Book Reviews

The Aesthetic of Play
Brian Upton
Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015.
Acknowledgements, introduction, and
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Let us play a game. Let us imagine you, the reader, are playing a game that I, the author, designed. I set up particular systems intended to constrain the arena that you can play in—in this case, by explicitly laying out the contract between you and me and the piece you are reading. I determined pacing, sections, and the overall narrative of this piece; I worked with English on paper or a digital medium and within the limits of this genre. Let us call these constraints the "phase space" that you occupy through engagement with this piece. You, however, anticipate the next move, imagine intent, and predict topics and discussion points. You move within the phase space, such that, at any given moment, your possible moves shift, limited by your immediate circumstances. We will call all your possible moves at any given moment your "horizon of action" and your set of desirable moves your "horizon of intent." As you read, you will make decisions that explore your horizons and move you to new places within the overall phase space. Maybe you will skip ahead, maybe you will reread sections to gain new insights, or maybe you will just keep reading while also reflecting on how this piece relates to others you have read or designed. If I did my work right, you will want to keep playing and reading, to continue exploring the space, to discover what is possible, possibly to come up with some interesting moves within our explicit contract. If I designed the game well, engaging with this reading has enough *variability*, *predictability*, and *uncertainty* to sustain your play-read. As you interpret this piece in very specific ways depending on your background experiences and your playing nature, maybe you will get out of this something worthwhile. And maybe that is how you generally approach new experiences.

All of the new terms above are from Brian Upton's *The Aesthetic of Play*. The first part of the book is immediately useful for game designers and scholars, as Upton describes this new framework for understanding and design that gives us a way to

examine any game or narrative in the same light. When we play, we make interpretive moves within constrained spaces, and for Upton, "anything that privileges one line of action over another is a constraint," meaning the constraints can come from the formal design as well as what players bring to the space (p. 18). When we do this, we anticipate possibilities and explore the values and meanings we can get out of the spaces.

One side effect of Upton's logic, which, among other things, reexamines player choice and agency, is an update or alternative to Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory. Earlier games scholars argued that sustaining engagement in video games required players to occupy a flow channel between boredom and frustration—feelings brought out when players' skill either outpaced or failed to meet a game's challenges. Upton gives us a triangle of acceptable play experiences (p. 70), pitting boredom against confusion, which are brought out by having too few or too many choices, and adding another axis tracking satisfaction or frustration with outcomes from player choices. As a guide for design, it is much more useful than the flow channel, which tracks player skill. Interestingly, this alternative to flow for design is not presented as such, and Upton rightfully engages with and interprets flow in a later chapter on mastery and skill.

Unfortunately, this mastery chapter, which ends the first part of the book, along with the entire second part of *The Aesthetic of Play,* are a slog compared to the rest of the book. Upton wants to discuss play as interpretation and meaning making and that this can happen outside of games, but,

to scaffold the reader into understanding this discussion, he dedicates the whole second part of the book to introducing epistemology, semiotics, and even neuroscience. While interesting and full of good information, this dry background material interferes with the flow of the rest of the book.

This is unfortunate because the last part of the book becomes good again. Upton bridges the gap between games and human experience writ large. He does this by carefully building his arguments, starting with his examination of play and how it brings us to make meaning. We do so not just in formal games with goals, but also with more free-form play and make-believe and with narratives in general through our act of interpretation within the narratives' boundaries (both as performers and as audiences. In this way, the framework provides a unifying interpretive lens that allows for both ludic (or gamist) considerations as well as narrative ones. In fact, they are the same thing when actions are meaningful. Toward the end of the book, after making the case for how the framework can examine all narratives through play, Upton describes a way to engage in critical play. It is not that hard to imagine how this could help us make meaning in all our realities.

Any game designer or scholar will find the beginning of *The Aesthetic of Play* very useful, because Upton provides a clear way to think about player movement in games within different possibile spaces, and this framework works for basically every video game from *Candy Crush* to *Ghost Recon*. Designers might not take away much from the latter half of the book concerning how to think about games and

what to design for. The latter half, however, *is* extremely important for game scholars and humanists, adeptly bringing the argument home as a universal means to examine interpretation and meaning in games, other narrative forms, and possibly life in general.

Recommended, for sure. Thank you for playing-reading. Did you skip ahead?

—Mark Chen, *Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA*

The Interrelationship of Leisure and Play: Play as Leisure, Leisure as Play

Robert A. Stebbins
London: Palgrave Macmillian. 2015. Acknowledgments, notes, references, and index. 183 pp. $95.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781137513014

The study of leisure and the study of play have followed different tracks in the past, in terms of both disciplinary involvement and intent. Robert A. Stebbins's latest work attempts to rectify this by demonstrating the overlapping of play with leisure and, more specifically, by making an argument about what he calls "augmentative play." His work begins by looking at the scope of both fields, leisure and play, and raising the question why both areas of research have followed such different paths.

Part of the difference is that we treat leisure as a noun, but play as both a noun and a verb. This has meant that the very idea of the ambiguity of play, as outlined by Brian Sutton-Smith, does not lend itself well to the structured studies found in leisure research. While the field of play studies has been informed by the classical work of Johan Huizinga, Stebbins identifies some inconsistencies in the Dutch historian's arguments about the nature of play—chiefly the manner in which play can be disinterested and open ended as well as intensely invested in an area or topic. This is most obvious in the distinction between casual play and more structured games with set rules players have to follow. Both involve play activities. Stebbins, then, to paraphrase, divides these various types of studies of play into play as disinterested activity, play as involved in structured games that include sport and nonsport activity, and play as an activity interested in art. This division into various areas of concentrations, as he terms it, allows us to view how play moves across a wide variety of human activities, including both scientific practices and artistic creations.

With the notion of augmentative play Stebbins attempts to show how we can bridge the gap between leisure studies and play studies by looking at those instances of leisure where augmentative play operates through the different concentrations he mentions. First, he defines augmentative play simply as "the playful activity engaged in while following the recipe for it during an actual occasion of leisure." He continues: "Such play is intended to enhance or augment an ongoing leisure activity" (p. 2). For Stebbins, then, play "is both an immediate end in itself and a means to the more distant aims of the unfolding leisure activity" (p. 2). Following his earlier work, Stebbins understands play "as a type of casual leisure" (p. 12). He fills this out in his second chapter, which focuses on