In the Italian Cinquecento, play became a dominant theme in literature and philosophy. While in the XV Century, games were the occasional subjects of frescoes and paintings, especially in the north eastern area of Italy, the modern sensitivity shaped by books such as Baldassarre Castiglione’s Il Cortegiano steered literates away from metaphysics and towards the trivialities of play and games. Furthermore, play became an arena in which the values and habits of the emerging urban bourgeoisie were shaped and tested. Historians such as Ortalli and McClure often describe the 1500s in Italy as the Century in which the politics of play were freed from the normativity of the early Reaissance – that generally understood games as a lesser form of intellectual engagement, bearing a stigma similar to that of gambling. In this context writers, philosophers and, ultimately, players started confronting and discussing the implications of play and its relevance as a widespread social practice.

A significant corpus of texts, dealing with all aspects of play, started to emerge from the accademie, the courts and the Universities of central and northern Italy. In our research on primary sources on play in the Italian Cinquecento, we came into contact with three types of books:

1. Theoretical essays on play and games
2. Collections of games
3. Narrative accounts of play or proto-ethnographies

The most influential theoretical contribution to the subject is Tasso’s dialogues Romeo e Il Gonzaga Secondo (1579 and 1581). In the two dialogues – which are in fact two slightly different versions of the same text – Margherita Bentivoglia, a young noblewoman, confronts Giulio Gonzaga and Annibale Pocaterra on the nature of play, its history, and its social implications. The two main subjects of the dialogue may be said to represent the core of the Italian reflection on play in the XVI Century: play as a gendered activity and the relation between play and art. The second type of book is more encyclopedic. Innocenzo Ringhieri’s Cento Giuochi Liberali (1551) depicts a hundred social games played in the area of Bologna and complements their descriptions with short poems. Girolamo Bargagli’s Dialogo de’ Giuochi (1572) compiles the games played in Accademia degli
Intronati in Siena, a gathering place for intellectuals were culture and politics were discussed. These are *giochi di veglia*, games that need to be played indoors, with friends, usually after dinner. Girolamo Bargagli's brother, Scipione, is the author of I trattenimenti di Scipion Bargagli (1587), where he claims to have put "his brother's theory into practice". While Girolamo's book was a collection of games whose rules were fleshed out and used as a backdrop for witty dialogues, Scipione is the author of a series of novelle that describe the ways in which some of these games were played. Finally, Ascanio de' Morì's *Giuoco Piacevole* can be considered unique, in that it is entirely devoted to one single match. Much like Yasunari Kawabata's *The Master of Go*, De' Morì's book is an in-depth description of a play session, through which the author reflects on social conventions and their relation with play. But what do these games look like?

Let us start with *Giuoco Piacevole* (pleasurable game), described in Ascanio De'Mori's *Giuoco piacevole*, also known as *giuoco delle lettere o dell'osteria*. Like most games described in cinquecentesca literature, this is a game of memory, invention and improvisation. All players are assigned a letter (A for the first player, B for the second, etc.). Players then take turns in narrating short stories that feature primarily that letter. In the play session described by De' Morì, nine players, five men and four women, have to make up a short narrative containing the following elements: City, Hostel, Host, Garden, Tree, Nymph, Animal, Bird, Motto, Sonnet, Riddle. Some of these elements must start with the appointed letter. For example, Signora Beatrice, one of the players is assigned the letter A and concocts a story set in the city of Ancona, in the garden of Altamira, where she meets a nymph named Aretusa and a mythological animal called Alicorno. Other elements of the story don't need to start with the appointed letter, but need to conform to the narrative. For example, the Motto NON CON ALTRE ARMI (with no other arms [than love]), is seen by Beatrice beside the Alicorno. Finally, the riddle does not need to conform to the rule of the letter nor to the general narrative, but is conceived as a standalone expansion of the turn. This complex interaction between regulated, game-like elements, demonstrations of literary proficiency, and free-form dialogue is one of the defining characteristics of the games described by our authors. Another game that includes regulated behaviour and free-form conversation is *Giuoco del Segreto* (game of the secret), described by both Girolamo Bargagli and Innocenzo Ringhieri as a version of what is now known as Chinese whispers (or telefono senza filo in Italian). The two accounts are slightly different, but in both cases the structure of the guessing game is complemented by a mnemonic exercise. In order to succeed, players have to learn by heart a series of phrases that form a stanza from a popular poem or a phrase from a novella or dialogo. It
should be noted that, at least in the area of Siena, in which Bargagli’s Dialogo is set, both texts from “high” culture and popular romances are used as tools for mnemonic play. This is particularly revelatory of how gender issues were addressed in the context of Senese academies. Women needed to be prepared to confront men on the typically manly terrain of high culture, while men had to “lower” their habits of cultural consumption and read Spanish romance novels, then considered women literature. While it is true that in giochi di veglia men and women are described as competing on equal grounds, a cultural rift is drawn between the sexes: women need to “man up” and approach high culture, men should get a gist of current chick-lit.

