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## Book Reviews

### **Play Anything: The Pleasure of Limits, the Uses of Boredom, and the Secret of Games**

*Ian Bogost*

New York, NY: Basic Books, 2016.

Preface, acknowledgments, notes, and index. 266 pp. \$26.99 cloth.

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Ian Bogost, a professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology and contributing editor at the *Atlantic*, takes no half measures in his treatises on games and play. For several years, the multitasking Bogost has been a leading voice in the critique of game culture and the digital games industry through forums ranging from academic books to popular-press articles and interviews to keynote talks to his own digital game products. The latter have a reputation for making points by satirizing their subject matter with their mechanics, such as Bogost's *Cow Clicker*, which lampooned the repetitive reward systems of popular social media-based games by structuring its play around the task of repeatedly clicking an image of a cow. Bogost's academic and popular writings are both confrontational. His take in the *Atlantic* on the phenomenon of "gam-

ification" (a term for adding game-like elements, such as points or competition tables, to nongame activities, particularly in a commercial context) was titled, "Gamification is Bullshit" (2011).

Although Bogost is well known for cleverly thumbing his nose at the games industry and its cultures, he is also a clear advocate for the value of games and play. Several of the games Bogost has produced carry policy messages, such as *Jetset*, which places the player in the role of a federal TSA agent inspecting an unending queue of luggage that quickly becomes unmanageable. In his latest book, *Play Anything*, Bogost goes much further, inviting us to improve our lives by making play of all that we encounter. Working often from the premise that life is boring and unpleasant (or at least too much so), Bogost presents the thesis that treating all activities, interactions, and artifacts as play is a key to enjoying life. Along the way, Bogost challenges intuitive assumptions about concepts such as "play" and "fun." He argues, for example, that an important element of play is not that it is pleasurable and unstructured, but that it often involves the risk and frustration of the challenges of an artificially imposed set of constraints. In

some delicate balance between the liberty of free play and the challenge of working within the boundaries of a game's rules, he maintains, lies the linchpin to the fun of playing. According to *Play Anything*, rules and reduced options do not limit the joy of experience, but rather provide structure for interesting and creative choices and experiences. Play, Bogost insists, is not in us, but in the things with which we play and the constraints around them.

The arguments supporting this general idea evidence Bogost's eclectic knowledge. *Play Anything* draws from sources in diverse fields such as philosophy, sociology, psychology, history, anthropology, and game design, as well as from popular literary figures such as David Foster Wallace. Readers versed in the existing literature on games and play will likely encounter new material but also recognize the discussion of widely cited concepts such as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's "flow" state and Johan Huizinga's "magic circle." The literature is not taken at face value; Bogost disputes some popular sources and also demonstrates awareness of relatively recent cases in which relevant research findings have been debunked. Bogost also introduces a few new concepts—or at least new terms—that a reader will be tempted to adopt, such as "ironia," his term for the friction between earnest appreciation for a cultural artifact and scorn of it in coexistence. The reader will be hard pressed not to recall the term upon next encountering a deliberately kitschy t-shirt or singing along to a 1990's Top 40 hit that has not aged well.

*Play Anything* also balances its diverse bibliography with personal anecdotes.

From the first chapter, *Play Anything* is rife with detailed vignettes from Bogost's life that serve as examples—literal or metaphorical—to underscore his points. Bogost's adventures with lawn care appear as often perhaps as Johan Huizinga's "magic circle," if not more so. (Bogost's recollections are, however, diluted by other cleverly applied anecdotes ranging from O. Henry plot lines to real estate trends.) For some, vivid yarns about Bogost's journeys to the Walmart Supercenter and air travel may seem self-indulgent, but they give the book a personal intimacy, particularly as Bogost digresses from the slings and arrows of his lawn work to his experiences with *Cow Clicker* and the challenges of a serious injury and subsequent surgery complications suffered by his own father. Bogost's application of *Play Anything's* thesis to his own experiences, whether mundane or life shaping, give the impression that he genuinely believes in his arguments about the role of play in life. Even Bogost's vacillation between disdain for Walmart and his fascination with lawn products seems to exemplify—whether intentionally or not—his own challenges with the choice between sincerely playing with the things around himself and considering himself above them.

As with so much of Bogost's writing, *Play Anything* is enjoyable and well written, thick with references to notable scholarship but kept fluid by an author with a gift for storytelling. Given the review of a broad range of concepts and previous literature, the book offers a worthwhile read for anyone interested in games and their social applications, whether or not a reader accepts the premise of the book in whole or in part. Some of *Play Anything's*

claims about the role of structure and constraints in enjoyable play activities seem difficult to dispute, though readers' opinions may be mixed regarding whether *Play Anything* really revolutionizes the ideas of play and fun as its preface promises to do. Whether the reader accepts all the book's claims or not, though, Bogost's arguments provide an experience that is—dare I say it—fun to navigate.

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—James D. Ivory, *Virginia Polytechnic Institute, Blacksburg, VA*

### **Get Out of My Room!: A History of Teen Bedrooms in America**

*Jason Reid*

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017. Acknowledgments, introduction, conclusion, notes, bibliography, and index. 320 pp. \$45.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780226409214

Jason Reid's *Get Out of My Room: A History of Teen Bedrooms in America* is a comprehensive and engaging study that accomplishes what all historical writing aims for but which it so seldom achieves. It illuminates its subject matter while simultaneously enriching the reader's understanding of the broader historical periods in which it contextualizes Reid's analysis. *Get Out of My Room* is a worthwhile addition to the existing historiography in its own right as well as an excellent reference point for twentieth-century U.S. social and cultural history.

Reid, however, reaches beyond the twentieth century and delves into the nineteenth-century origins of teen

bedroom autonomy in America. His investigation is as deep as it is broad, situating the birth of teen bedroom culture within the context of “the rise of modern capitalism and the sweeping social, demographic, and cultural changes that emerged in its wake” (p. 3). The first two chapters chart a narrative in which teen bedrooms shifted from sites of “character building, intellectual growth, spiritual awareness, and personal responsibility” to spaces of “self-reliance, property ownership, and personal autonomy” (pp. 12, 40). Reid points out that, in some respects, the narrative shift from spiritual to social-scientific rationales for children having rooms of their own was “offering old wine in new bottles” (p. 40). But he effectively illustrates the overall secularization of approaches to teen bedroom autonomy.

From there, chapter 3 includes a lively discussion of the consumer culture's impulse to individualize teen bedrooms vis-à-vis the décor-industrial complex. Chapter 4 covers the social acceptance and near ubiquity of having a room of one's own in the post-World War II period. Noteworthy here is Reid's deft treatment of class in his narrative. Nevertheless, he maintains, mostly convincingly, that teen bedroom autonomy was more culturally than economically based.

Chapter 5 illustrates the shift to do-it-yourself bedroom decoration, while chapter 6 delves into the evolution of the teen bedroom as multimedia center. Reid's approach here is especially innovative, discussing audiovisual technology's twentieth-century advancement concurrent with the evolution of teen bedroom culture. For example, the section on gam-