

He does point out that youngsters made playgrounds out of places where adults did not want them to be, such as “streets, dumps, railroad yards, and harbor fronts,” but play is as much a product of improvisation as of technology (p. 34). Third, Pursell might have touched on the ways fear of technology has affected play. For example, a few years ago, the Consumer Product Safety Commission forced Hasbro to recall the classic Easy-Bake Oven for fear that children might suffer burns by inserting hands into the toy’s front opening. Safety concerns also have restricted designs of playground equipment and amusement park rides. Technology provides hazards as well as wonders to an increasingly risk-averse society.

Well-researched and including a helpful list of works for further reading, *From Playgrounds to PlayStation* is a useful and engaging book, suitable for both academic and general readerships.

—Howard P. Chudacoff, *Brown University, Providence, RI*

Works of Game: On the Aesthetics of Games and Art

John Sharp

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015.

Preface, notes, bibliography, works cited, images, index. 146 pp. \$19.95 cloth.

ISBN: 9780263039070

On March 5, 1968, just under seven months before his death, French Surrealist artist Marcel Duchamp and his wife Teeny (Alexina) joined American experimental composer John Cage in perform-

ing *Reunion* in Toronto, Canada. *Reunion* consisted of a stage performance of two chess matches played by Cage, Teeny, and Duchamp on an electronic chessboard designed by Lowell Cross. The chessboard selected and distributed electronic sounds across the performance space based on the moves made by the players. *Reunion*’s fusion of art, performance, and games challenged assumptions about each and suggested numerous questions about the relationships between.

Are games art? Can works of art be considered games? How might we describe games that are produced by artists and artworks created by game designers? By what aesthetic and critical standards might we assess these works? And how might such game and art hybrids meet and surpass the values of both the game and contemporary-art communities? As an associate professor at the New School’s Parsons School of Design and an active game designer, John Sharp is ideally suited to address these questions. His incisive *Works of Game* seeks to do just this, while simultaneously offering a useful three-part framework through which to consider the intersections of games and art: “game art,” “artgames,” and “artists’ games.” *Works of Game* discusses both video and nondigital games, and its scope includes games that have been featured as part of museum exhibitions and permanent collections (such as the work of Cory Arcangel), as well as games more readily available for free download (such as games by Jason Rohrer). Sharp’s book fits neatly within the small but growing number of monographs and collections that examine the relationships between games and artistic practice, a domain which includes

Mary Flanagan's *Critical Play* and Matteo Bittanti and Domenico Quaranta's *Game-scenes: Art in the Age of Videogames*.

In the first categorization of "game art," Sharp examines artists' works that use games as a mode of cultural expression and a raw material, much like a painter might use paint. Here the influences of movements such as conceptual art and Fluxus are chronicled to explicate the ways in which game art fits within practices of media art. The second category "artgames" describes "games as an expressive art form," wherein game makers emphasize the constitutive aspects of games such as play mechanics, game goals, and interactivity to explore broader questions about games themselves and the human condition (p. 49). Sharp somewhat surprisingly argues that the artgames movement had apparently already peaked between the mid-2000s and the early 2010s, at one point remarking that "the artgames movement has more or less ended," effectively relegating this categorization of games to a particular historical moment (p. 115). Suggesting that artgames are already on the decline strikes this reader as overly fatalistic, given how nascent they are; this would be akin to declaring in the early 1970s that art cinema was defined only by films made at that point (which I suppose one could still argue).

Sharp's third and final category of "artists' games" encompasses games created by artists and game makers that robustly explore the potentials of games as a medium. Games within this categorization eclipse those of the first two groupings through their exploration and expansion of the creative and experiential capacities of games; in his words, such games inti-

mate "that it is indeed possible to create pieces that satisfy the aesthetic and critical values of both the contemporary art and game communities" (p. 16). In essence, these works effectively bridge the often substantial divide between modes of aesthetic and ludic valuation; they are fully functional games that simultaneously operate as works of art. Each of these categories is explored in successive chapters, but despite this organizational demarcation, Sharp's categories sometimes seem to bleed together; his definitions of each are occasionally a bit murky, and one could argue that some of the works that he describes might fit within more than one of his categories.

As part of MIT's Playful Thinking Series, which features shorter books engaging with various game studies topics, Sharp's book is not as lengthy as a typical monograph—just 146 pages. The brevity of *Works of Game* occasionally leaves the reader wanting more, as in the truncated discussion of the consideration of "games as a medium" in the final chapter of the same title. But Sharp otherwise makes excellent use of the restrictions of the series, and he offers a compact and concise engagement with the topic that is immediately accessible to readers not well versed in game studies or art history. He somehow manages to provide both a comprehensive overview of the complex relationship between games and art and a nuanced framework that is rich with detailed case studies. For example, his discussion of Brenda Romero's six "Mechanic is the Message" tabletop games supplies the reader with a thorough understanding of the play mechanics of these games. This series includes games that are not commer-

cially available, and therefore Sharp's coverage of them and other games to which the reader might not have access is of crucial importance. Sharp adroitly guides the reader through the intersections of two theoretically rich and highly specialized disciplines. In the hands of a less skilled writer, this might be a dense and seemingly impenetrable world. But *Works of Game* is clearly written for a broader audience, and Sharp's lucid prose manages to make complex concepts approachable and accessible for those unfamiliar with either field—or both of them. Marcel Duchamp serves as a fitting framing device for the book and not just because of his Cubist painting *Portrait of Chess Players* (1911) and his participation in Cage's *Reunion*. Duchamp famously commented on his lifelong fascination with the game: "I am still a victim of chess. It has all the beauty of art and much more." As John Sharp's spirited book demonstrates, we have much to learn about the aesthetics of games and art and the powerful hold that they both hold over us all.

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I AM ERROR: The Nintendo Family Computer/Entertainment System Platform
Nathan Altice.

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015. Series forward, appendix, notes, sources, index. 426 pp. \$40.00 cloth.
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The Nintendo Entertainment System

(NES) and its Japanese predecessor, the Family Computer or Famicom, hold a unique place in video game history as the bridge between two eras. Before Nintendo's console, which was released in Japan in 1983 and in North America in 1985, the vanguard of electronic play was the arcade cabinet produced to play a single game. Nintendo's *Donkey Kong* (1981) was one such game, which was adapted for play in the home as a cartridge for a variety of consoles including the Famicom and NES. The Famicom/NES was the platform that established home console play as the vanguard. As processing power increased and PC gaming developed, the arcade faded as a key site of electronic leisure. In the later 1980s and 1990s, playing Nintendo was often synonymous with playing video games, and Nintendo has endured into the present by continually exploiting the intellectual property popularized by the Famicom-NES platform, particularly *Mario Bros.* (1985), whose origins are in *Donkey Kong's* Jumpman. Few video game producers or platforms are of greater historical significance than Nintendo and the NES. As an entry in the groundbreaking MIT Press series of Platform Studies, Nathan Altice's *I AM ERROR* gives Nintendo its due as an object of rigorous critical and historical study, while also providing a welcome intervention within the literature on platforms as cultural artifacts. Our knowledge of video game consoles and of this one in particular are substantially increased by Altice's exhaustive efforts to explore and explicate the Famicom-NES from the inside out, but so are our understandings of digital cultural expression and the poetics of computers as expressive media. This book serves as a