

Playing Games in Nineteenth-Century Britain and America

Ann R. Hawkins, Erin N. Bistline, Catherine S. Blackwell, and Maura Ives, eds. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2021. List of illustrations, editors' introduction, and index. 383 pp. \$95.00 hardcover. ISBN: 978143848910

What makes a good anthology? At the most basic level, edited collections should cohere around a clear theme. Within that theme, the individual articles should present material of interest to specialists and the articles both individually and collectively engage key scholarship and treat topics of interest to the discipline. A new edited volume, *Playing Games in Nineteenth-Century Britain and America*, delves expertly into narrow slices of Victorian play culture, but the assembled pieces only unevenly engage broader issues and scholarship important to the history of games, play, and culture.

All the articles sit squarely within the Anglo-American world of the long nineteenth century. The editors take a capacious view of play, with essays on topics ranging from pastimes of the parlor to sports of the open field. The contrast in going from chapters on fox hunting and boxing to pieces on charades and board games seems sometimes staccato, but the range of topics also ensures a pleasant variation.

Section 2 on "Communal Games" proves the strongest of the book. Sean Grass sensitively analyzes play in the writings of Charles Dickens, especially *Great Expectations*. In the process, he explores play's role in confronting and dealing with trauma, insights that many scholars of

play—not just Dickens experts—will find thought provoking. Catherine Blackwell expertly teases out the roiling sexual politics that sometimes simmered under the decorous surface of croquet, where a well-turned ankle might distract and petticoats and crinolines could provide cover for cheating. Heather Frey's close reading of a diary account of an evening of charades in the household of Victorian fantasist George McDonald plumbs the meaning of this play acting for insights into gender roles and expectations. Although, technically, it falls outside the strict bounds of the nineteenth century and the scope of the book, I would have loved to see her explore Edith Wharton's 1905 novel *House of Mirth*, in which Lily Bart's star and star-crossed performance in a *tableaux vivante* encapsulates just the sort of gendered judgments that Frey discusses around playing charades.

Specialists in particular subjects will find other articles in the book useful. Megan Norcia's essay on games related to the 1851 Crystal Palace exhibition deftly probes how the art, text, and play of these board games reinforced dreams of empire and ordered the world along colonial lines. Andrew Rhoda makes a case for the importance of Louis Hoffman in the history of magic and puzzles. In other essays, I learned much about toy theaters and the card game called Authors.

And yet the book missed opportunities to engage some of the most exciting current work on the history of games and play. Most contributors come from the world of English criticism and read games as essentially literary texts, often interpretively guided by theorists such as Benedict Anderson and Michel Foucault. The essays

tend to focus rather minutely on individual words and pictures in the games themselves without offering wider insights into their production, reception, or place within the broader market economy of the trans-Atlantic world. These close textual analyses often left me wanting some of the structural investigations of publishing, business, and readership that have so energized the history of the book for the last three decades. How were these games made? What sort of businesses purveyed them? What did players think of them?

Playing Games in Nineteenth-Century Britain and America also seems oddly disconnected from the boom in game studies over the last twenty years. At times these lacunae seemed especially strange. The book's introduction, for example, offers a lengthy list of museums and libraries who are collecting and exhibiting board games—citing the Grand Rapids Public Museum's 2020 LaughFest and the ability to play historic games at Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer in Grand Island, Nebraska—but for some reason it does not mention the Strong National Museum of Play's collection of board games, likely the most comprehensive in the world (and whose holdings one contributor cited as being vital for her research).

The articles also lacked engagement with important game scholarship of recent years. An article on the history of war games, for example, didn't mention Jon Peterson's *Playing at the World* or Pat Harrigan and Matthew Kirschenbaum's edited collection *Zones of Control: Perspectives on Wargaming*. And there was little or no reference to scholars exploring games not just as texts but also as ludic objects. Here the insights of authors such as Paul

Booth, Mia Consalvo, and Mary Flanagan might have been helpful. A game, after all, while containing elements of literature and art, is fundamentally a play device, and it needs to be read in ways that foreground the play.

In the end, scholars seeking information on particular nineteenth-century games and play forms will find individual articles quite valuable, but the book as a whole could have entered into deeper conversation with the latest scholarship on play and games.

—Jon-Paul C. Dyson, *The Strong, Rochester, NY*

The Hidden Politics of Children's Online Spaces, Virtual Worlds, and Connected Games

Sara M. Grimes

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In *The Hidden Politics of Children's Online Spaces, Virtual Worlds, and Connected Games*, Sara M. Grimes explores virtual worlds, online spaces, and connected games in a new light. In the author's own words, "The objective of this book is to provide such a vantage point through an in-depth critical exploration of the present and history of children's connected (online, networked, or otherwise web-enabled) games—what they look like, how they operate, who makes them, who regulates them, and what they are used for