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Miguel Sicart

Play Matters

Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014, pp. 176

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Play Matters belongs to the *Thinking Playfully* series of the MIT Press, which is designed to provide readers with short, readable and argumentative books that combine depth with readability. The volume fits well into this series as an agile, yet engaging and thought-provoking manuscript on a topic, the one of play, that has never been so central in the academic debate since the time of Huizinga's seminal work *Homo Ludens* (1938). This is particularly evident in game studies and in those fields of cultural studies or social sciences that recently started facing the need to confront with breakthrough societal changes. On the one hand, pushed by the game industry and by the growth of a widespread gaming/participatory culture, video games became a dominant form of entertainment media; on the other hand, the emergence of strong semantic entanglements and cross-contaminations among different human domains blurred the very meaning of play: (i) game-related elements started entering non-gaming domains; and (ii) aspects which were typically disassociated from games, started converging into that domain, as it is generally hinted by the emergence of areas such as *professional gaming*, *gamification*, *serious games* or

the overall idea behind *playbour*.

In *Play Matters*, Sicart provides readers with “a romantic theory (or rhetoric) of play, based on an idea of creativity and expression that has been developed in the highly post-romantic cultural environment of the early twenty-first century.” (p. 5). By avoiding the instrumental and functionalist view on play that is often pushed by postmodern culture industry, this work offers a theory of play that is based on an ecological approach in which all elements have strong network relations to each other and are not hierarchically structured. Sicart sees play “as a portable tool for being. [Play] is not tied to objects but brought by people to the complex interrelations with and between things that form daily life.” (p. 2). In this theory, play is a 'mode of being human' characterized and performed as an activity which is: contextual, carnivalesque, appropriative, disruptive, autotelic, creative and personal. Throughout the chapters, the author clearly explains the implications of such an approach on the most typical dimensions that play is associated with. For instance, toys – the materiality of play – become “affordances for appropriation” which are hinted at playing and which become fundamental elements for understanding the technological and physical contexts of play. Similarly, Sicart's aesthetics of play is a nonformalist one and goes beyond the exclusive focus on form which is portrayed by many conceptions of aesthetics of play. Indeed, here it is a performative understanding of the beauty of play that comes to the fore: the aesthetics of play “as the action of appropriation and expression of and within a context” (p. 63).

The volume is structured and divided in small chapters each of which frames one of the key elements of Sicart's theory of play. Namely: *Play Is*; *Playfulness*; *Toys*; *Playgrounds*; *Beauty*; *Politics*; *Architects*; and *Play in the Era of Computing Machinery*. The book starts with three independent sections that provide explanations on the design of the book within the Thinking Playfully series, the acknowledgements, and the instructions for reading the book. It also ends with three rich sections related to the Notes, References and Index.

As a critical remark for a book that has been written to be agile to read, the Notes section deserves a few words. Sicart himself states in the opening that the large amount of notes included in this work, it has been purposely intended for making possible more than one kind of reading: one which can focus on the core content of the book, stripped of in-text, unnecessary or marginal comments and one which allows the reader to dwell on many different details, anecdotes and explanations by relying on the notes. Notes are placed at the end of the book, in form of endnotes divided and numbered per each chapter. However, I have found it somewhat unfriendly to move back and forth from the chapters to the note section, in order to find the proper note among the various ones. Endnotes at the end of each chapter, or even notes numbered progressively for the whole book could have been a much more usable and accessible way to include notes.

Finally, the book seems to be written with practitioners and academics who focus on games and playful dimensions of human endeavours as the key target audience. However, the language is very simple and the use of jargon is basically non-existent, which makes the book accessible to any kind of reader. I found particularly intriguing how Sicart manages to provide a theoretical account of play which is clear and effective in its structure and, at the same time, clearly detaches the activity of play either from the concept of game and of playfulness. Conceptually, this is a sound move that, in my opinion, makes of his work a useful lens for framing, studying and talking about the entanglements mentioned above in the opening of this review.