
Book Reviews

Playframes: How Do We Know We Are Playing

Celia Pearce

Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press,
2024. Foreword by Janet H. Murray.
Introduction, notes, references, index.
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Building on the work of Gregory Batson's theory of play and using Erving Goffman's dramaturgical work on framing and keying, Celia Pearce develops a novel concept: playframes designed to analyze and describe how and when we actually know we are playing. While the study of play has often revolved around the question of why we play, this work attempts to explore intensely the question of how we play. To do so, Pearce employs keying mechanisms that break down play into affordances (what you can do in play); parameters (what you should do); customs (what everyone does); and conventions (how things are done). This analytical, descriptive model proves most useful for teasing apart the complexity of play interactions in everyday life. A critical part of under-

standing the role of play and how it gets performed seems to be examining these spatial, temporal, and situational keying mechanisms that cue our understanding of what is and what is not play.

In addition, Pearce adopts the social construction model of everyday life pioneered by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann that allows her to examine how quotidian events and interactions provide many opportunities for negotiating what participants consider play to be. Her work stands out because she attends both to the individuals and organizations responsible for creating and maintaining different social frames—for instance, how one comes to understand an activity occurring within a particular setting. This feature sets her work over and above those abstract social science models that often miss the actual concrete events and affordances allowing folks to understand they are playing or what happens when they miss the cues for play.

To illustrate how her analytical descriptive method works, Pearce conducts four topical studies, ranging from an examination of what she calls the indexi-

cality present in the playframes established at a fan convention (Dragon Con) or at fake weddings (simulated rituals like Tony N' Tina's Wedding or weddings performed as entertainment). This playing with liminal events, in the manner discussed in the work of Victor Turner, asks how seriously we should take these performances and what relationship they have to play. Live action role playing (LARP) underpins much of this type of activity with players using a narrative improvised on the spot. The question remains, why? Pearce argues that conducting a common ceremony blends playframes to build cultural understanding from different viewpoints, a practice most game designers also use to develop new video and nonvideo games.

Pearce's third study of the stock market and its reduction to a game, which she ties to the cultural institution of money itself under capitalism, moves from an examination of the market to the board game Monopoly, from poker to today's cryptocurrency speculation. Unlike during the twentieth-century capitalist industrialization, she says, today's monetary worth appears to be simple money manipulation, a result of the finance industry rather than heavy industry dominating all monetary values. Cryptocurrency and virtual artifacts and their attendant institutions have become the playground for a new set of playframes. Thus it becomes quite natural to view this reduction of the real to the virtual as a stage for her last topical study, the impact of misaligned playframes constituting the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. And this last topical study proves the more disturbing, both in its origins and in its development.

Beginning with a look at the early

alternate reality game (ARG) *Majestic*, started in 2001, Pearce draws a direct link between its episodic structure, occurring across a wide variety of platforms in various real-world venues, and the effects later of the 2014 online harassment campaign Gamergate on the recruitment of angry young gamers into a political movement. The first involved blending fantasy and reality to create a dynamic tension in real-world settings in which conspiracy theories acted as the glue to hold the narratives together as a form of play. The second, Gamergate, used deliberate language to encourage folks to treat the harassment of women as simply a game not to be taken seriously outside the context of the gaming community. This provided a convenient excuse for bad behavior that also allowed game companies and the general media to dismiss such concerns as marginal to the general culture and as simply play.

The mainstreaming of Gamergate created opportunities for right-wing media figures—assisted by the emergence of Fox News, Breitbart, and a wide host of other conservative or reactionary media outlets—to rally disaffected men around a far-right political platform. The failure of institutions to regulate such behavior, which they understood not as harmful, but just as play (or, at most, a matter of strict free speech), left the door open for the wolves to enter. And enter they did. Pearce discusses how these influences, assisted by outlets like 4Chan and Reddit, fueled the QAnon fiction in its elaborate attempt to construct an alternate reality. And this process, in turn, was stimulated by both the expansion of reality TV and the explosion of cable and streaming services to “silo” not only entertainment but

also politics. It was then a very short step for these right wingers to the disavow all legacy media as fake news and to establish an alternate reality in which they could claim a legitimate election had been stolen.

Pearce's work is a masterpiece of analysis and assessment of how play can easily be fused, mixed, and placed in the blender of both politics and culture to generate unexpected outcomes that leave everyone confused—if not angry. Playframes, as she demonstrates, are excellent tools for unpacking these cultural developments. I recommend this work, primarily for graduate students because it is so dense. But, game developers, researchers, and the general public would benefit from taking her work seriously, given our fraught political times.

—Talmadge Wright, *Loyola University, Chicago, IL*

Adventures in the Play-Ritual Continuum

Audun Kjus, Jakob Löfgren, Cliona O'Carroll, Simon Poole, and Ida Tolgensbakk, eds.

Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2025. List of figures, images, index, list of contributors. 236 pp. \$26.95 paper. ISBN: 9781646426744

Although part of a book series on Ritual, Festival, and Celebration, this volume (more so than previous volumes) connects these phenomena—usually defined by their emphasis on social practice—to play. It challenges the generic differentiation of play from ritual by pointing out

their structural similarities—and frequent integration in performance. After considering scholarship that addresses the problems the boundaries (or even classificatory opposition) between play and ritual have presented to interpretations relying on empirical observation, the editors argue the two constitute a continuum that needs examining in any analysis of the production of meaning.

For this reason, I might have called the book “questions of” rather than “adventures in” the play-ritual continuum. After digging into its pages, I sense a kind of adventurism regarding knotty examples from contemporary culture that appear novel or “discoverable” and that require forays into barely charted theoretical territory. On the play side, one finds no conventional studies of ludic children's games and, on the ritual side, no essays on serious religious or sacred rites. One reads here of inventive ash scatterings in the Swedish Archipelago after the death of a loved one, “profanation of the sacred” in Scottish hen parties prior to a wedding, performative dilemmas in public antiracist protests, rationales of ethnic food play during purportedly religious observances of Christmas, and the hybridization of play and ritual in high-stakes computer game contests and large-scale sports events. The international spread of the examples suggests that the attitudes toward play and ritual are not so much national concerns as they are broader social and psychological human issues. Given the absence of Asian, South American, and African examples, the editors concentrate their generalizations to the individualistic, secularized tendencies of “Western” (presumably European and North American) industrialized countries.

The theoretical territory the authors