
Book Reviews

Play Matters

Miguel Sicart

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014. Notes, references, index, images. 158 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780262027922

In *Play Matters*, Miguel Sicart proposes a theory for the ecology of play that emphasizes understanding the activity of play and situates play within the world. The author dislocates play from within Johan Huizinga's widely accepted "magic circle," and, instead, contextualizes it directly in tension with reality. Sicart admits that his definition of play is fixed in the current social structure, reacting to postmodernist definitions of play—a definition he believes will one day be obsolete. Yet at present his theory is useful in identifying the transmission between reality and play. *Play Matters* is a succinct but provocative addition to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press's Playful Thinking book series. In his first chapter, Sicart establishes a foundation for his theory of the ecology of play. The next three chapters build upon his foundation and provide concrete examples. Chapters 5 through 8 expand his exploration of play ecology into more abstract ideas that demonstrate his theory

that play serves as a means to deal with reality.

Sicart's first chapter, titled "Play Is," sets the foundation for understanding play as a way to engage the world. The author identifies play as contextual, in that it is influenced by space, things, people, and culture; as carnivalesque, because it appropriates the world for players to mock and understand; as appropriative of the context in which it exists (but it is not predetermined by context); as disruptive in challenging established conventions; as autotelic, because its goals, time, space, and purposes are self-determined; as creative, because it allows players to be expressive within the act of play; as personal, because everything presents a reflection for the individual player; and, finally, as expressive, because it engages the world and challenges norms.

In chapter 2, Sicart examines playfulness as a way to extend our understanding of the attitude of play beyond the act of playing. Through playfulness, we are able to project the characteristics of play into nonplay activities as a way of engaging with the world. For example, Apple incorporates playful design into the user interfaces of its computers with windows

that shrink to a task bar. The design adds amusement to an otherwise mundane event. Sicart also cites playfulness as a method to establish our ownership over technology (an idea to which he returns in the last chapter).

Sicart's chapter 3 examines toys as props that invite players to play and help unite the activity of play and the attitude of playfulness. He observes mechanical and procedural toys as tools for understanding how the object makes sense of the world. Moving from objects to spaces, he discusses the relationship between play and environment in his fourth chapter, titled "Playgrounds." He argues that space lends itself to a type of play but does not impose a particular play activity, purpose, or reward. For Sicart, playgrounds are palpable metaphors of influencing play that underline the relationship between the design of space and the activity of play.

Chapters 5 through 8 explore "Beauty," "Politics," "Architects," and computers respectively. The author presents play as beautiful because its affordances allow for critical reflection in meaning-making processes. According to the author, play is also a politically significant activity that mocks reality and produces satire through creative exploration of human freedom. He demonstrates the importance of context as the agent to which play as political action expressively responds. Sicart's seventh chapter examines play as something that can be influenced or designed and presents the term "architect of play" as an alternative to "game designer." His final chapter explores the functionality of computers and interprets computing as a form of expression.

Sicart asks us to view play as an activ-

ity that exists within the world instead of one that happens in a suspended reality. His theory situates play as an expression in constant conversation with reality, one important for game scholars and designers, especially those dealing with serious games (or games that are not made primarily for entertainment). However, when pushed to the extreme, Sicart's theory becomes problematic. This theory might be less troublesome if he had spent more time defining the boundaries of playful expression as "dark play" (p. 3) and when it becomes necessary to demarcate this form of play as violent behavior. As such, Sicart could engage with games studies scholars such as Nina Huntemann and Mia Consolvo and their responses to violent and misogynistic representations of women in games. They have discussed the hostility towards *Feminist Frequency's* Anita Sarkeesian, who received threats that resemble play acts—for example, the "game" *Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian*—because of her criticisms of pervasive and harmful representations and activities towards women in games.

In spite of this, Sicart's book is a significant contribution to understanding the transformative potential of play. *Play Matters* offers only a snapshot of Sicart's greater project. Sicart includes a web-link in his book that continues the conversation about play, allowing him to engage with challenges and responses to his book. Like Thomas S. Henricks and Bernard DeKoven, Sicart emphasizes understanding play as meaningful expression and furthers play discourse by connecting play and reality. Sicart's understanding of play provides a necessary criticism to the commonly cited magic circle and offers an

accessible means of attending to the relation between reality and the play activity.

—Michael DeAndrea, *Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, IL*

American Fun: Four Centuries of Joyous Rebellion

John Beckman

New York: Pantheon, 2014. Notes, index, images. 402 pp. \$28.95 cloth. ISBN: 97803079808179

English Professor John Beckman's book is an erudite, engaging history, utterly free of jargon. His thesis is simple but one that gives him plenty of room for telling delightful stories and offering insight. Somehow, he says, inherent in the American character is a love of "fun," the active, risk-taking, often irreverent enjoyment of "flaunted pleasure in the face of authority" (p. xiii), but also a fun that unites "the crowd in common joy" (p. xiv). This love of fun originates with the people, even though it was co-opted by impresarios like P. T. Barnum during the Gilded Age and, later, by Walt Disney; but the best fun still is rebellious and mocking, while remaining civil. American fun descended from the festivities of Thomas Morton at Merry Mount in Puritan Massachusetts and the playful Sons of Liberty whose protests against the British imposition of the Tea Act precipitated the American Revolution in 1776 to the Merry Pranksters of Ken Kesey and the new leftists of the Yippie movement in the 1960s and even the antics of punks and anti-World Trade Organization rallies in the 1980s and later.

For Beckman, fun disdains convention and breaks boundaries (as in Morton's embrace of the "savages" and discovery of the indigenous people's playfulness). While acknowledging differences, Beckman sees a bright thread of rebellion running through American history, an affirmation of individualism and personal freedom in an often conformist and repressive culture and society, but also an expression of community, often absent in an America divided by class and race. Repeatedly, the fun-loving play of the risk-taking hero is posed against a dower, repressive authority or even a reformer who wants to "guide" fun (Sam vs. John Adams; the African American "King Charles" vs. the respectable abolitionist, Frederick Douglass).

Beckman is at his best in identifying exemplary personalities and retelling the stories of their often brief appearances on the national stage. Many of his figures may be familiar (Morton, Sam Adams, P. T. Barnum, Zelda Fitzgerald, and perhaps Abbie Hoffman). But he tells us also about some like John David Borthwick and his observations of the dances and jokes of California gold rushers. In Beckman's account of playful congregations of slaves in antebellum New Orleans at "Place Congo," he tells the intriguing story of how the oppressed expressed themselves on their Sundays of freedom. And his writing about the vaudeville team of Bert Williams and George Walker (originators of the African American cakewalk dance craze of 1896) is sensitive and enlightening. He is a great storyteller, bringing to life the adventures of Mae West, Clara Bow, and many more. And, while he may overdo some sections (like his detailed accounts of the antics of