An Interview with Matthew Kaiser on Competition and Play

by Sean Scanlan

An External Faculty Fellow at the Stanford Humanities Center, Matthew Kaiser joins the faculty of the University of California, Merced in 2014, having taught Victorian literature and gender and sexuality studies at Harvard, Rutgers, and Shanghai International Studies University.

Contact: mbkaiser@stanford.edu

Sean Scanlan is the founder and editor of *NANO*. He is Assistant Professor of English at New York City College of Technology, where he specializes in literary technologies and American and global literature.

Contact: sscanlan@citytech.cuny.edu

https://nanocrit.com/issues/issue4/matthew-kaiser-interview

Abstract: An Interview with Matthew Kaiser on Competition and Play, by Sean Scanlan. Matthew Kaiser, the author of The World in Play: Portraits of a Victorian Concept (Stanford UP, 2012) says that "[c]ompetition is the disease from which modern life suffers," and that "[c]ompetition is the only cure" for this suffering. This contradictory pairing seems to get at the heart of his thesis: play, as a totalizing, umbrella-like concept, emanates from a host of philosophical, political, and scientific work produced by Victorians who posed many of their ideas of play in sports metaphors, competitive logics, and narratives of struggle. Kaiser goes beyond the dichotomy of competition and play/competition or play, by stating "I'm interested in the totalizing potential of both concepts, the way that play, or competition for that matter, swallows the world whole, becomes in the minds of so many people, the organizing principle of reality, whether of culture or nature or consciousness, or of all three."

Keywords: competition, play, Victorian culture, criticism, literature, sports, leisure

Introduction: Matthew Kaiser is the author of *The World in Play: Portraits of a Victorian Concept* (Stanford UP, 2012) and the editor of five books, including Alan Dale's *A Marriage Below Zero* and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*. In 2012, his article, "Pater's Mouth," received the Donald Gray Prize for best essay published in the field of Victorian studies from the North American Victorian Studies Association. An External Faculty Fellow at the Stanford Humanities Center, he is at work on two books, *Anatomy of History: Cognitive Neuroscience and the Victorian Sense of the Past* and *Confessions of a Dickensian*.

Sean Scanlan: Early in your book you say that "[c]ompetition is the disease from which modern life suffers." And right on the heels of that sentence you write: "[c]ompetition is the only cure." This pairing seems to get at the heart of your thesis, which, if I have it right, is that play, as a totalizing, umbrella-like concept, emanates from a host of philosophical, political, and scientific work produced by Victorians who posed many of their ideas of play in sports metaphors, competitive logics, and narratives of struggle. And literary artists also worked on these themes, often critiquing and extolling competition simultaneously. Can you speak about how competition seems to be play's twin?

Matthew Kaiser: Thank you for your question. Philosophers and cultural critics had been debating the meaning and significance of "play" and "competition" since long before the eighteenth century, the period when my book begins. The debate became quite heated, however, in the nineteenth century. The world itself, it seemed, was suddenly at stake in these debates. What interests me most is not whose definitions are best, or to what degree "play" and "competition" overlap conceptually (and they overlap a lot). I'm interested in the totalizing potential of both concepts, the way that play, or competition for that matter, swallows the world whole, becomes in the minds of so many people, the organizing principle of reality, whether of culture or nature or consciousness, or of all three.

How do people cope emotionally and intellectually when they learn that the cosmos is intrinsically ludic or agonistic? Play and competition certainly give life structure and substance, but they also reduce it (to a game, for instance) in a way that feels false, facile, and suffocating to many of us. I'm interested in how people react when they realize just how pervasive play and competition are, when play and competition become conceptual rabbit holes. For instance, how does one stop competing, overcome one's contestive impulse, when the desire to achieve a more life-affirming or cooperative alternative to competition is itself competitive, a competition with competition? If competition is rooted, as Walter Ong contends, in "againstness," is it possible to be "against" competition, without unwittingly perpetuating the very condition one seeks to remedy? The impulse to be a *better* person, a less self-centered one, is still inspired, after all, by the desire to overcome an obstacle: oneself. My book does not provide definitive answers to these dilemmas, so much as it examines the various ways Victorian thinkers and writers grappled with them.

