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## Book Reviews

### **Play and the Human Condition**

*Thomas S. Henricks*

Chicago, IL: University of Illinois, 2015.

References, index, images. 252 pp. \$29.00 paper. ISBN: 9780252080685

Thanks to the commercial and cultural impact of digital games and leisure, the study of play is becoming a popular topic in academic research. Thomas S. Henricks's *Play and the Human Condition* is one of the most relevant, most authoritative texts recently published on the study of play, and it should soon become an inescapable reference for scholars interested in understanding the cultural, social, and aesthetic importance of play in contemporary society.

*Play and the Human Condition* is a book as ambitious as its title. In it, Henricks gives a synthetic vision of the research he has published over the last several years and that has made him, in my opinion, the most interesting scholar of play in the tradition of Johan Huizinga and Brian Sutton-Smith. *Play and the Human Condition* is an erudite reading of the vast tradition of play studies, from sociology

and psychology to cultural anthropology. It is also an original contribution to understanding play—provocative, informative, and enlightening.

Henricks's intentions are ambitious: to provide a theory of play that allows us to understand who we are and what to make of the world. As he puts it, "How do we discover who we are? How do we determine the character of the world in which we live? And how do we decide what we can do in a world so configured? Such questions, each connected to our lifelong quest for self-realization, are central to this book. Its thesis is that we learn about ourselves and the world—and about the intersection of these two realms—through acts of play" (p. 1).

Henricks is well aware that these types of comprehensive theoretical approaches to play have often failed, as play is impossible to define by or confine to neat theoretical frameworks. That is why what Henricks proposes is not so much ontological or definitional work, but a thoughtful reflection on the role of the activity of play in culture, through the characteristics this activity presents. Herein lays the

book's particular strength: without falling into definitional problems, it provides a sufficiently comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of play to allow for its identification and study in its many varied forms.

The structure of the book strongly supports this achievement. The first chapter introduces the author's intentions, and lays out the arguments that will be presented throughout the text. Following the tradition of Sutton-Smith, Henricks provides an overview of the different theoretical approaches to play, revealing that despite the many faces of play, "there seems to be rough agreement about play's nature and implications" (p. 41). This claim is the central topic of the second chapter, in which Henricks extends some of his earlier work on the distinction between play, ritual, work, and *communitas* (or civic celebration), to better situate his understanding of play in the context of the theories introduced earlier in the book. While this chapter does not bring anything new to Henricks's previous work, it provides a background from which more ambitious arguments can be made, as he does in chapter 3.

Perhaps the most interesting and relevant contribution from this book is the author's ideas on play as a sense-making activity that helps "players realize their capacities and limitations in widely varying situations" (p. 68). This idea, though not totally new to play studies, is here explored in erudite depth, relating it to a number of other theories of the self, and thus providing a solid understanding of play as a particular sense-making strategy. This important contribution allows the author to focus chapters 4 through 8

on different applications of this idea for a variety of research traditions and to engage in productive academic conversations with those disciplines. Covering all major disciplines that have studied play, from evolutionary psychology to sociology, Henricks successfully argues that this understanding of play as sense making is compatible—and perhaps even at the origin of most theories of play. Needless to say, this is the other significant contribution of the book.

Like all ambitious books, *Play and the Human Condition* is not without its flaws. Even though it is worth praising Henricks's erudite readings, sometimes the central argument of the book is lost in a literature review that could have been skipped. For instance, the discussion on human evolution at the beginning of chapter 6 could have been summarized to keep the flow of the argument. And even though it might be unfair in a book of this scope to single out omissions, it would have been interesting to read how this theory of play relates to contemporary works on play activities, such as T. L. Taylor's 2012 work on e-sports (*Raising the Stakes: E-sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*); Deterding's 2014 work on gameful design ("The Lens of Intrinsic Skill Atoms: A Method for Gameful Design," *Human-Computer Interaction*); or Montola and Stenros' 2011 work on Nordic LARPS (*Nordic LARPS*). This is not to fetishize the new, but it would have been fascinating to see how this theory of play could speak to scholarship, using similar theoretical starting points, that looks at contemporary forms of play.

All in all, *Play and the Human Condition* is an excellent, daring, and engaging

work that can be both a reference text for students and an essential inspiration for all of us interested in the elusive nature of play.

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—Miguel Sicart, *IT University Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark*

### **The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings**

*David F. Lancy*

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Notes, references, indices, images. 533 pp. \$34.99 paper. ISBN: 9781107420984

This book tells a story of contrasts. In the subtitle, David F. Lancy indicates that children are seen in their own cultures variously as cherubs, chattels, or changelings and that these views profoundly affect all aspects of their lives. In “neontocracies,” such as mainstream United States culture, children are inherently valuable cherubs who are to be cherished and indulged. Most places around the world, however, are “gerontocracies,” where children are regarded as chattels, that is, sources of work, who are expected to contribute to the family larder from very early ages. Or, sometimes children are seen as changelings, not really wanted and disposable if necessary, but who may become viable members of society at some point. As this is a second edition of Lancy’s earlier (2008) volume, he added another contrast, that is, between most cultures and those that Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine, and Ara Norenzayan denoted by the acronym “WEIRD” or Western, Educated, Indus-

trialized, Rich, Democratic (“The Weirdest People in the World” in the 2010 volume of *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*). Children in WEIRD societies are largely regarded and treated as cherubs while those elsewhere are thought of, and treated as, chattel or changelings.

Lancy claims, with voluminous supporting evidence, frequently presented in the form of short quotes from the ethnographic literature, that the way we, in the West, think of children and treat them places us in a distinct minority in cross-cultural comparative perspective. Moreover, with aid from the Henrich work, Lancy shows that the empirical edifice upon which much of social science is based—especially psychology in its various guises including child, developmental, and educational—comes from a very small, and wildly unrepresentative, minority of the world’s cultures.

In making his case, Lancy draws primarily from anthropology but also from history, primatology, archeology, biology, and psychology, although, with respect to the latter, his efforts are directed mostly at showing its culture-bound nature. He contrasts the development of children depending on the environment and ecology, subsistence methods, marriage and kinship systems, wealth, and the prevalence of disease and warfare in the societies into which they are born. Yet his central theme, as indicated in the book’s subtitle, derives from how children are valued in different cultures.

Children’s learning and play have been two of Lancy’s abiding interests throughout his career. And, inasmuch as a great deal of learning to be an adult takes place during play in much of the world,