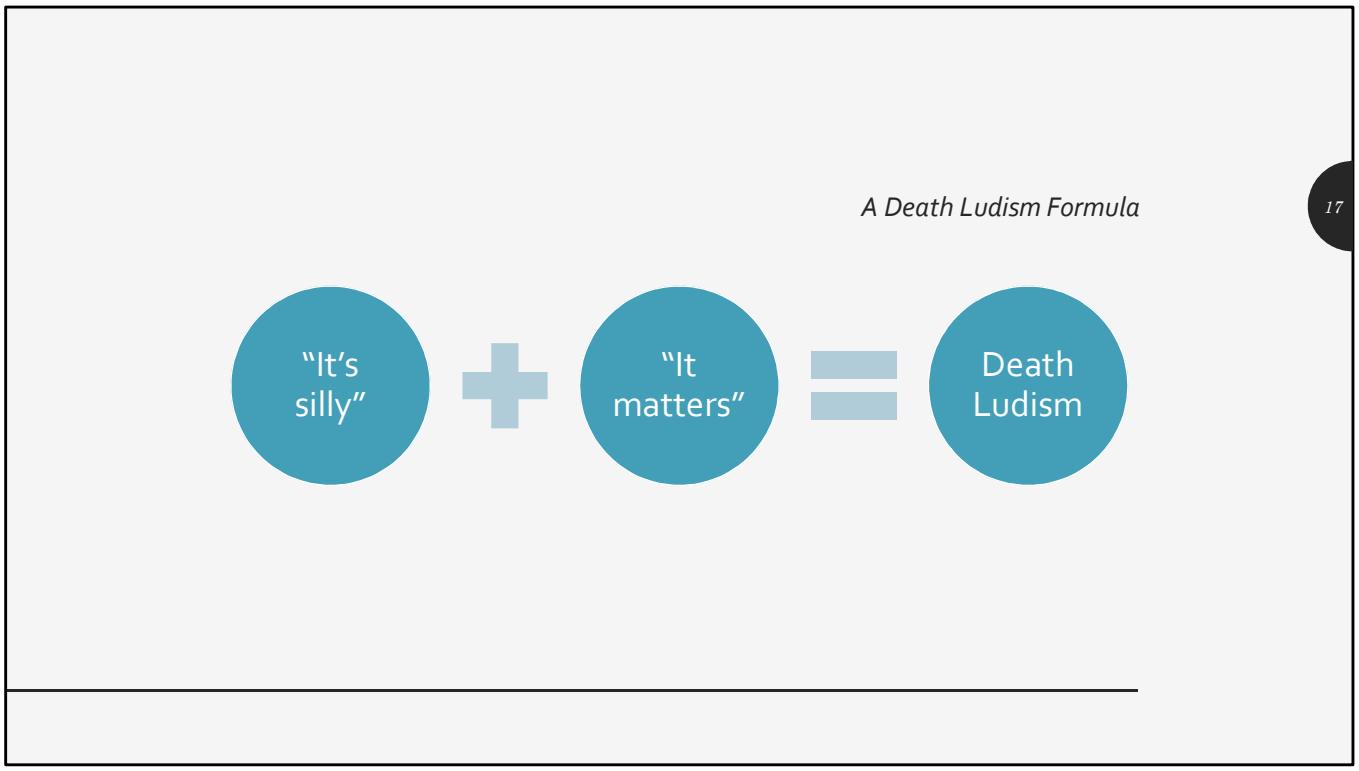
It's important to clarify, though, that this is ludic sense-making in a particular context – or contexts.

First: these interviewees are looking back, with rose-tinted, or perhaps rational-tinted, specs at previous grief experiences. Which isn't to say they were, or see themselves to have been, somehow emotionally irrational or kidding themselves when they were picking out grave goods or worried about hurting the dead – they would doubtless repeat those actions. But it is to say that grief is peculiar, liminal, and transitional - and that we look back on our own past actions in non-neutral ways with present hermeneutics.

Second: They're also talking to an academic and a stranger. There may be an element of performativity, of wishing to appear 'rational', of wanting to show that they can see a strangeness in their actions. I don't want to overstate that – the complexities of research encounters and power and performance, especially in death studies, are well documented. And, moreover, I've had interviewees clearly and richly describe their religious and spiritual beliefs, including their afterlife beliefs. But there may be a sense of being watched, for some interviewees – of wanting to catch oneself before the academic stranger raises an eyebrow.

Then, third: the individuals I've quoted share some similarities. They're all white.

They’re all somewhere in middle to late middle age. They’re all educated. They’re all British. They’re all either non-religious or have a lapsed or nominal Christian affiliation. Either they didn’t tell me what they believe about an afterlife, said they didn’t know, or they told me that they don’t believe in one.
However uncertain they might be, or open to possibilities, they are nevertheless relatively confident that clothing or items or objects or food, or rituals performed, won’t affect the dead. They can’t read the books they’re buried with. They can’t feel hot or cold, or squished or unsquished. They won’t be reckoning with the afterlife with only a stuffed rabbit for company. I strongly suspect that, for those who hold concrete afterlife beliefs, and believe afterlife fate is affected by objects and rituals, the ludic formula would not show up in the same way, or to the same extent.



But, for many people, this ludic formula holds. And it's less heavily-laden than the language of rationality and irrationality. 'Rationality' and 'irrationality' hold multiple meanings, and elude easy definition. But they're also morally laden: accusations of 'irrationality' serve to dismiss and shut down and belittle. So even though participants themselves might use the language of irrational, I advocate ludic as a less patronising, less weighty alternative.

Thank you!

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Watch my TEDx talk here