

***Review: Digital Playgrounds: The Hidden Politics of Children's Online Play Spaces, Virtual Worlds and Connected Games, by Sara Grimes. 2021. University of Toronto Press. vii + 358 pp.***

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Children's play is an emotionally rich topic in the public imagination. All adults possess some form of personal bond to it stemming from their childhood memories. Despite the emotional intensity of this topic, children's play and politics of play have stayed relatively understudied in contemporary game studies. Sara Grimes's book, *Digital Playgrounds: The Hidden Politics of Children's Online Play Spaces, Virtual Worlds and Connected Games* (2022), comes as an important intervention to bring attention to children's digital play and rights. Her approach to children's digital play spaces as inherently political settings—as places of negotiation for various stakeholders, such as corporations, game developers, governments, parents, and kids—invites both the academic community and the public into an overdue and important discussion.

Grimes starts off by situating children's digital play in the larger historical context of children's play. She notes that children's play has always been a site of contest for various political beliefs, as any designed space for children is subject to political rhetoric, emotional ambiguities, and public debates. Furthermore, as children are a sensitive topic in the public sphere, such debates can often result in moral panics or idealizations that are disconnected from the versatile nature of children's play practices. The author draws on science and technology studies and feminist literature to present a nuanced analysis of the complexity of this issue. Theoretical aspects of the work are grounded in data Grimes collected through two decades of researching online digital playgrounds, such as *NeoPets* (Independent, 1999), *Club Penguin* (Disney Interactive Studios, 2005), and *BarbieGirls* (Mattel, 2007). Throughout the book, Grimes approaches children's digital playgrounds from multiple angles, involving several stakeholders:

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as crucial forums for children's play, culture, civic engagement, and well-being; as artifacts that contain a contentious set of cultural politics; as quasi-public spaces where important new relationships are forged between children, corporations, parents, and governments; and as a social phenomenon that raises urgent policy issues. (p. 15)

Grimes's holistic approach works as a strong framework for unveiling and analyzing various tensions that characterize the contemporary politics of children's digital play.

Chapter 1 examines some of the most influential academic and public debates regarding children's play. Grimes focuses on media sensationalism and examines the relationship between video games and gun violence, as well as the idealization of digital play as a productive activity (e.g., digital play as a tool for teaching computer science). She highlights that discussions in this area often focus on the outcomes of digital play on children and their development towards adulthood, disregarding children's agency and the diverse contexts in which they play. Consequently, this chapter directs the reader's attention to the various dimensions of children's play, such as practices of play, design, and business models.

Chapter 2 presents a historical overview of children's online games from the 1990s to the early 2010s, highlighting the evolution of various aspects of these spaces. Grimes pays special attention to how commercialization and marketing have been guiding factors in the design of children's digital playgrounds and which forms they have taken. For example, she highlights the prevalence of cross-promotional content in games geared towards children and its ties to other transmedia content such as kids' TV shows.

Complementing Chapter 2, Chapter 3 provides a more in-depth look into the inner workings of children's online games. It investigates how the ideas and assumptions of various stakeholders affect the structures of these spaces. Through an analysis of the different facets of online games, such as industry standards on game design, community moderation, user-interfaces, codes of conduct, and regulatory structures, Grimes shows how commercialization and the use of children's online spaces for brand promotion can shape game design and player behavior. The author discusses how corporate motivation of marketing towards parents can have an effect of hindering child player's agency, for example, through censorship of in-game communication between players to relieve parental anxiety of "stranger danger."

While Chapter 3 focuses on formal structures of games, Chapter 4 addresses the agentic side of this discussion by presenting various ways children can play subversively and challenge expectations. Grimes argues that while subversive play practices are not as ubiquitous as some studies have suggested, they are important to consider because

children's play experiences cannot be defined solely by the structures and rules of the game artifacts. In addition, the tensions exposed by subversive play practices, which test the limits of digital spaces, can raise important questions about children's agency and rights.

Chapter 5 offers a discussion about the privacy of children in online games. Grimes contextualizes this discussion through a brief history of regulations in this area, such as the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), in the United States, which aims to regulate companies that harvest data from children under the age of 13. Then, the discussion expands to consider the ethics of data harvesting practices in the name of market research. The author rightfully argues that while children's safety in online spaces is often articulated through inappropriate content and "stranger danger," increasingly pervasive data harvesting practices are also a question of safety given the lack of governmental regulation and user awareness in this context.

Chapter 6 delves into the increasingly prevalent topic of user-generated content (UGC), specifically how corporations handle creative play practices through their terms of service agreements. Grimes brings children's cultural rights regarding authorship and fair use into the limelight here, arguing that a lack of oversight has given corporations full access in determining legal structures regarding UGC.

Lastly, Chapter 7 serves as a conclusion and brings these discussions together, once again emphasizing the social and political nature of children's digital playgrounds. Grimes argues that legislation, industry standards, and public awareness on this issue are ill-equipped to deal with the problems raised throughout her book. This calls for debate and discussion on four avenues regarding children's digital play: (1) the normalization of corporate surveillance and erosion of children's privacy; (2) the censorship of children's speech, often in the name of safety; (3) the question of children's authorship and ownership rights of their own ideas and creations, and how it conflicts with corporate copyright; and (4) the predominance of commercial content, relationships, and control in digital playgrounds.

A sense of urgency envelops all critiques and analyses throughout the book, which is concluded with a call to action. The biggest strength of Grimes's work lies in its ability to navigate a variety of perspectives, including public debates and academic discussions, to present the social complexity of the politics of children's play. Her approach, which explores the power structures of digital playgrounds by focusing on various stakeholders, such as game designers, children, and parents presents a compelling framework for unpacking the power relationships surrounding digital playgrounds. While doing so, Grimes also maintains a practical perspective by pinpointing specific pressure points that require action and presents some best practices for dealing with sensitive topics in children's online spaces, at the same time keeping a

tight bond with the literature and not shying away from building foundations from theory when necessary.

While the book covers extensive ground regarding the politics of digital playgrounds, there are some inevitable gaps that arise due to the sheer scale of this topic. For example, as the analyses in the book are framed through digital playgrounds aimed specifically at pre-teen children, children's play in games for more mature audiences and the co-existence of children and adults in online spaces are given scarce attention. In addition, some of the problems Grimes identifies, such as data privacy and commercialization of online spaces, are ones that affect digital playgrounds for all ages. The systemic prevalence of such issues adds a level of complexity to the action-oriented approach to children's play and rights the book presents, and warrants further attention. Considering the practical aims of this book, focusing specifically on digital playgrounds made for children can be understood due to the necessity of a clear direction for effective action. Yet, it is also worth reflecting on children's play and rights beyond games designed for children to better understand and develop effective strategies equipped to handle the challenges children's presence in age-diverse playgrounds presents.

Overall, the book sparks an overdue discussion on children's digital playgrounds as social and political spaces, while also presenting a comprehensive framework that centers the perspectives of different stakeholders. It is a strong reminder that, left unchecked, corporate interests can hinder the well-being, agency, privacy, and safety of children. Grimes emphasizes that children's play is a complex, social issue that is often framed through inherently political fears and hopes of adults in public discussions. Her work helps the reader move beyond idealizations and attain a notion of children's digital play that is grounded in history and the reality of diverse practices. This is a discussion that is not and should not be confined to academic spheres, and the book's practical approach, combined with its invitation to public discussion, is an important move forward in this regard.

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