

and about the obscene amounts of money earned by Barad and Eckert especially. Despite its title, this book is hardly a critique of the “toy monster.” Rather, it is largely a string of celebrity biographies.

What does all this tell us about play and playthings? Not as much as we might like. Other journalistic accounts of the toy business—for instance, G. Wayne Miller’s *Toy Wars: The Epic Struggle between G. I. Joe, Barbie, and the Companies That Made Them* (1998); Sydney Stern and Ted Schoenhaus’s *Toyland: The High-Stakes Game of the Toy Industry* (1991); or even the autobiographical *Dream Doll: The Ruth Handler Story* (1995)—offer us insights into the corporate process of designing modern action figures and dolls and explanations of what has sold well among kids’ playthings. Oppenheimer’s relentless quest for the personal, even salacious, story mostly precludes any discussion of the toy industry itself. He rehearses the well-known story of the origins of Barbie without any discussion of the girls’ playthings the doll displaced or why it was able to do so. He sheds some light on the development of He-Man and the Masters of the Universe toys and the well-known razor-and-razor-blade strategy of marketing action figures and Barbies—selling the doll or figure to “hook” the child into purchasing ever more accessories and other figures in the toy line. He recognizes the role of the program-length commercial, the television cartoon series of the 1980s based solely on toy lines. But he offers no context or interpretation. He summarizes Mattel’s 2008 court victory over MCA in which Mattel claimed rights to the entire line of Bratz dolls because it was conceived by a toy designer who was, at the time, on Mattel’s payroll. He does offer an explana-

tion of Bratz’s threat to Mattel’s Barbie by pointing out that today’s girls actually do prefer the streetwise look of Britney Spears and her ilk over Barbie’s “conservative” style, but Oppenheimer’s analysis is brief and superficial.

Perhaps the most striking element of this book about Mattel is that it has so little to do with toys or their use by children. And that may say as much about the toy industry as about the author.

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The Place of Play: Toys and Digital Cultures

Maaïke Lauwaert

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009. Diagrams, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. 160 pp. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9789089640802

The concept of “participatory culture” has become increasingly associated with new forms of play made possible by digital media and the Internet. In our so-called participatory cultures, players do not simply play with toys and games designed by corporations, but become co-designers, modifying play practices as well as the objects themselves and sharing them with other players. Participatory culture has been lauded for its presumed shift of players from consumers to producers, the democratization of cultural production, and the increasing freedom from the dominance of corporations and industry in shaping and commodifying play. But a growing number of critics argue that such participation is not as open or liberatory

as it seems. *The Place of Play* is a welcome attempt to tread a middle ground between hyperbolic praise and exaggerated censure. The book takes a careful look at the advantages and disadvantages of participatory cultures, locating the changing world of toys, games, and play in the (Western) social and cultural processes of commodification, domestication, and urbanization from the 1850s to the present.

The title, itself, in referring to the “place” of play, reflects the author’s analysis of various activities of play and their relationships within what she calls the “geography of play.” According to Lauwaert, the “core” of play is comprised of “facilitated” play practices” (p. 12), including the toy’s or the game’s design features and the discourse that characterizes appropriate player behavior and experience—as intended by the manufacturer. The “periphery” of play consists of unanticipated play activities initiated by players that deviate from the intended design and discourse of a toy or game (p. 17). As an example, Lauwaert describes an adult fan who created a World War II tank and other military objects with LEGO bricks. His was a form of divergent play (part of the periphery) that challenged the intended conception of LEGO sets as innocent and educational children’s toys. Lauwaert argues that, due to networked technology and other digital tools and to the growing digitalization of toys and play itself, the relationships between the core and periphery have shifted. On the one hand, there is centrifugal movement as players deviate from core play practices. On the other hand, centripetal movement of ideas, practices, and tangible objects simultaneously grows from the increasing influence of the periphery on the core of

play. So, for instance, the LEGO company eventually bought the rights to this particular fan’s military and other play sets, then produced them and sold them, making them part of the official LEGO domain.

Lauwaert focuses on construction toys and illustrates this many-to-many paradigm through three case studies: the above mentioned LEGO toys, the *Sims* games, and *Face Your World*, a Dutch urban-planning game that engages young people in the design of a city park. In a theme that runs throughout the case studies, Lauwaert claims that while players are increasingly influencing the production of games and toys, their practices—even when novel—typically do not deviate significantly from the core values and ideology underlying their design. For example, much player activity in *The Sims* consists of creating new clothes, objects, and homes, which reinforces the game’s discourse of consumerism and consumption. Lauwaert uses the LEGO company, *The Sims*, and *SimCity* as examples of deliberate and successful recruitment of the many-to-many model by the toy and game industry. She provides a useful analysis of the failure of *The Sims Online* to implement the many-to-many model, showing how the limited opportunities for players to create and share their own content, combined with a utilitarian approach to social relationships (social interactions were a means of gaining skill points) led to antisocial behavior and cheating, created conflicts among players, and undermined the stated goals of the game. She uses *Face Your World* as an example of a successful “serious” game that involved groups, such as immigrants and young people, who would otherwise not have participated or had a voice in urban development.

