



Where Has All the “Good” Play Gone?

—Jennesia Pedri

Burn, Andrew, and Chris Richards, eds. *Children’s Games and the New Media Age: Childlore, Media and the Playground*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014. 238 pp. \$49.95 pb. ISBN 9781409450252. Print.

Chagall, Irene, dir. *Let’s Get the Rhythm*. New York:

Women Make Movies, 2014. 53 min. \$19.95. DVD.

Ogata, Amy F. *Designing the Creative Child: Playthings and Places in Midcentury America*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2013. 320 pp. \$34.95 pb. ISBN 9780816679614. Print.

In a recent summary published in the *Guardian* of new research that connects play to childhood learning, Lucy Ward reports that “[a] lack of understanding of the value of play is prompting parents and schools alike to reduce it as a priority.” If there is a lack of understanding, it is certainly not due to a lack of awareness. Parents and teachers in the global North are reminded regularly of a so-called play deficit: journalists report repeatedly on the threats posed to children’s quality playtime, the authors of popular parenting and education literature paint bleak images of children’s futures without play, and the advocates of play movements promise to reconnect young people with the right kinds of play (see Frost; Gill;

Gray; Kang; Louv). In these accounts, play is essential to children’s learning and development, whereas a decline in quality play spells disaster for children and society. Researchers are also responding to the idea of a play deficit, demonstrated by a growth in studies seeking to determine the importance of play to children’s development and reinforcing the potential consequences of its decline (Goldstein; Hughes; Macintyre; Bergen, Davis, and Abbitt). Although the objectives and views of these various stakeholders differ, what is noticeably similar among them is that media, or “screen time,” are usually cited among the primary suspects in the case of the decline in quality playtime.

Given that the media broadly speaking have long been a source of consternation where young people are concerned, it is hardly surprising that increasing time spent with screens is blamed for a decline in play. In *Youth Media*, Bill Osgerby contextualizes contemporary concerns about the effects of media on young people's behaviours within a long history of anxieties and moral panics that blame commercial entertainment for social problems. He illustrates that media panics are not new and are almost always symptomatic of much more complex social, economic, and political problems than is acknowledged. In the case of a play deficit, for example, growing concerns about risk and new emphases on safety are only a few of the social changes that have resulted in new restrictions to where, how, when, and with whom children are permitted to play. Defining this as a media problem positions media as the opposites of play, when in fact children's relationships to play and media are much more complex than this. Not to mention that much of what children are doing when they use media might also be considered play. Nevertheless, a great deal of tension surrounds children's play and media.

While there is a general feeling that children's play has been fundamentally changed or even replaced by the popularity of television, video games, virtual realities, and mobile devices, the first text reviewed here illustrates instead the interdependent relationship between outdoor play on the streets or in playgrounds

and media-based play. The essays in Andrew Burn and Chris Richards's volume, *Children's Games in the New Media Age: Childlore, Media and the Playground*, are concerned on the whole with the ways that popular media references move across what they call traditional playground games. In addition to arguing that relationships between media and play are complex, they demonstrate that traditional games are far more robust than often acknowledged. *Let's Get the Rhythm*, co-produced by Irene Chagall and Steve Zeitlin, while not specifically about media-based play, similarly documents the resilience of the handclapping games children (particularly girls) have played for centuries. The film challenges the easy assumption that contemporary media are simply replacing children's play. Challenging this idea still further, Amy F. Ogata's *Designing the Creative Child: Playthings and Places in Midcentury America* offers a historical interpretation of how specific idealizations of children's play have been transformed and transmitted visually, materially, spatially, and scientifically through, for example, educational toys. She unveils the constructedness of perceptions about children and play, reinforcing the inadequacy of terms such as "media-based" and "traditional" for describing children's play cultures. While these three texts are relatively diverse in their objectives, offering a range of disciplinary perspectives from media studies, education, folklore, and architecture, what they share is an interest in the history

of children's play, whether for the purpose of archiving or documenting that history or for the purpose of understanding better or challenging contemporary play cultures. In this way, each invites readers to reconsider the play deficit and some of the overly simplistic ways in which the relationships between children, media, and play are framed.