Finally, among the games described by our authors, some stand out as being a conflation of physical interaction and subversive (“carnivalesque”) behaviour. The Giuoco delle bestemmie ridicolose (The game of ridiculous blasphemies) requires players to utter the most insulting and ridiculous blasphemy they can think of. After this phase, one of the players is randomly selected to be tickled by other players; s/he has to remember and yell all the blasphemies while being tickled in order to be set free. This game operates almost parodically on the canon of memory-games established in Ringhieri and Bargagli. While usually players are required to remember fragments of poems or compose idyllic narratives, in the game of ridiculous blasphemies an unusual amount of physical interaction is coupled with a subversive approach to culture.

In our research on the games and their descriptions in the Italian Cinquecento, two main themes emerged that still permeate contemporary discourses on games and play. On the one hand, play is inextricably connected with gender politics and rhetorics. This is evident in Tasso’s dialogues, were a woman questions her role as a player, and even more relevant in the texts written in the context of Siena’s Accademia degli Intronati, were a tension between equality and subordination arises. Play loosens the rigid conventions of inter-gender relations, facilitates flirting, and allows for more audacious conversations. This is often at the expense of women who are granted artificial equality in the context of play but, with Margherita Bentivoglia, are often oppressed in other, more relevant, matters. This intrinsic tension is defined by McClure as a situation of “male mediation”, in which the expression of women – both in play and in literature – had to be validated or mediated by men in order to be considered socially acceptable. The “giochi di veglia” of the Cinquecento, though derived from the rural tradition of the filò, a type of game typically played by women while sewing, are the contested terrain of an unresolved tension. On the one hand Ringhieri’s angel-women who are above trivial matters (whether they want it or not), on the other Sofonisba Anguissola’s chess players, three generations of women playing the
typically manly game of chess. On the one hand the oppressed Margherita Bentivoglia, on the other an impresa, drawn by an anonymous hand and dedicated to “a young noblewoman”, that reads Amica et non serva. A friend, not a servant. The second recurring discourse is that of the relation between play and the arts. . The intellectual urban bourgeoisie of central Italy considered play as a “palestra d'humanae litterae”, a way of rehearsing one's skills in the study of humanism. Play and literature often seem to converge, to the point of identification; games of memory and improvisation are played using poetry as a modular tool, while literary forms such as the dialogo, the indovinello (riddle) or the impresa have rigid rules and are often playful in nature. The study of the humanities in the Cinquecento cannot avoid games, since Cinquecentesca literature exists sub-specie ludi, in the light of play.

Our research on the Italian Cinquecento aims at being a pilot instantiation of a larger project dealing with the relevance, nature and characteristics of the discourses on play found in different contexts. More importantly, we aim at connecting these circulating discourses with the actual games they refer to. What did they look like? How were they played? What kind of playful behaviours did they elicit? How did they mimic, criticize, or subvert existing social norms? In other words, our ambition with ludo-history is to develop a set of play-historical tools that allow us to

− Analyse discourses on play found in different eras and cultural contexts (with the added bonus of enlarging the breadth of references for play scholars)

− Reconstruct games that these discourses refer to. Analyse the structure and recurring traits of these games and their intended players.

− Re-play these games in order to get a better sense of the emerging interactions that they generate and the relations with other games found in different contexts

− Finally, and maybe most importantly:

− Understand the play-concept (what we describe in contemporary English as “play”) as one that has historical as well as language-specific connotations and that means different things in different contexts