

Encyclopedia of Play in Today's Society

Rodney P. Carlisle, ed.

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Offering more than 450 entries written by 130 authors from around the world, the sprawling, two-volume *Encyclopedia of Play* gives newcomers speedy access to many topics that range from the daffy ("Blinky Bill," "Gollywogs," and "Hit the Rat") to the deep ("Daydreaming," "Play as Catharsis," and "Playground as Politics"). For more experienced hands, the volumes provide topical reminders and organizing cues: "Adlerian Play Therapy," "Symbol Formation and Play," and "Theology of Play" are good places to start if one is brushing up. The editor, historian Rodney P. Carlisle, observes that play and games as universal expressions represent both the "dispersion of culture and the underlying structure of human nature" (p. xi). Thus while moving from A to Z, the *Encyclopedia* follows themes in the cultural anthropology and sociology of play, explores topics in play's history and psychology, sketches the highlights of play in more than ninety countries, and tells brief stories of many specific playthings and games. Brian Sutton-Smith, who wrote the foreword, delights in the profusion of subjects—"the cauldron of multiplicitous ambiguity" (p. ix)—that appears in the *Encyclopedia of Play*.

How does one read an encyclopedia? A distracting wealth of material dooms an alphabetical approach. Here, a look at

the entry on the controversy surrounding the simple elimination game "Dodgeball" in volume 1 will tempt the reader to follow the "see also" prompt that leads to the entry for "Paintball," around a few others, and then all the way back to the ur-game "Tag" that appears in volume 2. Chase the string that begins with "Native Americans," and you may end with "Spinning Tops." Start with "Stratego," and you will raid the video game "Cosacks" along the way and eventually cruise a helpful introduction to "Game Theory" by Brandon Vaughn and Frank Roberts. Entry hopping inescapably turns recursive in these volumes, reminding readers that studying play often brings one full circle: begin with "Play as Mock War, Psychology of" for instance, and one will eventually make one's way back again to "Tag."

Reading the *Encyclopedia's* pages at random precipitates a shower of interesting speculations and facts. Mike Wragg notes that ancient Egyptians fished for fun. Cynthia L. Baron observes that land diving (the inspiration for bungee jumping) is on the wane in Vanuatu. Wendy Welch tells us that Iranian girls prefer pirated versions of Barbie and Ken to the Qu'ranically correct Sara and Dara. Elizabeth Matthews and Abigail Jewkes remind us that Maria Montessori appealed to the pope to be admitted to the University of Rome's boys-only medical school. Carol M. Barron finds that golf courses outnumber public playgrounds in Ireland by a ratio of 405 to 168. We learn from Rhonda Clements that in France the word for leapfrog is *saute-mouton*, which translates as "leap sheep."

While *Encyclopedia* readers will gulp plenty of fascinating trivia, they will not want for richer and more satisfying fare in play theory. For instance, Dan Flem-

ing formally connects free running, *parkour*, lap-dancing clubs, casinos, and virtual-reality play with obstacle courses in "Cityscapes as Playsites." Diederick Floris Janssen and Ilona Denes, two European scholars it is interesting to note, write a sophisticated and nuanced treatment of the African American insult game of "Playing the Dozens." Myae Han profitably explores "Teacher-Child Co-Play." Mary Ruth Moore neatly ties the nostalgic marketing of "Lincoln Logs" to Progressive Era fears of urbanization. Play theorists such as Gregory Bateson, Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Froebel, Johan Huizinga, Jean Piaget, and others receive extended and respectful treatment here. Kim Kullman offers a wise contemporary reassessment of Roger Caillois's pathbreaking study *Man, Play, and Games* (1958) and notices how fierce competition and delightful abandon (*agon* and *ilinx*) are now combined in extreme sports in a way that seemed unlikely or impossible fifty years ago. Occasionally, controversy pokes through: Fraser Brown inveighs against the "Idealization of Play." And in "Surplus Resource Theory," Gordon Burghardt speculates how (by some definitions) well-fed wasps, despite tiny brains and notoriously evil tempers, can be understood to engage in a form of play.