Continuity and Change: Children's Games in the New Media Age

The eight chapters in Burn and Richards's edited collection emerge out of a two-year project that notably resulted in the digitization, cataloguing, and analysis of recordings from 1970s and 1980s playground and street games by British folklorists Peter Opie and Iona Opie, in addition to an ethnographic study of two UK school playgrounds, a website, a documentary, and a prototype for a motion-tracking research tool and computer game. The objective of the collection is to build on the legacy of Opie and Opie by exploring "the relationship between children's traditional play cultures and their media-based play" (1). In his introduction, in addition to laying out the objectives of the volume, Burn briefly contextualizes adult concerns about the state of children's play within changing play landscapes. While children have gained independence through their access to media, children's lives have also become more constrained since the mid-twentieth century when Opie and Opie

conducted their research. Burn cites standardized approaches to education, the expansion of the welfare state, and perceptions of risk as some of the factors that have shaped children's lives, including increasingly structured opportunities for children to play (9–10). Many have argued that the regimented nature of children's play is a sign of play's decline. In response, a number of play movements have emerged in an attempt to restore children's traditional play (see Frost). Burn attributes these movements to part of a larger concern about the status of childhood, which often sees changing cultures and media technology as part of a threat. In contrast, he suggests that children's play cultures are far more robust than is often thought, evidence of which can be found within many of the essays in the volume.

Jackie Marsh's exploration of friendship and exclusion (chapter 5) in online and offline spaces for play foregrounds the interdependence of media and non-media play. For the children at Montenevy Primary School, online activities have proven to be central to their everyday lives; Marsh argues that it is inevitable that media are referenced in children's playground cultures and that it is not a sign that media are replacing play. Media, moreover, are only some of the resources that children draw upon in their play. Both Julia Bishop (chapter 3) and Rebekah Willett (chapter 6) make the important point that children draw on a wide range of cultural resources in their



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play. Willett's chapter on media-referenced play on the playground applies Mizuko Ito's idea of "remixes," a concept used often in reference to the digital cultures of young people, to describe the way that children's play and games draw on a wide variety of resources, some of which are media driven. She demonstrates that children's play draws more often on wider resources than simply media, stating that "it is misrepresentative to label games as media-referenced." Drawing on the work of Mizuko Ito, Willett focuses instead on remixes "in which children draw on various referents including 'common cultural source material' to develop shared language and activities which fit their particular social circumstances" (133). Like Willett, Bishop's comparative study of a single clapping game illustrates the "subtle revoicings and re-embodiments" that occur in children's play and the fact that all such games have "their own intention and accent" (78). These two chapters illustrate that media are but one of the many influences on children's play.

Willett goes further to demonstrate that, when children do mix media on the playground, they do so in culturally specific ways, making it important to take cultural and social context into account when studying play. In addition to the highly variable nature of play, Willett's case study determines that when children do reference media in their play, they rarely "faithfully copy" media texts but rather create a "hybrid/recontextualized" form of media referenced play (138). In this way, children are situated as social actors and media are part of a shared store of cultural referents that help to establish particular identities and intersubjectivity among players. Because of her emphasis on the importance of the social and cultural context of play, Willett's chapter reaches beyond the simple observation that children incorporate media resources into their play, illustrating that how media function on the playground is never straightforward but rather dependent on social actors and other playground structures.

Taken as a whole, one of the immediately obvious contributions of the volume, then, is the observation that media are part of children's everyday lives and as such are some of the many resources that children draw upon in their everyday interactions, including those on the playground. In illustrating the inevitably complex ways that media are sourced in playground activity, the volume might help to challenge binaries like "traditional" and "media-based" by illustrating that it is not one or the other. The argument implicit throughout the collection is that "old" games have not been replaced with the advent of "new" ones. Not only is it difficult to argue that media are posing an imminent threat to children's playground cultures, but also, as many of the contributors to the volume illustrate, there is a great deal of continuity in past and present children's playground songs and games.

