

Games: Conflict, Competition, and Cooperation

David Blagden and Mark de Rond, eds.
New York: Cambridge University Press,
2019. Preface, introduction, references,
and index. 153pp. ISBN: 9781108447434

With a diverse array of writing, *Games: Conflict, Competition, and Cooperation* brings together researchers from academic fields such as organizational ethnography, international security and strategy, sports, behavioral ecology, law, humanities, criminal justice, clinical neuropsychology, psychiatry, and public policy. There is also a piece by a former cabinet minister of the United Kingdom. Derived from the 2016 lecture series conducted by the University of Cambridge's Darwin College, this many-faceted exploration of the nature of games has much to offer both the novice and the professional.

One of the last pieces in the volume "The Game Theory of Conflict: The Prisoners' Dilemma—An Unsympathetic Critique," by Thomas C. Shelling, concludes, "Without the context it is hard to know how people might 'solve' even relatively simple games. . . . 'Games' do not 'speak for themselves,' but rather must be located in the social environment in which they arise if they are to have meaning or offer insight" (p. 149). As highly structured activities with clearly bounded rules, games are played out on many stages and at many different levels, from the abstract games of philosophy and mathematics to the biological games of bird flocks and mating behaviors to the games played by empires in securing power and influence among rivals.

As the introduction points out, "The

study of games, then, is the study of social interaction in the face of different incentive structures" (p. 3). It is not simply winning, losing, or even playing the game, but rather the outcomes and the impact these outcomes have on the participants. Games are serious business. By highlighting the manner in which games and game-like behavior pervades all areas of everyday life, the authors open up new lines for research and investigation about how these structured activities achieve their outcomes. Plus, they note (as Shelling makes clear) the necessity of understanding social and political contexts. This also means knowing history and the meanings social groups make of history.

It is clear by now that past assumptions that game players represent a rational actor of sorts always looking to maximize his or her benefits within the confines of the game does not adequately describe the reality of power, emotions, or even of official state actors in the struggle over influence. This narrow assumption, often found in areas like rational choice theory, gets put aside in this work for a more nuanced approach that looks at the relationships between, as Nicola Padfield states in "The Game of Crime and Punishment," principles and rules. The dance between both is played out in courtroom trials—as she illustrates and as Sayeeda Warsi, in "Personal Principles in the Political Game," discusses—in the world of political wrangling. The legal system of adversarial argumentation, often presented as a game between jurists, may not be the best way to serve justice or ensure fairness as an outcome, and the competitive nature of political parties looking after their own interests may not represent the most just

system for those they represent.

The revisiting of Wittgenstein's language games by A. C. Grayling presents a most interesting essay about the distinction between facts and things and why language matters in this distinction. As the author presents it, language is a useful game. This essay was a helpful reminder of why the preoccupation with generative grammars and semiotic structures so popular in the 1980s was doomed to failure, because the issue of meaning does not reside in the structure of the game itself but rather in the uses to which it is put and in its importance to the participants. I also found David Brailsford's essay on "Games in Sports" important for reminding us that in game strategy, bicycling in particular, it is not perfection that is important but rather progression. The occasional visit to the gym will not make you healthier; instead, we are reminded, it is consistency and commitment that accomplishes such an outcome.

We also understand that war and violent conflict in general is often approached as a serious game, many times without a clear understanding of the true nature of war and the costs paid by so many for the arrogant assumptions that frequently inform its strategies and tactics. Frank Ledwidge's analysis of "Losing the 'New Great Game,'" detailing the British failures in Afghanistan during the most recent war, specifically those in Helmand—its lack of accountability, its numbers game, its body counts, and ultimately its failure to know the enemy. In this most serious of games, foreign policy objectives were not supported by any coherent strategy or even clear tactics, and the arrogance of power was met by the incentive structures

of local cultures, social orders, and political incoherence.

The remaining two essays, "Games for the Brain" and "Games Animals Play," were most interesting, the first because it clearly points to the relationship between cognitive disorders and the use of "gamified" cognitive training for healing various forms of mental illness; the second reminds us all of the incredible variety of mating games in the animal world and the broad nature of natural incentives that go into making our world the diverse and interesting place it has become.

There is much more to this volume than I can elaborate here. But, let me just say that this work, as diverse as it is, is accessible to the general reader and therefore does a great service in bringing to the public the many different ways in which we can think of games that go far beyond the limited nature of commercial games.

—Talmadge Wright, *Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, IL*

Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games

Alenda Y. Chang

Minneapolis, MN: 2019. Introduction, acknowledgments, notes, gameography, and index. 299 pp. \$27.00, paper.

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In *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games*, Alenda Y. Chang has written a book that feels complete and focused, but more importantly urgent and thorough. Chang combines a vast array of methodologies and theoretical framings both from envi-