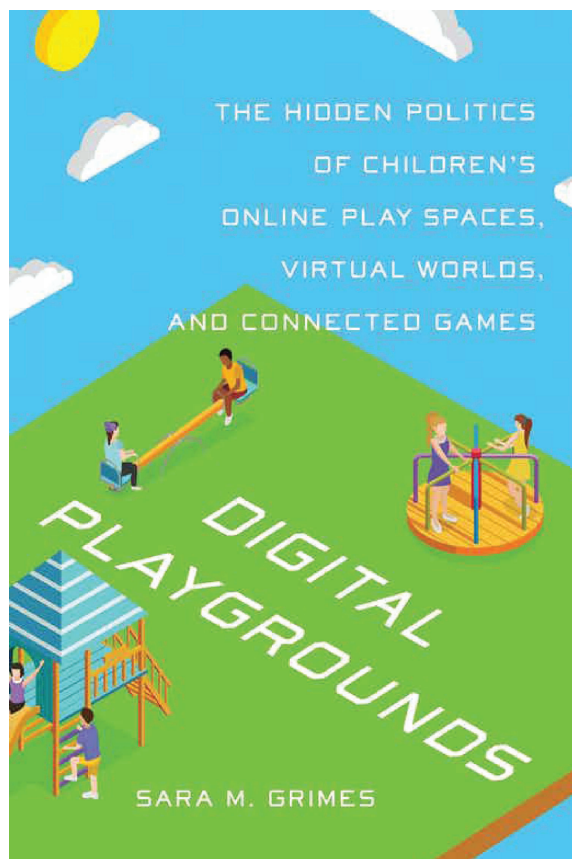


Book Review:

Grimes, Sara M. *Digital Playgrounds: The Hidden Politics of Children's Online Play Spaces, Virtual Worlds, and Connected Games* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021)

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Since the early 2000s, children have spent time in virtual worlds and playing online in increasing numbers, with more frequency, and starting at younger ages.² Despite the ubiquity of children's online play, there is a dearth of nuanced critical analysis about these digital playgrounds. Popular and scholarly discourses have tended to coalesce at either end of a binary. On the one hand, children's digital playgrounds have been the subjects of moral panics, critiqued for causing a range of problems, from sedentary lifestyles and behavioral issues to violence. On the other, these products are celebrated for their social and educational potentials. Missing from such discussions is the critical consideration of children's virtual play spaces that takes into account their ideological underpinnings at multiple levels: their corporate structures, narratives and content, design affordances, and the rules and regulations governing play. *Digital Playgrounds* is an invaluable contribution to scholarship on children's media and digital culture that conducts this kind of analysis. It at

once offers a comprehensive historical overview of children's digital playgrounds, introduces a theoretical framework that addresses these worlds' workings at multiple levels, and identifies the core problems with digital worlds, thereby highlighting areas for future research and policymaking.

Digital Playgrounds advances a multifaceted theoretical and methodological framework, analyzing online children's spaces from the perspective of legislation, regulatory documents, and corporate ownership structures in addition to the actual content and mechanics of these worlds: their narratives, affordances, constraints, and aesthetics. What emerges is a remarkably comprehensive account that addresses the central questions: "How is the social order articulated within children's digital spaces? Which interests, norms, and agendas are represented, and which ones are excluded?"³ Grimes situates children's digital play within the underexplored history of children's media culture more broadly, tracing continuities and technological developments in visual playgrounds since the 1990s. Much like Ito's *Engineering Play*, *Digital Playgrounds* thus offers a detailed critical history that is essential to understanding contemporary children's media culture.⁴ The book begins by establishing the fundamentally political nature of children's play as a wildly capacious set of practices. Grimes argues that digital play contexts "have more in common with traditional playground play than is often assumed."⁵ Grimes advocates understanding both physical and digital playgrounds as public spheres of childhood, arguing that the commercial logics governing online game spaces can compromise children's ability to engage in crucial risky and transgressive play.

The introduction articulates the book's framework for the study of online playgrounds. Grimes draws from a range of analytical traditions, including science and technology studies (STS), which, the author argues, is a fitting lens for the exploration of children's culture, since both technology and childhood are constructions. Chapter 1, "The Importance of Digital Play," documents popular and scholarly discourses on children's digital play, revealing a recurring binary wherein digital technology is cast either as a harmful entity (e.g., in ongoing moral panics about explicit content or corrupting commercial influence) or as a valuable resource and essential tool for children's growth. Common to both sides is an emphasis on children's futurity at the expense of acknowledging children's everyday lives in the present. Breaking out of this binary necessitates an approach that considers multiple perspectives, factoring in not only the content and contexts of digital playgrounds, but the structural parameters that shape play, from rule systems and design affordances to the legal and commercial frameworks within which digital products for children are conceived. This multi-scalar and multidisciplinary approach distinguishes *Digital Playgrounds* from related research on children's digital culture, which tends to analyze particular phenomena or trends through fewer vantage points.

Chapter 2, "Small Worlds and Walled Gardens," traces continuities and changes in the history of children's online gaming since the 1990s, with particular emphasis on changing technological affordances, corporate ownership, and marketing that positions children's online games as separate "walled gardens." Pushing against the tendency of trade media to register online games and experiences as always new, Grimes demonstrates how established children's toy and media companies have remained key players from the early days of digital

playgrounds, noting that their status as products “for children” historically justified design elements that lack sophistication compared to digital games and experiences for less age-restricted markets.