The fact that media landscapes have changed dramatically in the span of only a few generations tends to support the belief that children's play is also dramatically different today than it was in previous generations. While there are visible differences in the spaces, objects, and contents of play, Burn and Richards's volume also complicates the apparently straightforward ideas of continuity and change in children's play cultures. Revisiting Opie and Opie's recordings, Laura Jopson, Andrew Burn, and Jonathan Robinson (chapter 2) are interested in uncovering what else the recordings reveal about the way that children's

play cultures relate to their media cultures. Their emphasis is on the need to have a better understanding of variation and transgression, aspects of play that, they argue, are under-represented in studies of children's play (36). Their rereading of the Opie and Opie recordings uncovers a number of variations, including transgressive versions of traditional children's songs, leading the authors to wonder how the official version merits this status. They conclude that "the recordings remind us how easy it is for these songs and rhymes to become standardized and indicate that further research into variation and the complex inventiveness of this culture is required" (45). The variations that surface in their analysis illustrate play's contingency, which challenges the otherwise common assumption that children's play cultures are static and universal. The idea that play should remain unchanged from its traditional shape is thus in conflict with the reality that the substance of play varies both globally and locally.

The main objectives of the project from which the Burn and Richards volume arose were to capture both the continuities and the changes in children's playground cultures through the development of a new research tool and to make Opie and Opie's recordings accessible publicly through the website of the British Library. These are discussed in detail in the last two chapters of the volume. Grethe Mitchell (chapter 7) summarizes the Game Catcher, the computer game-based research tool developed as part of the

project to track and record children's movement on playgrounds. Interestingly, part of the goal was to use this tool to shift the focus from transmission between media and playground to between playground and computer game by creating a program that could capture handclapping games. John Potter (chapter 8) summarizes another product of the project—the site “Playtimes: A Century of Children’s Games and Rhymes,” produced collaboratively between the British Library and a select number of children involved in their study. The site, which is no longer available, aimed to display selections from the Opie and Opie archive accompanied by video-recorded samples of play from the two schools that participated in the study in an effort to illustrate the historical changes and continuities across Opie and Opie’s research in contemporary playgrounds.

Both Mitchell and Potter emphasize that Game Catcher and the Playtimes website were designed to engage children as participants and producers, recognizing their agency as social actors. Mitchell describes how Game Catcher was designed, unlike children’s commercial computer games, to configure “the player as an active and influential participant, rather than just a passive receiver of, for example, advertising or marketing messages” (156). Similarly, Potter describes the role children played as co-curators of the website archive. Although they were inevitably part of a wider, adult-led research team, they were also

given the opportunity to offer a “child’s-eye view of the history and contemporary culture of children’s games” (188). In both cases, there is an attempt to incorporate children in the research process, situating them as active participants in and “experts” on their own play. By incorporating children in their project of recording and archiving play, the contributors to this volume are able to make interesting observations regarding children’s awareness of the historical continuity in the games they play. The children they observed were seemingly disinterested in the origins of their play and tended to disregard the fact that their play had any history at all, often claiming to have invented a game themselves (194). This observation emphasizes the fact that concerns about the continuities and changes in children’s play belong to adults, not children, in much the same way as moral panic about media effects are adult concerns. Although they may be oblivious to their history, it is children and not adults who are responsible for the transmission of games and play. The history of children’s games is thus in the hands of children, quite literally in the case of clapping games, whose participants have been adopting, remixing, and sharing them through their play for generations.