While ranging in these volumes, it is easy to find exemplary entries. Marc Bekoff writes about "Play among Animals" and offers as succinct a summary of the benefits of play as one is likely to find. Daniel Farr rewards us with eight concise paragraphs on "Bullying." John Sutterby writes a treatment of intergender play that is a model of care, reserve, and clarity. Joshua Garrison gives readers an insightful treatment of the business history and intellectual history of LEGO.

Deborah S. Valentine skillfully navigates the currents of paternalism in reform politics and academic psychology in her treatment of the "Playground Movement, U.S." Christine Walker's satisfying entry that covers "Europe: 1600 to 1800" attends to cultural, political, economic, philosophical, and gender-related circumstances that shape play in time and place.

Alas, it is nearly as easy to find entries that are less successful than these, and the failures often owe as much to indifferent editing as they do to careless writing. One pass through "Europe: 1200 to 1600" with a friendly red pen might not have purged all its inaccuracies or straightened its disorder, but the reader would have been spared unsupported assertions, disconnected observations, and logical lapses. Likewise "Play as Mock War, Sociology of" wanders over a scattered and confused territory. The hurried "Hockey (Amateur)" is filled with stray metaphors and strange transitions. One loses count at the miscues in "Girls' Play." Entries describing play in individual countries are sometimes impressive in their contextualizing: "Hungary," "Israel," and "Switzerland" shine brightly. But these entries for countries can also be dim, disappointing, or perplexing, seeming to have been introduced for no reason other than to plump the text and justify a second volume. The fantasy writer Bill Kte'pi is responsible for many of the most perfunctory and confusing among these; we learn from him that Germany, for example, is a country of "poets and thinkers" and "heavy food," but we learn very little that is useful about German play.

No compendium of any liftable size could include reference to even a fraction of all there is to say about play. And it is

never quite fair to chastise scholars for the particular books that they did not compile. The editors mustered sound reasons for excluding professional sports from these pages, for example. Still, readers will puzzle over some editorial decisions. Morris dancing makes the cut, but break dancing does not. Readers will find snail racing among the articles, but disappointed habitués of the track will find that dog racing is left out. Reference to hunting games is included, but hunting itself is not. Rodeos make an appearance, but Soap Box Derby failed to enter. Boggle, a word-game like Scrabble, is in, but body building is out. Alan Armstrong (an expert on Maori games) merits mention, but Lance Armstrong gets no ink in this *Encyclopedia*.

The editors made no effort to standardize the voice of the pieces, and so the entries range from the talky to the technical. Sometimes this decision serves the authors well—for instance Anastasia Pratt has an easy way with “Dolls, Barbie and Others.” But, in fact, readers would not need to look far to find that the editors’ hands-off attitude unhappily extends to content, too, leaving authors pretty much on their own to swim or sink. An engaging

description of hobbies is allowed to detour into a discussion of Benjamin Franklin’s apprenticeships to family members. A serviceable entry on the very model of violent video-game imagery, *Grand Theft Auto*, concludes without dealing with the public outcry it generated. Description of a kite flight that took a string across the gorges of Niagara Falls that then pulled a rope that then pulled a cable that then pulled a bigger cable is credited as the “inspiration” for suspension bridges. In fact, the Mayans were familiar with suspension bridges twelve centuries before. The neologism “jump roping” is substituted for “jumping rope.” One entry describes the “essence” of kick-the-can as the “connection and feelings of belonging that games provide.” No, whatever the dividends of playing the game, the *essence* of playing kick-the-can is *kicking a can*. Readers of the *Encyclopedia of Play* who will likely encounter these entries at random would be happier had the publishers printed just one volume that had been more carefully edited and purposed.

—Scott G. Eberle, *Strong National Museum of Play, Rochester, NY*