SS: Reading through your book, I was struck by how you set certain writers in rich oppositions, such as Matthew Arnold set against Alfred Tennyson. The "sweetness and light," that Arnold hopes will guide the culture of modern England is much more optimistic that Tennyson's contemplation of doom. This makes me think of one of the underlying thesis points of your work—that the world is trapped in play, or that play can set the world free. Well, which is it?

MK: One regularly encounters contradictory senses of the word "play" in Victorian literary texts, sometimes even on the same page or in the same sentence. Dickens, for instance, will conflate "play" with notions of wholesome recreation and leisurely self-cultivation in one paragraph, only to associate it with political chaos and working-class mischief in the next. Predators, cynics, and epistemological relativists view the world through a lens of play, but so do angelic children. The concept of "play" is, for many Victorians, indeed, for many of us today, closely connected to modern ideologies of individuality. Hence, play is a powerful expression of freedom in our eyes, as well as a vehicle of normalization. "Play" does a lot of political work. It's a conceptual binding agent. But it does its job so beautifully, so genially, that we sometimes don't notice the violence it masks. That's why we recoil from attempts to unmask play. Play is difficult to face. "Competition" is a different story, of course.

SS: I was particularly interested in your description of childhood play and the role of the body. The idea that especially captured my attention was that a lack of play, an *unludic* attitude, is "[m]ore threatening to the Victorian middle-class ideal of childhood than violent or antisocial play" (111). How does play in its most violent forms get placed on the podium, so to speak, of Victorian culture? Is it merely some contorted view of a winner-take-all Spencerian ideal? As a parent of young children, I find this discussion fascinating and a bit frightening.

MK: For many Victorian scholars of childhood, play represents both the unpredictability of life *and* the biological impulse to manage and shape life, to reform the world by way of rules. So, yes, violent boy sports were easily reconciled in the Victorian imagination with functionalist theories of child play, with the notion, for instance, that competition builds character in boys and young men. Ludic violence in children is often perceived in the nineteenth century as a sign of latent potential, as an indicator of a healthy desire for control. Those children who bully animals, other children, or servants will one day—or so the theory goes—direct that violence at themselves in the form of self-control, thereby ensuring the perpetuation of society. Play is perceived, then, as unruly energy, but also as the managerial act of harnessing that energy. It is the impossible dance of chaos and order that takes place in the hearts of us all. This is why the unludic child, the listless boy or girl who sits out the dance, is viewed as more of a threat to society than the willful brat.

SS: Cognitive neuroscience has both aided and frustrated humanities scholars by enabling new perspectives on feelings and how the mind, brain, and body respond to socialization. One idea that has gotten a lot of traction is that we may be hardwired for narrative—here I'm thinking in particular of *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* by Jonathan Gottschall. How have scholars of play worked with or against cognitive approaches? Do you think that play and competition are part of the human condition?

MK: I'm more inspired than frustrated by the work of cognitive neuroscientists. But I also take seriously the warnings of thoughtful neuroskeptics like Irving Massey. There is a part of me, however, that loves it when literary critics play at science, even ham-fistedly, or when scientists play at literary or art criticism. Academics become tedious when they insist upon having the last word, when they try to "win" every debate. In my view, it's the playful *first* words—those unself-conscious, partial, poetic, scrappy half-thoughts—that make intellectual work possible. The people we call "experts" are just the cleaning crew that tidies up, or codifies and legitimizes and refines, the thought experiments of those clumsy but inspired thinkers who make a beautiful mess of things.

Despite what the neo-Schillerians might say, play doesn't "belong" to the humanities. The more time you spend with play, the more you marvel at its ubiquity. Play is at the heart of all intellectual work. Some of the most creative, innovative, and mischievous thinkers I know are scientists. For a long time now, ludic activities and games, everything from yoga to word puzzles to horseback riding, have been used therapeutically to treat brain trauma, mental illness, and other neurological disorders. Play activities have been shown to promote cognitive functioning in certain patients and to reactivate unresponsive cortical regions in others. It's a very Victorian idea, actually, the equation of play with cognitive development.

