

tion digs into methodology and the idea of research as play and play as research. This section more definitely crosses time and space as it grounds the Opie historical research against contemporary research, both in practice and content. Young readers are exposed to legacy media and given glimpses into the play of the past, while researchers can use the Opie's work to help interpret children's current play.

Part 2 naturally flows into part 3, "Play in Space and Time," which takes a more direct line into play spaces and memories of play. This part of the project uses a more ethnographic approach to research while grounding it within the framework of the overall project and the Opies' work. This section bridges the gap by specifically looking at connections between the past and present through generational divides, children speaking with adults about play in a research setting, and connecting "lines of play" in spaces over time. The ways in which play gets passed down, reshaped, and made new again are explored against the backdrop of technology and changing physical spaces. The flow to part 4, "Future Play," is also natural and logical. Part 4 closes out the book with a single short chapter that looks toward the future. This chapter provides something of a theoretical synthesis of ideas in preceding chapters and applies them to the future of play. Both the first and final chapters discuss the limitations of the research. The authors recognize that play has once again changed and there is opportunity for further research based on this project.

Playing the Archive, a well put-together volume with coherent and cohesive themes and style, is both easily digestible (with its concise writing) and demonstrates a clear

understanding and engagement with various histories, theories, and methods of play. Although it is certainly very localized to the United Kingdom, the description of the research methods and ideas are compelling for play scholars globally. The rigor of the background research and methodology provides a useful framework for any researcher or student in these fields, offering plentiful citations at the end of each chapter. For scholars who are in play-adjacent fields such as digital game studies, the volume also provides excellent insight into the Opies and their work while breathing fresh air into it. Being based on a research project with innovative methods and purpose, this book also neatly carves out a clear space for itself among play scholarship from multiple angles, including the history of play research and scholarship, research methodologies, and analytical frameworks.

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The Well-Read Game: On Playing Thoughtfully

Tracy Fullerton and Matthew Farber
Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2025.
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In *The Well-Read Game*, Tracy Fullerton and Matthew Farber propose a bold vision: Players should approach games not just as entertainment, but as texts to be read deeply and aesthetically. As they put it, to become literate in this way is to read one's own game play "closely, deeply, performa-

tively, and reflectively—with or against the intended or designed experience” (p. 181). The aim is not just better players—it is better people.

If we look at the sample player response journal from the book’s website we see several prompts. For example: “Where are you? Who are you playing? What do you want or need to do? As the game unfolds, what happens that moves you? Do you relate to any characters or situations? What do you bring to the game from your own lived experiences?”

These prompts signal the type of games the authors prioritize—those with characters to inhabit, places to explore, and stories to experience. Although Fullerton and Farber claim all kinds of games can support aesthetic reflection, the book’s strongest examples come from narrative-rich titles, from indie darlings to AAA blockbusters. While there are mentions of puzzle games and mobile games and the like—Frank Lantz’s reflection on *Serpentes*, for instance—they often emphasize either social interaction (for example Farber’s own parent-child coplay) or literary and socratic discussion rather than the game’s mechanics or systems themselves. The authors repeatedly state that any game could be well read, but their examples, and counterexamples, celebrate slower paced, narrative-rich games, as well as games with an explicit artistic approach or serious pretense. We see games like *Journey*, *Braid*, *That Dragon Cancer*, *Gone Home*, and Fullerton’s own *Walden*. Surely game designers and game design students will read this book, so why not argue for the importance of these kinds of games more explicitly?

The book’s title riffs on Bernard De

Koven’s *The Well-Played Game*. However, it is not so much the game that is being read, but the player’s own notes and reflections on that play. In some ways the book is more about writing than playing, and it advocates for treating play as a source of insight that deserves documentation—whether for classroom discussion or personal growth. Crucially, *The Well-Read Game* is not just a stand-alone book—it belongs to a larger pedagogical project. The accompanying website includes handouts, prompts, a card game, and (coming soon) recommended game lists. A special issue of the journal *Well Played* will gather reflective essays inspired by the book, expanding the community around its ideas. Taken alone, the book can feel somewhat unfinished—more of a provocation than a complete tool kit. It excels as a resource for educators of any level, but may feel less immediately useful to individual players trying to journal on their own.

Fundamentally, this is a book about education. Its most useful tools—journaling, reflection, and discussion circles—are rooted in literacy education, particularly in English language arts at the middle and high school level. The authors briefly mention alternatives like book clubs and informal reading groups, but their approach is most vivid and applicable in classroom settings. They draw more from literacy studies than from game studies or media theory, and that pedagogical framing shapes the tone and reach of the book. That said, there exists a tension here worth exploring. The authors make a sharp distinction between players who simply consume games and those who read them. Most players, they argue, do not reflect deeply on their expe-

riences and instead engage with games in superficial, goal-oriented ways—what literary scholar Louise Rosenblatt would call “efferent” reading. This is the core challenge the book takes on: How to push players beyond functional play into aesthetic engagement.

It is a provocative stance and one that feels refreshing in a space where game culture often gets handled with kid gloves. However, the book stops short of offering a fuller critique of why shallow reception dominates. It offers no sustained analysis of the game industry, the everyday lives of players, or the ways in which play is consumed. Unlike, say, theorist Theodore Adorno in his critique of popular music and listening, Fullerton and Farber avoid connecting surface-level engagement with deeper structures of power, commerce, or ideology. One wishes they had gone further in this regard.

They also miss an opportunity in their treatment of community and culture. Although they advocate for thoughtful, reflective engagement, they largely bypass Let’s Plays, fan forums, and streaming—venues where play often gets discussed, if not always aesthetically in the manner they advocate. They point out that most Let’s Plays are stuck in walkthrough or comedy mode, but they do not explore what kinds of play cultures could be cultivated instead. If the book hopes to move players from shallow consumption to rich engagement, it needs to say more about the environments in which this shift could happen.

The Well-Read Game ultimately hopes that if players learn to reflect on games the way skilled readers reflect on literature, they will not only appreciate games more deeply but grow as empathetic, emotion-

ally literate citizens. This educational ideal, rooted in Deweyan public pedagogy, feels optimistic but genuine. As the authors write, “Well-read players possess both the multimodal literacy skills and the social and emotional skills that will make them uniquely equipped to participate in today’s complex societies” (p. 206).

This makes for an inspiring goal, even if it may take more than journaling to get us there. Still, encouraging players—and students—to take their play seriously, to reflect, to write, and to talk about games in richer ways seems a worthwhile mission. We can only hope along with the authors that playing and reading games can create a better engaged citizenry. And if we do not quite get there, more people learning to take their play seriously and to come to enjoy it in new, perhaps deeper ways, would be a worthwhile goal in itself.

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Eugene Jarvis: King of the Arcade

Matthew Thomas Payne

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A persistent temptation exists in all histories to deify the creators we admire. This is particularly true for auteur-focused histories that zoom in on a single individual, who by that focus almost invariably becomes heroic in the telling. So I was pleased that Matthew Thomas Payne’s *Eugene Jarvis: King of the Arcade* neatly sidesteps this historiographical trap and