Centuries of Play: *Let’s Get the Rhythm*

Let’s Get the Rhythm, a documentary film about the history of handclapping games around the globe, traces these games back to ancient civilizations. The

film touches on a number of important issues regarding these traditional games, including the gendered nature of clapping play, references to “adult” content, and the role of handclapping games as a kind of “rhythmic rite of passage” with social benefits for young girls. Describing how clapping games get passed down, one of the eight-year-old girls who is central in the narrative of the documentary explains, “Adults don’t teach it to you and don’t force it into your head—you pick it up from a friend who got it from a friend, who got it from a friend, who got it from a friend.” The film celebrates clapping games as a connection between cultures and between generations, featuring archival footage as well as original footage shot on location in New York, San Francisco, and New Orleans as well as in Kabala, Sierra Leone, and in Fuenlabrada, Spain, in addition to commentary by children, folklorists, cognitive neuroscientists, ethnomusicologists, teachers, and musicians.

The use of documentary film to capture the handclapping traditions immerses adult viewers in this girl-dominated play in a way that a scholarly volume cannot. Watching and listening to the familiar moves and rhythms brought back memories of growing up singing and clapping “Let’s get the rhythm of the hot dog” and other rhymes that even as an adult I can recall well. Nostalgia can often obscure adult perceptions of contemporary childhoods, but the film veers away from framing handclapping as a dying

trend; rather than lament for the past, the film illustrates that the shared cultural value of handclapping games is in part what keeps them alive. The primary goal of the documentary does not seem to be about archiving the clapping games children play (although, as a documentary, it can also do this). Instead, it is a study of how handclapping connects generations of players globally and locally even though children’s lives are constantly changing.

Similar to the volume *Children’s Games in the New Media Age*, *Let’s Get the Rhythm* calls attention to the simultaneity of continuity and change within play cultures, which are subject to both remixing and, as folklorist Bess Lomox says in *Let’s Get the Rhythm*, “There are all kinds of features in these traditional materials that make them survival material.” The documentary offers a refreshingly optimistic approach to play in the twenty-first century; the attitude is that if handclapping games have survived wars and major migrations and traversed languages and cultures across the globe, then they will survive alongside new innovations in children’s media. And if *Children’s Games in the New Media Age* demonstrates one key point, it is that media are indeed not the end of long-standing traditions in children’s games and play. Chris Richards (chapter 4) reminds readers, however, that even though there may be cause for celebration, it is equally important to question the positive values attributed to play. In his essay, Richards interrogates



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the value attributed to rough-and-tumble play, which despite its negative connotations is often said to have important benefits for the socialization and development of young boys. He reminds readers that not all positive values attributed to play hold true in all cases. I would add to this that the similarities that *Let's Get the Rhythm* reveals in play cross-culturally should not be misunderstood as evidence that play is understood universally. In the same way that play is of variable benefit to individual children, it is not universally viewed but culturally specific.

Idealizing Play: *Designing the Creative Child*

Renowned play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith has written widely about a tendency he calls the idealization of play, which refers to the assumption that play is all good to all players and is a view held especially toward children and educational play. In *The Ambiguity of Play*, he uses the term “[t]he rhetoric of progress” to describe the propensity to fetishize play as primarily a tool for children’s development (9), which is evidenced today particularly by the mass market of toys and games sold as “edutainment.” In *Designing the Creative Child: Playthings and Places in Midcentury America*, Amy F. Ogata examines playthings and spaces in the context of post-war United States, arguing that “educational toys, public amusements, and the plan and decoration of the smaller middle-class house and thousands of postwar schools, along with special museums across the country, were designed to cultivate an idealized imaginative child” (ix). Like Sutton-Smith, Ogata calls upon readers to challenge their own presumptions about the relationship between children and play, asking how it is that play came to be perceived as a natural tool for fostering the innate creativity of children. The book is divided into five chapters, each exploring perceptions of children as imaginative and “naturally” creative in the context of a specific plaything or place

with the understanding that the design of spaces and the material cultures of childhood are not a passive reflection of but rather an active redefinition of ideas about childhood (xvii).

