Book Reviews

Toy Theory: Technology and Imagination in Play

Seth Giddings

Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2024. Acknowledgments, introduction, notes, bibliography, and index. 286 pp. $50.00 paper. ISBN: 9780262548212

In *Toy Theory: Technology and Imagination in Play*, ludic technologist and "microethologist" Seth Giddings explores a provocative proposition: What if sociotechnical development has always been driven by play? Throughout the book, Giddings provides in-depth theoretical backing for this question, offering a fresh lens through which to consider the technologies and virtual platforms of our everyday lives. While his arguments are well supported, it would have been valuable also to consider how readers might practically apply his insights. How does this toying perspective shift the ways we engage with or design technology?

Each chapter functions as a minihistory, or genealogy, tying early historical examples to contemporary versions of the toys and games in question. If you have an interest in dolls and figurines, construction toys, robots, or "cinema toys"—including optical toys, animated figures, and interactive toys and books—then *Toy Theory* has something for you. The introduction sets up the book's goals, and from there, it is possible to enjoy the subsequent chapters independently, allowing readers to focus on any specific areas of interest. With around ten images per chapter and text boxes providing digressions and case studies, there is much to discover here. The book is also packed with references, making it a rich—if slow—read for toy enthusiasts and scholars alike.

Despite its engaging subject matter, *Toy Theory* can be a challenging read. Given the fun and relatable topic of toys and play, it is a shame that the book does not present its insights in a more accessible manner. In our fast-paced, media-saturated lives, passages overloaded with dense language may require multiple readings to fully grasp. For example, in his chapter on dolls, Giddings suggests that archaeological artifacts in human form used as funerary objects were, in some cases, replacements for human sacrifice.

This expands the possible meanings of figurines and is an insightful inclusion. But the next sentence runs in many directions: "Along with other primarily non-representational or formalized modes of mediation—such as sympathetic magic (see 'Unbox: Poppets') and animation (see next section), this ambiguous signification runs through the history of, and play with, dolls as toys" (p. 59). When sentences contain over thirty words and the subject is referenced using "this," "them," or "these" it is worth restating the subject for a reader instead of making us return to the previous long sentence to determine what you are referencing by "this." Readability does not reduce meaning—it enhances comprehension and engagement through writing.

Stepping back from dolls to the larger project of toy theory, Giddings asserts a "key lesson from dolls that will inform the rest of this book is that neither the machinic nor the symbolic have any guarantee of determining any particular moment of toy play" (p. 83). The connections between Giddings' erudite, chapter-length explorations and his overarching thesis are to be unearthed at key points in the book, as one might perform an archaeological excavation. Giddings does not easily hand the reader answers to his central question of what it might mean to think of sociotechnological development as toyetic, but rather provides a framework to consider his premise deeply. Nevertheless, *Toy Theory* makes a significant contribution to play studies and offers an innovative perspective on the intersection of technology and play.

Giddings proposes in *Toy Theory* that the technologies, mechanisms, and platforms in play came from the dominant technological paradigm and its economic workings. Here, I find some tension. I struggle to reconcile Giddings' vision of the imaginative with his nesting of corporate economic imperatives within the very technological paradigm he describes as both producing and representing the mechanisms of play. For me, there is an important distinction between a game played for pleasure and the gamification of adult endeavors driven by economic imperatives. Giddings criticizes the "recent apocalyptic diagnosis of late capitalist and media culture" (p. 222), and his archeo-historical descriptions within each chapter support his view that the current moment does not differ much from past eras. Still, I resist his enmeshment of the dominant technological paradigm—including digital platforms, virtual spaces, ludic and surveillant economies, and the corporations that produce this paradigm—with the platforms, mechanisms, and technologies of play.

This brings me back to his initial premise. If play is always already embedded in, born of, and supportive of the current technological paradigm, is there any room left for that initial spark of imagination and creativity that exceeds the predetermined world being built through play? Although players can certainly invert toys and reject their designed purposes, is there any room in Giddings theory for play that reaches outside the grasp of economic imperatives?

Giddings does not stray far from his material and virtual objects of study in his pursuit of these questions. This focus is fair, becasuse there is plenty to consider within the scope of *Toy Theory*. Still, readers may not find definitive answers

here. Even so, these are questions worth pondering, particularly at a time when inspired and imaginative actions are urgently needed to address the backward social momentum of the world.

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Play Stories: Using Your Play Memories and Perspectives to Inform Teaching Practice

Katelyn Clark
St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press, 2024.
Acknowledgments, introduction, appendix, references, and index. 128 pp.
$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9781605548166

Sharing play memories can light up family reunions, parties, and other social gatherings of people who know each other, quick start conversations between strangers attending various events, and promote new acquaintances and deepen friendships. In contrast to these personal functions, Katelyn Clark's *Play Stories: Using Your Play Memories and Perspectives to Inform Teaching Practice* targets professional functions that they can serve in the field of early childhood education; and she hits a bullseye. The book offers delightful and stimulating reading about the effect of reflecting on your own and others' play experiences has in forming beliefs, values, and attitudes concerning teaching, playing, and learning during the early years.

Given her extensive experiences observing and conversing with fellow early childhood educators, Clark learned there is much diversity in their personal play histories and educational and career backgrounds. What they have in common is the important relationship between play story identities and the decision to take a particular course of action in play-responsive teaching. She examines this central idea in four case studies of teachers in play-based classrooms, using observations, interviews, and focus group methods of data generation. In chapters 4 through 7, entitled "The Puzzler," "The Character," "The Explorer," and "The Maker," she captures the gestalt of each teacher's play personality. These chapters begin with a vignette—the child at play—to draw attention to the different styles of these four teachers in action doing play pedagogy.

Clark organizes *Play Stories* using an introduction, twelve chapters, an appendix, references, and an index. In one excellent feature, she offers sidebars throughout the text, and, at the end of each chapter, labelled "reflect**,"** questions or prompts to stimulate the reader's thinking (e.g., "how would *you* define play" or "it's harder than you think"), with space to write answers. Clark wants readers to interact while reading her book. She suggests reading it along with others, if possible. The writing exercises aim to have readers share play memories and thoughts, perhaps to commence their own play stories. The appendix provides play stories interview questions for preservice and in-service teachers. Areas cover family, space and materials, school, adult play, teacher history, and classroom (practicing teachers) or in the field (student teachers). For example, she proposes question eliciting memories under the space and materials area: "Can you walk me through your