As for cognitive approaches to play in the *humanities*, I'm more intrigued, frankly, by work being done in the field of cognitive linguistics than in cognitive narratology, although the latter has its attractions. Take metaphor. Metaphor and play are closely related, of course, insofar as they constitute simultaneity, or a cross-pollination of sorts, between different orders: the tenor and vehicle, in the case of metaphor, the real and fantastical, in the case of play. Thanks to George Lakoff and other cognitive linguists, we now understand the centrality of metaphor to cognition, how metaphors function as the building blocks of even our most basic thoughts. And thanks to advances in neuroimaging technology, scientists can now study metaphor at the neurophysiological level. Metaphor appears to entail an in-phase oscillation of neurons in different, sometimes remote, cortical regions. Thus, the metaphor "He's a cold person" causes neurons in the region devoted to temperature perception to fire at the same rate as neurons in emotion centers of the brain. Perhaps consciousness itself, the phenomenon of "self," is a product of neural play—as Antonio Damasio might say—among various body maps or somatic representations in our decentered nervous systems, like mirrors reflecting each other's reflections. The experience of "self" is a multidimensional reflection, a representation come to life.

Are human beings hardwired to play and compete? I don't know. I don't like the metaphor "hardwired." It depresses me. That said, all animals with complex central nervous systems engage in behavior that we call "play" and "competition." And competition *is* ludic, insofar as it entails inhabiting two mental orders or parallel worlds at once: a rival's reality and one's own. The animals "enter" each other's minds, mirror each other neurally, in order to anticipate each other's movements and responses. Conscious competition requires it. The real question, it seems to me, is not "What is play?" but "What *isn't* play?" When are our minds *not* playing?

Empathy, after all, is a form of play. To empathize is to step through the looking glass of another mind.

SS: Peter Brooks helps you notice play's links to major historical transformations. In particular, you say that British forms of play, especially melodrama, are not exactly like the French revolution's effects on French culture, which was one of cataclysmic collapse. Instead, British forms of melodrama play were rooted in "economic anxiety, alienation, and an uncanny sense of being out of place" (55). Can you make a similar type of analogy or comparison to talk about the historical foundations of US play? What I mean is, if the revolution informs play in France, and the industrial revolution informs British play, what upheavals helped consecrate play in the US? For example, what did colonialism or perhaps radical individualism have to do with "our" ideas of play?

MK: Actually, I was making a more narrow point about the ethic of fair play in working-class melodrama, and how differences between British and French texts can be attributed to their different economic and political contexts. However, the question of how significantly the "historical foundations" of play vary in the West across national borders is an intriguing one. Victorian travel writers certainly viewed play through a lens of "national character," often to disturbing effect. I'm not an Americanist, so I don't want to make sweeping generalizations about the historical foundations of play in the U.S. But I'll say this: Victorian travel writers loved depicting the United States as ludic—to the point of absurdity. The dominant play tropes that shaped Victorian representations of the New World are alive and well in twenty-first-century British texts about America. The United States is childlike, for example, a place of juvenile experimentation and crude innovation. Or, the United States is a vast natural playground, where the aleatory forces of the cosmos scatter fixity and certainty to the wind. Or, the United States is a land of brute competition, primitive and simultaneously hyper-modern, unrestrained individualism having replaced custom as the organizing principle of society. And my favorite, and Dickens's too: the United States is two-faced, a nation built on slavery and a nation built on freedom—a country pretending to be what it is not, yet pretending itself into existence. Were these Victorian travelers onto something? Perhaps. Then again, tourism is such a ludic activity. The tourist sees the world through a veil of play. It's difficult to find a nineteenth-century British travel narrative, whether about an Arctic expedition or a trek through the Holy Land, that isn't saturated with play.

