Review: *The Privilege of Play: A History of Hobby Games, Race, and Geek Culture*, by Aaron Trammell. 2023. New York University Press. xiii + 221 pp.

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Aaron Trammell's 2023 *The Privilege of Play* presents a genealogy of hobby games with an interest in race, gender, and class. As opposed to digital games, Trammell's focus is on analog, tabletop games: war games, card games, board games, roleplaying games, etc. Despite ostensibly focusing on a niche area of games studies, Trammell's project deserves wider attention in media studies, fan studies, and race studies. Trammell frames this work as part of the "third wave" of game studies, placing it alongside the works of other scholars that center the political implications of games as cultural texts. *The Privilege of Play* is composed of an introduction, conclusion, and six chapters, which are combined into three groups of two: "Beginnings," "Networks," and "Mainstream." Trammell primarily analyzes gamer discourse and visual media (advertisements and artwork) alongside ludic analysis of hobby games, beginning with model trains and running through hobby culture in online spaces.

Before the case studies that undergird each chapter, Trammell's introduction provides a wealth of theoretical background. Key to this background is Trammell's development of the concept of a "network of privilege," which is "a form of social gatekeeping that polices the boundaries of networks along racial, gendered, and socioeconomic grounds" (p. 31). These networks used pre-Internet technology (letters, forums, fanzines, and radio) starting in the 1950s to cultivate hobby knowledge and a burgeoning identity rooted in apolitical geekiness. Trammell, drawing on contemporary accounts of White toxic masculinity in geek cultures from Ging (2017), Pande (2018), and Cote (2020), finds the rhetorical and identitarian origins of such groups in historical hobbyist cultures. Furthermore, he argues that this situation was exacerbated by generational networks of privilege. This dynamic

resulted in the sorts of raced, gendered, and socioeconomic disparities and discrimination that persist in the digital age.

Trammell's first chapter expands on his concept of networks of privilege. Locating networks of privilege at the emergence of technology allows for a broad range of historically and culturally situated critiques. Because more affluent, White, male geeks tended to have access to computers before the general public, networks of privilege around such technology persisted. The same is true, Trammell shows, of model train communities in the middle of the 20th century. Trammell analyzes the graphical and textual components of advertisements from *Model Railroader* magazine circa 1950. These advertisements frame their target audience as male, middle class, and afforded the luxury of free time. Trammell turns this observation towards MIT's Tech Model Railroad Club, a vital group in the development of computer gaming as memorialized in Steven Levy's *Hackers* (1984). Trammell shows how, despite identifying as White men, this group cultivated a sense of being "outside" dominant modes of masculinity via hobbyist culture and geek identity. The ability for hobby gamers to both identify with and disparage hegemonic groups is a persistent theme of the book.

With this foundation set, Trammell engages the racist origins of Avalon Hill's wargames in a provocative second chapter. This chapter principally explores the *Avalon Hill General*, a magazine published by Avalon Hill that allowed for the coordination of wargames and communities through the sharing of personal addresses. In part because Avalon Hill's most popular wargames, such as *Gettysburg* (1958) and *Afrika Corps* (1964), featured playable White supremacist factions, the company cultivated a sense of historical revisionism steeped in libertarianism and racial animus. Trammell rightly notes the visual valorization of Nazi and Confederate soldiers in the *Avalon Hill General*. Most interesting, however, is Trammell's exploration of "simulationism" as a game design philosophy in these games. Simulationism, which seeks to reproduce ostensibly authentic or accurate historicisms, is also used as a rhetorical tool to include harmful depictions of slavery and genocide, he explains. This logic elides responsibility for the politics of representation while implicitly asserting a whitewashed version of history as objectively factual.

Trammell moves to the "Networks" section with the third chapter. It begins with an examination of the hobby scene for the strategy game *Diplomacy* (Calhamer, 1959), which is set in Europe in the lead-up to World War I. Because *Diplomacy* allows for player interaction under the guise of being a leader of a European state, players were encouraged to roleplay their respective states, either in-person or via mail correspondence. Trammell links these games to the suburban politics of the 1970s—a politics that virulently reacted to integration and civil rights movements in the United States. Of particular note is a collective of players, known as the New York Conspiracy, and their debates about

the role of real-world politics (especially race and gender) in the game space. Once again, Trammell links these conversations to a contemporary gaming discourse steeped in apoliticism and race-neutrality, and points out how such discourse vacillates "between dynamics of white guilt and white privilege" (p. 81).

Chapter four focuses on an interview and history of Lee Gold, publisher of *Alarums and Excursions*, a Dungeons & Dragons fanzine first released in 1975. Trammell examines the conflict and resolution between Gold, a woman, and the hegemonic masculinity of the early roleplaying scene. Trammell contextualizes his conversation with Gold by also analyzing Gold's discussions with her peers about sexism in optional character classes "The Damsel" and "The Courtesan." This choice bases the chapter in a touching, personal way. Although this chapter is light on theoretical contribution, it is a deeply meaningful glance at how identity and power were negotiated in gameplay. Trammell thoughtfully points out that, in a post-Gamergate and #MeToo frame, swift judgments about the sexism in such conversations may be less useful than grappling with the forgiving, restorative tone of these conversations. Although Lee Gold was quick to point out the flawed design and misogyny of her peers in 1976, this did not prevent her from meeting them with an "earnest dialogue" (p. 129). Trammell balances this insight with the realization that Gold's peer group's frameworks for diversity and inclusion still remained "tempered by a libertarian sense of individualism" (p. 132). This chapter brims with keen thoughts about the negotiation of controversial subjects in fan communities.

The final two chapters of *The Privilege of Play* examine material and social issues in hobby games following the proliferation of digital technologies and online communities. Building upon the Whiteness and maleness of past communities, many online forums such as *Board Game Geek* and *The Forge* remained hostile to perceived outsiders. The most fruitful aspects of these chapters are Trammell's narrativization of clashes between newcomers to hobby games and the "old guard." Despite Trammell's clear criticism of the old guard and its privileges, he adds a touch of nuance by acknowledging the often-unrecognized labor performed by this group—labor that protected hobby games in their fraught early years. Trammell contrasts these material conditions with the brutal logic of the gig economy and late capitalism, a changing dynamic that is receiving more scholarly attention. Trammell's analysis of this balance between progressive politics and regressive habits continues into the conclusion; Trammell notes the greater visibility of women and BIPOC in the hobby scene while drawing attention to the lingering problems of gatekeeping and stereotyping rooted in the "dubious legacy" (p. 174) of hobby games.

This book, especially in conjunction with Trammell's *Repairing Play*, also published in 2023, represents a welcome addition to scholars at the nexus of identity, games, and play. The brilliance of this work lies

primarily in its array of methodologies across multiple historic snapshots. By creating clear throughlines from segregation and suburbanization to the digital era, Trammell makes clear the urgency of historically and culturally situated analyses of media and games. Trammell's formations of "network privilege," "simulationism," and the "old guard" are just as necessary to understanding White identity in contemporary gaming communities as those of the 1950s. Indeed, Trammell's work makes clear the deeply entwined nature of identitarian politics and gaming communities. Because White privilege can often make technological innovation and gaming seem apolitical, *The Privilege of Play* acts as a welcome remedy, reminding scholars that games always carry political meaning which is rooted in historical contingencies.

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