Ogata begins in the first chapter by detailing some of the historical circumstances that enabled the creative child to emerge as an ideal in post-war United States. She links the creative child to consumption, the American critique of conformity, post-war research, children's picture books, and television. In each of these areas, the child figure can be summarized in Ogata's words as "an intuitive and independent character who was also natural, artistic, and conscientious. The postwar creative child was the avatar of the well-established myth of the American frontier spirit, repurposed to assuage fears of totalitarianism, delinquency, and conformity" (34). The figure of the child represents the future of the nation; thus, childhood is thought of as a stage for the preparation for adulthood and for the conditioning of productive adults. In the remainder of the book, Ogata argues that the design of toys, middle-class homes, schools, and museums were a major part of this project.

It is not until chapter two that Ogata makes the connection between creativity and play, which forms the basis of the argument of the book. She suggests that play is central to the figure of the creative child both because, as Sutton-Smith illustrates, play is connected ideologically to the natural "work" of childhood and

because play is considered a vital tool for children's cognitive and behavioural development. Ogata reasons that, "[b]ecause play is central to the concept of modern Western childhood, it has accumulated associations of imagination and invention" (36). She supports her reasoning by citing the works of educationalists John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Froebel, and Maria Montessori and play scholars Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, and Jean Piaget as evidence that play has long been considered a productive activity, particularly for children and their imaginations. The remainder of the chapter is spent illustrating adult concern for the provisioning of proper playthings from as early as "Locke's Blocks," a set of alphabet blocks developed by Locke to teach literacy, to Playskool, which by the 1950s had become the largest producer of educational toys in America (48). Because her focus in this chapter is on the way that middle-class parents of the baby boom valorized a niche market of educational toys and their subsequent role in the much larger project of constructing an ideal creative child, readers could easily get the impression that these toys represent the norm for children's play at the time. It would be interesting to know where these educational toys fit in the context of other non-educational mainstream toys and what counter, if any, they would have offered to educational-toy narratives.

Chapters three to five continue the contextualization of these playthings spatially in the

post-war playroom, schoolhouse, and museum. The post-war preoccupation with providing the right tools for securing the development of children extended to the careful design of spaces for children to learn and play. The middle-class family home, for example, was designed to emphasize family togetherness and included official playrooms where growing children would benefit from the encouragement of free play (73). School-aged children were similarly the subject of efforts intended to support the nation through proper child education and development. Rising populations placed significant demands on public education, which, if done correctly, was considered, much like today, “an agent for national renewal and the cultivation of democracy” (105). Pedagogy and architecture came together both in the new design of schools and in the design of leisure spaces (such as museums) that encouraged children to “explore art and science to liberate their individuality and develop their own subjectivity [in] an attempt to mould a new generation to accept the complex demands of citizenship in the era of the Cold War” (186). In each of these three spaces designed for children, childhood and play are conceived of as opportunities to fortify the future of the nation during the post-war period when that future was uncertain.

Play in the twenty-first century continues to be prioritized as a key to ensuring the future development of children, evidenced by the growing scope of the

concern for offering children the right opportunities for play. In 2013, the United Nations issued a general comment on the child’s right to play as stipulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, expressing a deep concern for the state of children’s play, citing increasing screen time as high among the causes for declines in play (Committee). The general comment reinforced the obligation of states, private sectors, and parents to implement strategies and programs to secure appropriate opportunities for children to play. The often well-intended desire to offer children the so-called appropriate objects and spaces for play has contributed to the idealization of not just the creative child, the subject of Ogata’s work for whom play is integral but not tantamount to creativity, but also the playful child for whom play is considered a natural tool for development. The persuasiveness of the belief that play is natural to all children and foremost a tool for development continues to perpetuate a rather narrow understanding of what good play is, avoiding the possibility that play might sometimes be solely about enjoyment.

