
Book Reviews

License to Play: The Ludic in Japanese Culture

Michal Daliot-Bul

Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2014. Contents, acknowledgments, notes, references, index. 186 pp. \$45.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780824839406

Michal Daliot-Bul's monograph *License to Play* provides an engaging interdisciplinary analysis of both play and Japanese youth culture, and in this dialectical treatment, she uncovers transformations and emergent practices in contemporary Japanese culture. She includes an introduction that offers a brief synthesis of play theory, six chapters analyzing play in Japan specifically, a short epilogue, and a wealth of endnotes.

One of the challenges in discussing play as a culturally specific phenomenon is that play so often looks similar across cultural and historical boundaries. Chapter 1, "The Linguistic Concept of Play," then, is an important summary of *asobi* (遊び)—the Japanese word for "play"—and other words that come to mean play. In this chapter, we see a preview of the historical argument that play and leisure are

culturally closely connected. In turning to the historically emergent properties of play and culture in chapter 2, "Play as a Formative Element of Culture," Daliot-Bul traces play in the Heian period (794–1184) of Japanese history and its emphasis on play aesthetics, skips forward to the Tokugawa period (or Edo period, 1603–1868) to look at play within demarcated *sakariba* spaces (or play districts), and then looks to 1970s youth culture and postmodern constructions of play, identity, and connoisseurship formed in opposition to hegemonic adult culture.

In chapter 3, "The Otherness of Play," Daliot-Bul turns from theoretical and historical overviews to case studies of contemporary play phenomena. Here, focusing mainly on play in women's fashion, she more carefully considers modern *sakariba* to argue that these third spaces provide a segregated "otherness" in which people can play with history, nostalgia, and identity. Daliot-Bul argues that the spatial segregation of play is a form of cultural administration that keeps play safe by separating it from everyday life. As her fashion examples so eloquently reveal, however, identity play can transcend

spaces: Women turn their play aesthetics into assets for work, creating new places for play and the conspicuous consumption of play.

Chapter 4, “The Rules of the Game, or, How to Become the Best Player,” may be my favorite chapter. The author provides some of the most compelling evidence that Japanese play culture is firmly entrenched in Japanese ideological constructs. Since the 1970s, Daliot-Bul argues, the ideologies of a hegemonic work-oriented culture and of information cultures have shaped late consumer culture and its closely related play culture (pp. 77–78). I find fascinating her discussion of the intense professionalization of play, which takes many forms. In schools, students join circles (clubs) to participate in play cultures, and these circles have functionally professional requirements from members. People who join institutional hobbies learn *katas* (forms), and these forms require perfect repetition to reflect the originating house. The information mastery, expected and performed, astounds me. Magazines and web sites proliferate as people become subject-matter experts in their play domain, whether the domain is nail art or anime culture. Within these rules, participants develop highly aestheticized activities. And while most people who study Japan would know about all of these activities and proclivities, the way Daliot-Bul presents them provides a brilliant lens for future analysis.

Following her discussion of rule and information mastery, Daliot-Bul examines creativity. In chapter 5, “Creativity in Play,” she looks to *cosplay* (costume play—people dressing up as their favorite anime and manga characters) and *dōjinshi* (the amateur manga market) to argue that within

these strictly regulated play forms lie opportunities for creative style, mimicry, and parody. Those who study fan culture, participatory culture, and the actions of prosumers will find this chapter particularly illuminating.

In both chapter 6, “Contested Meanings of Play,” and the epilogue, Daliot-Bul turns to the tensions that arise between a dominating, ideological state like the one described by French structural Marxist Louis Althusser and a playful youth culture. In the postbubble economy—a recession that started in the early 1990s—Japan has seen a fundamental shift in social and cultural orders. Young men and women now see work as a means to fund the consumer cultures of play, and the media overcelebrate youth culture in general and high-school culture in particular. This fuels contemporary moral panics about what those “youths” might be doing. I find particularly interesting Daliot-Bul’s analysis of governmental attempts to control and institutionalize play through such campaigns as Cool Japan and through particular leisure policies. Appropriating play for corporate and civic ends neutralizes play’s liminality and its threat to the normative social order. Such tensions whip play cultures into a frenzy as people who want to participate in noninstitutionalized play seek greater thrills and a more extreme sense of “otherness.” With this conclusion, Daliot-Bul invites us to consider the future of play in Japan, both in its historical and late-capitalist contexts.

I emphatically endorse this book. Those studying play will gain a culturally and historically situated study of play in a highly influential country. Further, the

analysis provides insight into the different forms of adult play, which needs greater study in play and game theory. Those who study Japanese culture will find the theories of play so broadly conceived and specifically applied useful in understanding some of the more carnivalesque trends in Japan. And while the extremes work well for analysis, I would have liked evidence and examples of quotidian play in both historical and contemporary contexts. Initially, I resisted the interchangeable use of play and games; however, upon reflection, I find the arguments in this book provide compelling evidence that our information age makes play game-like in its use of replicating rules, mastery, and style. Ultimately, I am struck by the intense paradoxes of play that occur when normative institutions and play culture struggle over the consumer powers and identities that have emerged in twenty-first century Japan.

—Jennifer deWinter, *Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Worcester, MA*

Varieties of the Gaming Experience

Robert Perinbanayagam
New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2014. Preface, introduction, references, index. 160 pp. \$49.95 cloth. ISBN: 9781412854719

Following in the tradition of Symbolic Interaction, Perinbanayagam's new book, *Varieties of Gaming Experience*, blends an analysis of the historical nature of games with their significance for reli-

gious mythology as well as secular identities. Divided into chapters titled, "The Pragmatics of Games," "Champions and Renouncers," "The Play of Emotions," "Dramas of Identity," "A Logos in the Text," and "The Endgame," this book works to expand our definition of gaming from one focused on a simple textual reading to one incorporating a historical understanding of religious tradition and its impact on players' game experiences.

Borrowing from Jans Joas's concept of a pragmatist theory of action, the work maintains that, following G. H. Mead, the "willful meaning" we bring to game playing helps break the tension between habitual acts and creativity. Games are, in short, "pragmatic machines" that break up the rhythm of everyday mundane activities. Perinbanayagam demonstrates this by examining gaming encounters in boxing and dancing. Following the notion that games are inherently social, the book advocates a pragmatic existentialism in which human agents do not seek meaning through belief but rather through activity and practice: "They systematically undertake various tasks, minor or major ones, understand their problematic dynamics and systematics, and seek to overcome them as well as they may" (p. 13).

In the second chapter, the author contrasts sports games in Ancient Greece with those in Mesoamerican culture and Indian religious cultures. He compares Hindu mythology, in which Siva plays dice competitively, to Protestant renunciation of worldly games as sins before the emergence—embodied in rugged sports—of a muscular Christianity during the Victorian period. The question still remains: what do games mean for the players? This