Chapter 3, “Commercializing Play(grounds),” examines four strategies used to commercialize online games for children: “velvet rope” or freemium models, integrated cross-promotion, immersive third-party advertising that has largely flown under the regulatory radar, and structural features that configure players as brand ambassadors. Nuancing previous accounts of online play that tend either to critique encroaching commercialization writ large or that celebrate children’s capacities to critically respond to and negotiate commercial imperatives, Grimes argues that children’s actions are constrained in online gameplay environments because commercial logics are integrally incorporated into game narratives, spaces, and mechanics at the level of design. These limitations impact children’s possible actions within digital play experiences.

Chapter 4, “From Rules of Play to Censorship,” investigates the rules that shape children’s online gaming at multiple levels, from a game’s official rules and terms of service to design affordances and constraints, adult-imposed rules, and peer norms in play. While there are many similarities between children’s “traditional” or offline play and play in digital games, online games are distinct, “since rules can now be standardized and embedded at the level of the program or software code, these spaces can be designed to virtually exclude certain forms of deviation or rule-breaking.”⁶ Notably, functions designed for “safety,” such as filtered chat tools or chat functions with pre-set phrases can limit children’s creative expression. The chapter examines the uneven power relationships that result from these layered rules, which can hinder opportunities for free speech, as well as ways that children nevertheless transgress and negotiate various rule systems in their play.

Chapter 5, “Safety First, Privacy Later,” studies the contours of children’s online privacy regulations in the US and Canadian contexts, specifically the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA). Grimes demonstrates how industry compliance with COPPA has tended to conflate privacy with protection, imagining young users as victims in need of protection, thereby drawing attention away from data collection practices. Through tactics such as privacy policies that read more like user rules to design features that restrict children’s actions, the focus on safety and protection in children’s commercial virtual playgrounds significantly reduces children’s opportunities for freedom of expression in these spaces. Highlighting this slippage between privacy and protectionist discourses contributes to a growing body of research that reframes discourses of risk in terms of children’s rights.⁷ *Digital Playgrounds* consistently returns to this point, focusing on children’s rights as key to rethinking discourses about children’s engagement with digital technology.

Chapter 6, “Playing as Making and Creating,” concentrates on children’s user-generated content (UGC) and the murky legal territory young content creators are made to occupy by Terms of Service (TOS) and End User License Agreement (EULA) documents. These documents commonly grant children ownership of their creative material, absolving corporate entities of any responsibility associated with that content, while also granting companies permission to use child-created content and data for myriad unspecified purposes. Grimes notes that children are not likely to understand the TOS and EULAs they are presented with,

given these documents' purposefully obfuscating language. *Minecraft* is a notable exception to these practices: its documentation is written in accessible language with a range of UGC content, materials, and scenarios described in detail. The stakes of this inquiry are high, as Grimes asks: "How does the (re) positioning of cultural participation as a corporately owned commodity (re) shape children's experience, autonomy, and identity as digital creators and citizens?"⁸ Building on the previous chapter's arguments about safety, the limitations on creative tools in these digital environments may also facilitate a "narrow vision of online creativity [that] in turn constrains children's sense of themselves as persons who belong and contribute to a shared culture."⁹ Grimes frames the chapter primarily in terms of children's media literacies, freedom of expression, and rights, rather than adjacent issues of UGC as uncompensated or under-compensated labor, which may be an additional lens.

Chapter 7, "The Politics of Children's Digital Play," highlights four key problems of children's digital playgrounds: privacy and its conflation with safety, the need to avoid censorship and to balance freedom of expression with risk, ownership of children's creative work, and the opaque commercial practices underlying the structures of digital playgrounds structures. Reiterating a call to analyze children's digital spaces in terms of children's rights, Grimes advocates an alternative conceptualization of digital playgrounds as a kind of public sphere akin to physical playgrounds. The conclusion effectively demonstrates both continuities across traditional and digital play contexts, as well as the many ways in which children's risky, creative, and expansive play can be uniquely curtailed in online commercial spaces. The four problems flagged in the conclusion represent a provocative list of pressing priorities for future research.

Digital Playgrounds comprehensively demonstrates that commercial imperatives are inextricably woven through every aspect of digital playgrounds "at the level of the mundane . . . frequently made part of the background, [and] 'taken for granted'" from their content, narratives, and aesthetics, to the accompanying terms of service, policies, and instructional documentation.¹⁰ In its attention to commercial imperatives baked in at every level of children's digital spaces, from the content, to the design, to the legal and corporate structures surrounding them, *Digital Playgrounds* foregrounds the complexity of contemporary children's online culture. In framing the implications of her inquiry around questions of children's rights, Grimes' work models the attention that these topics warrant and highlights the urgent stakes of children's online play. This book charts a history and a theoretical framework that establishes a new and higher bar for children's media research. It is a foundational text in contemporary children's media studies and will remain so for the foreseeable future.

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² Sara M. Grimes, *Digital Playgrounds: The Hidden Politics of Children's Online Play Spaces, Virtual Worlds, and Connected Games* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 66–67.

- ³ Ibid., 269.
- ⁴ Mizuko Ito. *Engineering Play: A Cultural History of Children's Software* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).
- ⁵ Grimes, *Digital Playgrounds*, 7.
- ⁶ Ibid., 137.
- ⁷ See, for example, Sonia Livingstone. "Reframing Media Effects in Terms of Children's Rights in the Digital Age." *Journal of Children and Media* 10, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 4–12; Jacqueline Ryan Vickery, *Worried about the Wrong Things: Youth, Risk, and Opportunity in the Digital World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).
- ⁸ Grimes, *Digital Playgrounds*, 245.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 266.