SS: What sort of pop culture forms of play do you think are particularly interesting these days? Is the global attraction to reality TV a sort of mutation or meta-mutation of the world in play? It seems like the created, fictional worlds of reality TV are not so much an invented world laid on top of the real world, but rather an invented world woven into the actual world. Do these forms of entertainment reinforce the need for play and the fantasy of "reality" in reality TV, or do these shows harmfully blur the differences between the worlds? [a possible sidebar to this question is how competitive and nasty people become, or are encouraged to become, in these shows.]

MK: That's a great description of reality TV. You've made me feel less ashamed of my addiction to *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*. I'm currently teaching one of my Harvard lecture

courses on sexuality in Shanghai, so it's been a *long* time since I've had a dose of American pop culture.

One thing I've noticed, speaking of sexuality and the so-called "developing world," is how gay sexuality, and non-reproductive sexuality more generally, is increasingly associated around the world with the ludic, sometimes negatively, but not always. I've encountered many people in China, for instance, who associate same-sex desire with globalized pop culture, with an aspirational consumerism, with recreational self-fashioning. For better or worse, gay rights are now seen as *play rights*, the right to have fun. It's a testament to the enduring power of the Victorian idea that one's individuality, indeed, one's humanity, is inextricably linked to one's leisurely pursuits. Talk about Homo ludens!

In the twenty-first century, LGBT people have become model citizens of a globalized world in play. I see the rise of anti-gay violence around the world, the backlash against same-sex marriage, for instance, in places like Russia or Central Africa, not simply as the rage of the traditional against the modern, or the mushroom against the orchid, as Oscar Wilde would say, but as fear of a world structured by non-agonistic or, conversely, by non-communitarian play. Homophobic violence is as much about reasserting masculine or majoritarian control over play as it is about punishing sexual minorities. It's about contesting leisure itself, pitting either competition or collectivist bonding against autotelic recreation. It's about punishing those whose subjectivities are aligned with ludic self-cultivation, which is seen as superficial and cosmopolitan and artificial. Clashing ethics of play, I predict, will shape human rights debates in the twenty-first century.

SS: Early in your book, you say that the "world in play is a disturbing idea; it disturbs *me*" (9). I wonder if you could talk about your personal interaction and history with the world in play and the world at play. Was there some "aha" moment that launched this project, or did your study of play emerge slowly and organically out of some other topic or personal experience?

MK: When I was a kid, I was a bit of a contradiction: a rebellious brat and a sensitive idealist. At seventeen, I ran away from home, joined a slew of radical organizations, the Socialist Workers Party of America, Queer Nation, you name it. I was a hardcore goth for awhile. Instead of preparing for the SATs, I spent my formative years fleeing reality, looking for people who wanted to *play* utopia into existence with me. It was silly. Imagine Marcuse, but with black lipstick and acne, nesting with street punks. That's me. It's only natural, I suppose, that I would write about play now, about how play provides us with perspective on the ways of the world.

So, play is my version of skepticism, of ideological critique. Skepticism is at the heart of what we do in the humanities. But over time, if we are not careful, our skepticism threatens to become its opposite: certainty, close-mindedness, zealotry. Thinking ethically means learning to be skeptical of our own skepticism. That's what I tried to do in *The World in Play*. I set out to write a very different book than the one I eventually produced. It was originally intended to be an exploration of the utopian dimensions of play in the Victorian period, an account of how certain writers and thinkers embraced the ludic as a world-transforming force. Then, some mischievous

little voice within goaded me into turning my paradigm on its head. I forced myself to look, instead, at the dark side of play, to see past my self-interest as a proponent of play, to imagine a Victorian world not *at* play, but trapped *in* play, normalized, constrained, ensnared by play. I recast play—this benign concept I had always admired—as a monster. I exposed its totalizing tendencies. It was important that I betray play, so that it did not become a god to me. What's that famous Howard Thurman quote? "A bigot is a person who makes an idol of his commitments." An ethical book is an exercise in self-critique.

SS: I have to ask: what games, sports, or other activities do you play?

MK: On the A Train in New York, I play Hello Kitty Bubble Shooter. It's one of my favorite apps. Hello Kitty must pop as many multicolored bubbles as she can before they land on her head.