

## *Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage*

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### **Play Matters**

By Miguel Sicart

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(hardcover)

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### **Reviewed by / Revu par**

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*Play Matters* is part of MIT Press' Playful Thinking series that "combines depth with readability for any reader interested in playing more thoughtfully or thinking more playfully" (p. vii). It is a decidedly readable, single-authored book directed toward an audience of academics and game designers. It is a general exploration of play and playfulness and how we can act, express, and interact playfully in a variety of ways within our virtual and physical worlds. The book is structured in eight short sections. The first two examine play and playfulness and how they are connected. In Sections 3 and 4, the role of toys and playgrounds are explored. Sicart follows this with a discussion about aesthetics, politics, and game design. He concludes the book with a brief discussion about the role of computers and how they are partners in our play.

Upon first reading the title of this book, I interpreted it as play matters in the sense that it is important; however, it might also be interpreted as the stuff of play. Sicart explores both of these interpretations as he weaves through a comprehensible discussion of the matters of play and playfulness and contextualizes them in discussions of toys and

playgrounds, and computers in play. The book is a smooth read because Sicart has included extensions of ideas, further discussions, and references in a *Notes* section of the book, providing readers with more details and numerous resources to further investigate.

While the book is not specific to early childhood education, it can certainly inform understandings about the role of play and playfulness, especially with regard to the environments and contexts of play and the role of toys, games, and computers in children's play. It provides a gateway to a world of balance, where the virtual and physical environments of child's play are acknowledged and celebrated. The *Toys and Playgrounds* sections provide theory and examples that are useful within the early childhood education learning environment. However, the book mainly serves to provide thought-provoking ideas and to challenge thinking about play and playfulness, rather than necessarily providing concrete examples of play practice. An example is the concept that "[p]layfulness makes the world a toy" because "[w]hen we are playing, anything can become a toy" (p. 40).

Similar to Dr. Stuart Brown in *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* (2010), Sicart does not absolutely define play, but instead provides a list and discussion about each aspect he has identified. Relying on a number of respected authors from multiple disciplines, Sicart examines play as contextual carnivalesque, appropriative, disruptive, autotelic (with its own goals and purposes), creative, and personal (in the effects and meaning of the play).

Sicart skillfully distinguishes between the act of play and the attitude of playfulness. He then takes us through a comprehensive and critical discussion within the framework of his theory of the ecology of play, which is "constituted by the elements that form the context of play: all the agents, situations, spaces, times, and technologies involved in playing" (pp. 43-44); he describes playfulness as the glue that holds these elements together. While the ecology of play is loosely situated within Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's concept of the *Homo ludens*, Sicart takes play in a different direction, one that is less formal and dependent upon rules. As he states, "I am not going to oppose play to reality, to work, to ritual or to sports because it exists in all of them" (p. 3). This holistic perspective explores play not only as an act, but also as human expression, "a world of playthings and spaces and computers where we play to express who we are and what we can do" (p. 101). Such an inclusive discussion is welcome in the often-fragmented research space of play.

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In the chapter *Toys*, Sicart centralizes the role of toys in play and their informality. He states that much of the study of play has been through the lens of games and that in exploring toys we can further examine the opportunity and context for play, as opposed to the structure, expectation and directed nature of games. Yet, whatever the discussion at hand, Sicart does not exclude or deny any aspects of play and playfulness, leaving the reader feeling a sense of inclusivity. This is particularly the case in the discussion about the role of computers or the virtual world of play. The virtual and physical environments are often diametrically opposed within the literature. I feel as though Sicart wants the reader to understand and appreciate the role and nature of the virtual environments and how they, too, are adopted for play. I appreciated Sicart's approach, as it challenged me to consider my biases toward different types of play, and how I have privileged physical and nature play over screen time; his viewpoints opened up an important discussion about balance in the act and expression of play.

I highly recommend this book, for anyone who thinks about and values play; and I believe this is all of us, because "To play is to be in the world" (p. 1). Sicart's discussion of play is a humanistic one, examining play as a language we all speak; playing is expression, "play gives us the world, and through play we make the world ours" (p. 101).

As is the intent of the Playful Thinking series, the author truly builds bridges between play researchers, practitioners, gaming enthusiasts, and game designers (architects). It is undoubtedly a relevant resource for all readers as it speaks to how we all play in and experience the world around us.

## References

Brown, S. (2010). *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*. New York: Penguin Group.