A strength of the book lies in the detailed case studies that the author uses to illustrate key points about the dynamics of participatory cultures associated with play. Particularly original is her analysis of *Face the World* as an attempt to recruit this culture for the “serious” purpose of urban planning. The illuminating historical perspective she offers in her overview of construction toys helps keep the reader focused on the changing nature of play and its ties to particular cultural values and societal structures. Some readers may object to Lauwaert’s use of core and periphery, because this model seems to privilege the toy industry’s perspective. Indeed, one limitation of the book is the author’s limited use of player perspectives. Clearly, Lauwaert writes as an informed outsider, not as someone who has participated in the player communities she discusses. Nor is it obvious that she talked with many players of the games she discusses.

This is not a fatal flaw, but it does leave certain questions unanswered. For example, how does one determine if a particular form of player-generated practice works to support or challenge the dominant discourse of a game? In the case of *The Sims*, a popular practice involves players creating game-play challenges for others and documenting the completed challenges by posted stories on fan sites. One such challenge, Nickel and Dimed (after Barbara Ehrenreich’s 1996 book of the same name), requires players to enact the life of a single mother with limited resources to experience the hardships involved. Is this an indictment of single motherhood or of an inequitable economic system, or conversely, a lesson in the rewards of hard work and frugal living? It is difficult to know how players might respond unless

one actually talks to them and reads the online discussion where real-life, single mothers comment on the authenticity of the challenge.

Lauwaert closes the book by questioning the rhetoric of egalitarianism and democracy often associated with participatory culture. She points to issues such as players’ lack of access or interest in participatory practices and to the co-optation of player productivity for the benefit of corporations, which extends the reach of their products—and profits. These are not novel criticisms, and it’s unclear what Lauwaert thinks can or should be done about these concerns. She offers few examples of player-created practices that fit her conception of an “antidiscourse,” that is, a discourse that works against the presumably oppressive values and discourses embedded in toys designed by corporations. The implication seems to be that toys and games designed by corporations by definition aim to domesticate and constrain, and only players can design games that either liberate or enhance life, an assumption that begs for further debate. The paucity of such games would seem to suggest that this type of productive play is rare. Indeed, only a small proportion of game players engage in any kind of design or production, even when the necessary tools are available. As Lauwaert herself notes, non-users remain an important group for further study, though there is a danger that they will be viewed as somehow deficient for their lack of participation. Indeed, the design of truly countercultural play practices, ones not simply destructive (like the examples from *The Sims Online*) is difficult, and it seems disingenuous to assume that everyone can or should be involved in this kind of play.

Despite such questions, *The Place of Play* is well worth reading. Its case studies are engaging, and its issues are provocative. It adds a new perspective to the discussion of participatory culture, gaming, and the nature of play more broadly in our networked and digital world.

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Engineering Play: A Cultural History of Children's Software

Mizuko Ito

Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009. References, index, photographs, tables. 234 pp. \$24.95 cloth. ISBN: 978026203352

If you're looking for a thrilling tale of corporate espionage and rags-to-riches (and rags-to-rags) careers, you need look no further than the business of making children's software over the past two decades. In *Engineering Play: A Cultural History of Children's Software*, cultural anthropologist Mizuko Ito opens the door for a closer look at children and technology during this time period. Limited in scope for reasons described below, the book breaks new ground in the way it attempts to interpret what happened during this period of optimism and frustration, when publishers were competing to produce and market 979 commercial products per year during the peak year (2001) and trying to market them in retail settings.

Before you start reading this book, it helps to refresh your social-cultural jargon, which Ito applies generously throughout

the five chapters. She does so because the book relies heavily on two dissertations and a handful of published journal articles. Here, for example, is how Ito frames her ambitious task: "This work draws from an interdisciplinary methodological frame that weds ethnography with approaches in technology and media studies that trace highly distributed and technological mediated forms of culture and practice" (p. 16). Who! While it is possible to forgive the wedding of such vast constructs in the interior pages, the use of two words in the title—cultural and history—cannot be easily passed over without more scrutiny. On the surface, they suggest a comprehensive and, perhaps, impartial accounting of events. At the very least, a clear definition of "whose culture" and "how much history" should be provided.

Unfortunately, the source material for the historical analysis of the book is relatively limited. It includes two years of *Family PC* magazine (1999 and 2000), plus searches on "children's software" in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*. Ito also uses some Web sites she unfortunately does not specifically reference (p. 26), a fact that does little to bolster the validity of this work. Granted, for example, the children's software business in the late 1990s was terribly amorphous, and Ito accurately describes the enterprise as "the ongoing struggle, negotiation and contestation between different actors and social and cultural forces" (p. 3). Still, the author could have drawn on a more comprehensive array of sources to describe more fully the enterprise and its times.

In order to remain true to her title, Ito would have needed to define properly the social and cultural forces shaping the field. These forces included a bipolar Mac/