What Ogata’s work illustrates, however, is that the very notion of what constitutes good play is constructed historically, which raises the question of what we consider to be “natural” or even “traditional” play and how these are attributed to childhood. Reflecting on the value of this exercise, Ogata states that “[w]hat I think we can gain in analyzing childhood creativity as a historical development, rather than essentializing it as a

'natural' fact, is a greater awareness of how and why we identify and value these qualities in 'real' children" (xvi). Burn, Jopson, and Robinson arrive at a similar conclusion in *Children's Games in the New Media Age* when they question the process by which some versions of a game become the standard versions. Both the content of play and the idea of play itself thus remain highly contingent. The positive value attributed to the "right" play is seldom challenged. Like the concept of childhood creativity, the value of "traditional" play has become an unquestioned "truth," which has implications for the lived experiences of real children as well as how we frame the scholarly study of children's play.

Talking about Play and Media: Beyond either/or Logic

Children's play has probably never received more serious attention from parents, teachers, health practitioners, play advocates, and academics than in the present moment. For children, one practical potential benefit is that adults are actively seeking ways to create more opportunities for play with the goal of improving the quality of children's lives. For example, the call for more playgrounds or programs that encourage children to explore their neighbourhoods is of great value and should not be dismissed easily. The merit of such initiatives, however, must also not be assumed on the basis that they promote a "back-to-basics" approach to play at a time when changes in new media are said to be putting children and childhood at risk. In

asserting the value of unstructured, outdoor, physical play that is free from new media and technology, we must be cautious not to evoke play and media as binary opposites. Treating media-based play as the binary to traditional play imposes a hierarchy that typically privileges older (traditional) play and games, negating the legitimacy or even condemning alternative ways of playing. Furthermore, the traditional versus media-based binary invites other equally unhelpful binaries such as indoor and outdoor, active and passive, and online and offline to describe both children and play.

Avoiding the application of these binaries into discussions of play has proven difficult. Not only do the popular press and parenting literature commonly fall prey to the alluring simplicity of this sort of thinking, but also play scholars often rely on positioning play as belonging to one or the other in their attempts to make sense of children's relationships to media. This can be the case particularly when scholars use archival materials as a point of reference for understanding contemporary play cultures. As a whole, *Children's Games in the New Media Age* offers an example of how difficult it can be to discuss media and play without labels like "media-based" or "traditional" even when, as in this case, the objective is to show that these binaries are inadequate descriptors of the relationship between play and media. Like Opie and Opie before them, the contributors to this volume illustrate in their own way that the relationship between media and play is far

more complex than these labels suggest. What they call “media-based” play is thus not meant to be framed as a threat to or even in opposition to “traditional” play. Rather, media and play are understood to intersect in ways that are complex and highly contingent upon the social and cultural contexts of play. The texts reviewed here are in good company with numerous play and media scholars who are faced with the challenge of defining children’s experiences with media and play without reinforcing a false distinction between them; for example, the complexity in referring to children’s experiences in virtual realities without suggesting that the virtual is in any way less meaningful or “real” (see Giddings 1–16).

Concerns about the status of children’s play can be traced back to well before the playground movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Frost 63); something about children’s play invites panic narratives and reports of play deficits that are unlikely to vanish from the news cycle. A more coherent vocabulary is still needed if we are to address the challenges currently limiting our ability to talk about children, media, and play. In the meantime, the three texts reviewed here offer readers an opportunity to

consider how these conversations can be reframed to acknowledge the interdependence, contingency, and cultural specificity of all play cultures. They allow us to think about the history of children’s play without fetishizing the past and to appreciate the complex nature of the changes children’s lives have undergone. While there are obvious differences in play cultures in the new media age, there are also significant similarities in the ways that children play. They illustrate that both “media” and “play” are value-laden terms that tend to carry with them a naturalness that contributes to misunderstandings about the place of both in children’s lives. Play cannot be considered primarily a tool in the advancement of children’s development for the future and the media should not be construed narrowly as major threats to play. The idea that the media are leading to a play deficit speaks to ongoing unease about children and media more broadly. As Jopson, Burn, and Robinson illustrate in *Children’s Games in the New Media Age*, media are an undifferentiated part of young people’s cultures (38) and so it does little to advance our understanding of media’s relationship to children’s lives if we reinforce them as somehow separate in the first place.

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