

## Addams Was Right, but Skinner Is Winning: Considering the Architecture of Contemporary Play

Jessica Heybach

*Florida International University*

Laura Camas reminds us of Jane Addams' commitment to humanize childhood through the aesthetics of experience and resist the anesthetizing qualities of urban industrialization then and now.<sup>1</sup> Camas chronicles Addams' ideas of play as a potential site for socializing democratic dispositions and leads us through an accounting of what play could offer those of us searching for ways to rebuild fractured social ties. She concludes her essay by asking us to consider if youth activities in digital spaces are in fact play and warns us to consider that this play might be more aptly described through understandings of addiction. Camas asks readers to ponder the consequences of this new form of digital play for the prospects for democratic life. In this response, I extend her discussion of play beyond where she ends and push us all to consider the ramifications of play in digital spaces and its implications in the development of democratic sensibilities.

Camas writes that Addams' "notion of play emphasizes not only the children's and adolescents' natural necessity for play, but also the potentiality of a revealing activity of the human condition that overcomes challenges such as loneliness, hopelessness, isolation, or monotony in the industrial society. Establishing a new order in the love of pleasure had to do with rethinking and reconfiguring the spaces, times, and activities of childhood and adolescence." Although there is empirical research that shows the motivations for users in digital play (for example, gaming culture) are in fact *pro*-social and digital spaces can offer positive effects as we come together to share and "play" online, it is hard not to realize that we seem to occupy a digital space that increasingly makes us lonely, hopeless, and isolated.<sup>2</sup> We are, as Sherry Turkle writes, "alone together."<sup>3</sup> In addition to amplifying our feelings of isolation, digital spaces are mostly *not* places where we reorder the social order and rethink our relations in more humane ways; rather, they are places where we double down and mimic

the cruelty and harshness of the non-digital world. In short, the anonymity of the digital world provides a seductive cover to unleash our worst tendencies.

Addams warned us that, “‘If the imagination is retarded [sic], while the senses remain awake, we have a state of esthetic insensibility,’—in other words, the senses become sodden and cannot be lifted from the ground. It is this state of ‘esthetic insensibility’ into which we allow the youth to fall which is so distressing and so unjustifiable.”<sup>24</sup> This essential point of which Camas reminds us in Addams work is what Dewey takes up in *Art as Experience* when he distinguishes between “an experience” and “experience.” “An experience,” or capital E experience, is often found in aesthetic experiences that feel complete, purposeful, and organic. On the other hand, little e “experience” is fragmented, drifting, and scatterbrained, and often “miseducative” in that it stops growth in its tracks through dehumanization, splintering, and fragmentation.

With Addams and Dewey in mind, I want to turn our attention to technology and the digital spaces our children occupy and ask this question: Is play still possible in digital spaces? In short, I am suspicious on two counts that digital “play” is akin to the theorized notion of play for which Addams argued: 1) digital play is not aesthetic, and 2) digital play is not unscripted. To start, digital play is not aesthetic because it does not activate the full range of sensory experience. Digital worlds are profoundly dependent on our visual and auditory perception alone—spaces where we lose track of embodied experience rather than locating ourselves, or our bodies, in time and space. We cannot yet feel these digital spaces with our skin, we cannot smell in these digital paces, and we cannot taste in these digital spaces. The best we can do is simulate or imagine touch, smell, and taste. Even if we were able to all put on a pair of Meta’s ocular quest goggles and wander around the metaverse for a moment, we would still only be imagining an estimation, or approximation, of our sense world in a fully artificial world.

A more complicated reason for why play is not possible in digital spaces is because it has been deployed and designed for the expansion of capitalistic ends—a space tethered to the aims of adults who are cashing in on the activity of digital playgrounds. The architects of the internet and nearly every digital

space we willingly give our children to “play with” operates on a digital design model, or architecture, that “locks us in” to a limited set of options determined by the software engineers’ imagination. In addition, these options are always designed to harvest human data through the simulation of choice and free will. Digital spaces are built on business models that require human exploitation for advancement. Children (and adults) as the users of digital spaces are not free to play in the ways Addams and Dewey envisioned in their descriptions of unscripted play. Instead, we are the ones being played with through our devices—human behavioral data is the object of digital spaces—or, put another way, our devices are playing with us and our data then sold to develop more products and artificiality. Whatever redeeming qualities digital spaces might have are simply not enough to warrant its monopolization of play. I too want to jump up and say: But what about how we connect and share online, or how we organize for political action? Although these statements are true, they conceal the darker realities of Silicon Valley.

Jaron Lanier writes that we have to remain antagonistic toward digital spaces before we ever become a user—we have to learn to hate technology, or we will be lulled into a love affair with it.<sup>5</sup> Lanier lays out why the technological landscape as deployed today is socially, politically, and economically problematic. As a Silicon Valley insider and an early architect of virtual reality, Lanier offers a necessary critique of what he has deemed a “nightmare.” Virtual reality, he argues, is easily becoming “the perfect tool for the perfect, perfectly evil skinner box.”<sup>6</sup> He continues, “it’s clear that with good enough sensors, good enough computation, and good enough sensory feedback, a Skinner box could be implemented around a person in a waking state without that person’s realizing it.”<sup>7</sup> He hypothesizes that what is at play is akin to if we combined Pavlov, Watson, and Skinner into a singular design model, or “if we combine our ever-growing computational powers with behavioral manipulation, shit will hit the fan. Those in power of defining the behavior of the people in the box will have absolute power to bend the world to their will.”<sup>8</sup>

His cautionary tale of digital spaces demands that we “double down on being human” rather than “digital” beings. Lanier reminds readers that early

visions of the internet and virtual reality did not include the manipulation of behavioral data algorithms and ad revenue—we could have made digital spaces a social good. He points to *The Well*, a digital community that still operates today under the early assumptions of “connection”—a place where Addams’ (and Dewey’s) notions of experience and play might be possible in the digital world.<sup>9</sup> In *Dawn of the New Everything*, Lanier describes a childhood rich in *unstructured* and *unscripted* play where he learned to reorder the social order and dream of worlds where this could be possible for all to experience—an aesthetic dream of sorts. A digital dream without the threats of capitalism, colonialism, and empire were not baked into the architecture of the experience. Recently, a group of young computer science kids posed a question to Lanier: “If artificial intelligence (AI) is going to surpass us, if we’ll have no jobs, if we won’t be needed, why did our parents have us? Why are we here?” A devastating question indeed. Why do adults give children devices for “play”? Why do adults send children into digital spaces, or modern playgrounds, spaces whose architecture they themselves do not understand? In short—why did we allow Skinner, Pavlov, and Watson to design playgrounds instead of Addams and Dewey?

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## REFERENCES

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8 Joakim Vindenes, “How Jaron Lanier, ‘The Father of VR,’ Warned Us About Meta,” *Medium*, November 21, 2021, <https://medium.com/@VindenesJ/how-jaron-lanier-the-father-of-vr-warned-us-about-meta-6456bfd05cbc>.

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