

sum of its parts because of the breadth and depth of references.

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—Doris Pronin Fromberg, *Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY*

### **Playing: Christian Explorations of Daily Life**

*James H. Evans Jr.*

Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010.

Contents, foreword, postlude, notes, reader's guide. 99 pp. \$15.00 paper.

ISBN: 9780800697266

As part of a series called Christian Explorations of Daily Living written for a general readership, *Playing* aims to provide theological reflection on our play, asserting that everyday practices matter for Christian faith. Written by a systematic theologian and former president of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, the book reflects the author's broad theological wisdom. It also evidences a solid familiarity with the field, making use of classic works on play by Karl Goos, Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, Brian Sutton-Smith, Jean Piaget, Hugo Rahner, Clifford Geertz, John Dewey, David Miller, and Victor Turner, among others. But what sets this volume apart from these standard texts in the field is its focus on the practice of play within an African American cultural and theological context. It is Tony Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, the work of Maya Angelou and of Tyler Perry, reflections on Brer Rabbit, Dwight Hopkins's work on enslaved Africans and their playful strategies, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Evans's own upbringing at the Second Gethsemane Missionary Bap-

tist Church in Detroit, Michigan, that provide the context for the author's trinitarian theological reflections. In the process, our inquiry into the field is broadened.

Typical of other works on play, the author chooses more to describe than define this activity, noting play's distinctive ways while positing its theological character. After surveying classic descriptions, Evans concludes that play can be characterized as a set of practices "that occurs in the interstices between freedom and structure, between the subject [ive] and object [ive], between creation and imitation" (p.11). For Evans, play is serious business. It is not leisure, nor is it fooling around. Instead, writing from his African American experience, Evans argues that play allows people "to endure, manage, and even enjoy life." (p.85). Surely he is correct.

Evans could have been clearer, however, in maintaining play's nonutilitarian character, even as he rightly highlights its productivity and value. At times, Evans seems to turn play into a form of work, a task of subverting what is inhuman and destructive. Similarly, there is, at times, in this volume, a confusion between the practice of play (the book's ostensible focus) and an understanding of play as a metaphor for one's stance toward life. But the comingling both of work and play, and of play and that which is playful, while intending to make work more enjoyable and play more important, actually undercuts the ability of real play to give life a vitality amidst structures that might otherwise suffocate. To work at play is to abort one's play; to make everything play is to make nothing play.

In developing his argument, Evans gives his short book a provocative structure patterned on the Christian understanding

of God as a trinity. The chapter entitled “Playing in the Dark: God and the Field of Play” looks at how the notion of play might inform our understanding of God. “Don’t Hate the Player, Hate the Game: Jesus as a Player” explores play’s political, social, and religious meaning by considering Jesus’ life as a model. And the chapter “The Holy Spirit at Play: Humanity, Church and Cosmos” seeks to learn from that spontaneity associated with Christian pneumatology. Could the Holy Spirit be understood as the spirit of play? The book ends with a very brief postlude considering how play might be understood as a global practice. Students of play will find this book a quick, but provocative read, taking the subject matter in new and unexpected directions with challenging results.

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**Utopic Dreams and Apocalyptic Fantasies: Critical Approaches to Researching Video Game Play**

*J. Talmadge Wright, David G. Embrick, and Andras Lukacs, eds.*

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Digital games are a significant new form of play, exploding in the past thirty years from the rarified setting of the research lab to the noisy arcade and to many American homes. Game studies, the academic analysis of video games, formally emerged only as recently as 2001 with the launch of the online academic

journal, *Game Studies*. Prior to this, the most prominent academic work on video games focused on the alleged negative effects of video game play. Academics worldwide have approached the study of video games from a number of perspectives and disciplines. Like many new fields, game studies has taken the first faltering steps to establish itself in a number of respects, not least in terms of the methodological approaches to understanding the cultural, social, economic, and innovative impact and value of the digital game form. A key challenge is how best to build effective methodological tool kits and rigorous academic enquiry in a rapidly evolving technological landscape.

*Utopic Dreams and Apocalyptic Fantasies: Critical Approaches to Researching Video Game Play* joins a growing body of work establishing the core themes, issues, and approaches to more closely understanding video game play. The book offers the reader a specifically sociological approach to video game theory. There has been little published explicitly from this perspective. As games gain both wide social acceptance and significance, there is much to be gained from this type of work. Games and computational technology have been closely bound together since the mid-1940s when Alan Turing used chess as an example of what a computer could do. Computers and play have remained close companions ever since popularly expressed through the phenomenal rise of video game form. Digital games increasingly flourish. From out-of-game forum communication to massive multiplayer game experiences (MMOG) to increased investment in user-generated content around game making, the ways in which we play together online has become an