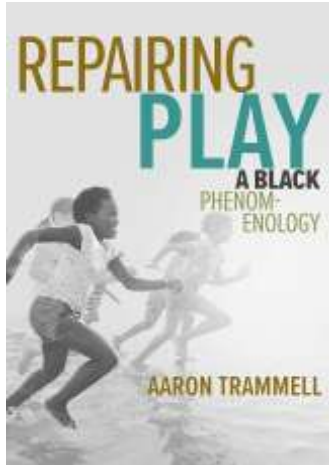


Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology

Review by Laura Ádám

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Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology

Aaron Trammell

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Play as an activity has been the subject of investigation long before Game Studies as a separate field of inquiry emerged. Play in Education Studies, in Humor Studies, and in the study of analogue games have been already explored extensively by academics. However, with a newfound interest in video game as a medium reliant on play, the concept arrived at the forefront of academic inquiry. Play has been analyzed through many lenses from autoethnographic perspectives (Wilde 2023) to feminist criticism (Chess 2020). In this context, postcolonial and African American approaches have only recently permeated the academic field of Game Studies. For example, *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, is a collection of essays with a focus on representation in video games edited by Jennifer Malkowski and Treeandrea M. Russworm (2017), similar to Lindsay Grace's 2021 book on *Black Game Studies: An Introduction to the Games, Game Makers, and Scholarship of the African Diaspora* point towards a growing need for diversity of scholarship within the field of game studies that accounts for the lived experiences of a wide range of people. Such endeavors demonstrate the living intersection of Black Studies and Game Studies with the study of the digital, whether it be societal interactions, the practice of gaming in communities, or the narratives told within video games.

Seen from this perspective, Aaron Trammel's book *Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology* contributes to this scholarship with a radically critical eye, in a reader-friendly language. The author starts each chapter with an example or an anecdote, facilitating the comprehension of the heavily theoretical ideas of the book. Part of the *Playful Thinking* series published by the MIT Press, *Repairing Play* seeks to speak to academics and non-academics alike, and Trammel bridges the gap between these groups of people by invoking and quoting well-known texts from the history of Black people ranging from slave songs to rap music.

In the introduction, Trammel outlines his agenda of using affect studies and a phenomenological approach to challenge fundamental notions surrounding the conceptualization of play. Trammel's main proposal is that play's definition should be reconfigured, as it had been mostly shaped by Western White thought, and because of this, it still promotes exclusionary practices. Trammel's re-envisioning of the play uproots the concept as we know it, by questioning the base tenets of play as a civilized, voluntary, and all-around positive activity, suggesting that play for Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) often involve negative notions such as trauma, torture, or objectification. Throughout the first chapter, the author aims to decolonize the expression of play from its Western, exclusionary roots by reviewing preexisting scholarship on play and examining fundamental texts by Jonah Huizinga, Jean Piaget and Roger Caillois after which he points out the modes in which these theories linked play to the notion of civilization. Play is the privilege of 'civilized' Whites, according to such theories, and thus they implicitly marginalize experiences of BIPOC people, for whom play is often tainted by pain, sorrow, and objectification. Trammel also reviews more recent scholarship on play by Mihai Spăriously, Tara Fickle and Soraya Murray that also point out problematic aspects in the understanding of play.

The concept of play as an affect of emotions is elaborated on in the second chapter. Relying on affect studies – a field of study that is concerned with how feelings are structured within society – Trammel highlights the ways in which play can elicit feelings that are far from pleasurable, which is a little-discussed notion within play theory overall. Understanding how play creates "affective worlds" (44) allows players to break away from the traditional game-play binary setup traditionally associated with reason and play, with embodiment, emotions and the "other" (50). The author also argues that sadness is an imperative part of the Black experience, a concept with which play has to engage. However, play as an affect can unravel "who is hailed

when play is invoked” (47), meaning that the player in the context of game and play studies is oftentimes presupposed White. The third chapter of the book challenges the definition that poses play as a voluntary activity. Trammel argues that play is most commonly theorized with an equal relationship between two or more subject positions, yet there are many instances of play that resemble subject-object relationships. This observation questions whether the concept of voluntarism is necessary in defining play, when such a definition shuns the experiences of marginalized groups for whom play is not always optional and is frequently something that is being done to them. Trammel bases his argument on three primary notions by Jonah Huizinga, Clifford Geertz, and Miguel Sicart to reconfigure play as a “way of being” (53) that is only voluntary for the one who initiates play and is in the power position to do so, highlighting the modes in which play can be a power of policing and capturing others.

In the fourth chapter, Trammel elaborates on the idea of torture as a form of play, introduced at the end of the third chapter. Relying on W. E. B. Du Bois’ conceptualization of the Black experience as a veil and his notion of “double consciousness” (61), Trammel explores the ways in which torture as play can operate on an institutional and on a personal level. Since torture renders subjects into objects, they fall under the category of play. The author concludes this chapter by examining slave songs functioning as play since they are affective of the pain, sorrow and trauma caused by the institution of slavery. These examinations support Trammel’s call for a wider scope in the theorization of play that considers play not just as possibly pleasurable but also as a possibly painful experience. The fifth chapter is concerned with what Trammel terms as “Black radical aesthetics” (74), denoting the way the tradition of Black radicalism appears in the design of games and the way this aesthetic engages and welcomes the contradictions that lie in the Black experience, namely, the coexistence of fear and hope of being a Black artist. Trammel also suggests that all Black artistic expression is radical to some extent, which can run the risk of essentializing all Black experiences. In the second part of the fifth chapter, Trammel brings examples from analog, tabletop games that possess the qualities of the Black radical aesthetics such as the *Cyberpunk*, *Blood Rage* and *Steal Away Jordan: Stories from America’s Peculiar Institution*. While Trammel’s focus is on analog games only, it would have been interesting to see how such radical aesthetics manifest in digital spaces, whether these are video games or interactive websites of collective memory.

In the book’s conclusion, Trammel reemphasizes the importance of repairing play by applying a larger scope to it, a scope that does not align itself with any oppressive ideas (such as those of the civilized-barbaric binary) and one that does not present itself as providing agency for all participants. It is only at this point that the reader learns the reason behind the author’s choice of the word “repair.” As opposed to forgiveness, repair implies embracing imperfection and contradictions instead of putting the past behind and into oblivion. Trammel considers repair and repairing as acts of play that can highlight the affective aspect of games. This study would have benefitted from such a clarification at an earlier point in the book, not only at the end. Trammel’s attempt at repairing play has implications also for the (video) game design, which the author himself also notes in multiple instances within the book. Treating play as affect can amplify women’s and minorities’ voices within the game industry (whether they are players or game designers), since it validates negative feelings that might emerge during play. The author also mentions that envisioning play as a notion that can be constraining and nonvoluntary allows game designers to create games that go against the grain, not abiding the laws of providing the illusion of total freedom for the player. This way, digital and analog games alike have the opportunity to engage in forms of Black radical aesthetics.

In conclusion, *Repairing Play* offers a fresh perspective on the study of play and games that can impact further research in this field. The opening up of the redefinition of play is indeed important and thought-provoking, yet one cannot help but wonder: if all affective actions are play – whether they bring happiness or sadness – then what is not?

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