



A Brief Introduction to Competition and Play

by Sean Scanlan

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<https://nanocrit.com/issues/issue4/competition-play-introduction>

Abstract: In this introduction to Special Issue 4, *NANO* editor Sean Scanlan highlights the articles and interviews on competition and play. First is an interview with Matthew Kaiser, the author of *The World in Play: Portraits of a Victorian Concept* (Stanford UP, 2012). The second note, "Exhaustion of Leisure: Identity and Cycling," by Finn Kolsrud examines amateur bicycling from a sociological perspective. In the third note, "Community in Competition: The American Birkebeiner Cross-Country Ski Race," teacher and skier Tim Donahue meditates on the intricate balance of independence and dependence necessary in mass-start competitive Nordic ski races. Lastly, an interview with artist, curator, art historian and critical theorist Michael Betancourt, discusses the nature of agnotology.

Keywords: play, competition, sports, bicycling, Victorian era, cross-country skiing, agnotology, criticism, theory

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Four ideas jump-start this special issue of *NANO* on competition and play.

1: A quick look into the *Oxford English Dictionary* reveals interesting contradictions. The prefix “com” means to come together, yet the usual sense of competition is to strive, or the “action of endeavouring to gain what another endeavours to gain at the same time.” So, there is a sense that competition means both to join and to try to get ahead. The second definition of the verb “compete” is also instructive: “[t]o strive *with* another, *for* the attainment of a thing, *in* doing something.” Stretching this idea a bit, then, competition requires others to be present, and in some sense, it requires playing together and for oneself.

2: The word “play” has an older etymological history than the word competition. The Old English *plaega*, was replaced with more common “play” in the 17th century. It means “Exercise, brisk or free movement or action.” But, additionally, it seems to connote the presence of others: “Active bodily exercise or movement; brisk and vigorous action of the body or limbs, as in fighting, fencing, dancing, leaping, etc.”

3: Fast forward to more modern usage, when competition is integral to capitalism. Karl Marx was energetically conflicted by competition. On the one hand, in *Poverty of Philosophy* he says competition “is necessary [...] for the *advent of equality*.” And on the other hand, he says that “[i]ts most certain result is to ruin those whom it drags in its train.”

4: Competition is also part of Charles Darwin’s idea of natural selection. In the chapter “Extinction,” he says that the theory of natural selection is grounded on the belief that each new variety and ultimately each new species, is produced and maintained by having some advantage over those with which it comes into competition; and the consequent extinction of the less favoured forms almost inevitably follows” (371). But if, as he continues, “competition will generally be most severe [...] between the forms which are most like each other in all respects,” then how to explain sports and play among homo sapiens, especially as so many human activities require constant cooperation? Since then, scientists such as Peter Kropotkin have suggested that survival is very complicated and that mutual aid may be part of evolving systems.

These ideas set the stage for a special issue on how competition and play revolutionized Victorian work, how these ideas operate in endurance sports, and how they might get remade in digital spaces.

This special issue on Competition and Play begins with an interview with Matthew Kaiser, the author of *The World in Play: Portraits of a Victorian Concept* (Stanford UP, 2012). In his book, Kaiser 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.” [Read the full interview here.](#)

The second note, “Exhaustion of Leisure: Identity and Cycling,” reveals a different, but related, idea of competing for or against. Finn Kolsrud examines amateur bicycling from a sociological perspective, relying on interviews and the concepts of exhaustion and flow. Kolsrud’s project examines the ways that the drive to compete gets mixed with the drive to get ahead: “I came to understand that the amount of time, effort, and discipline that even amateurs devote to cycling can resemble the professional, daily work lives of those same individuals. [...] My beginning research question was: how do the interactions amateur cyclists have via racing events and training shape their identity?” His findings give him some surprise; he assumes that “badass” culture would define the racers’ mindset, but he finds that sharing stories and sharing the workload are just as important. In the end, Kolsrud describes a complex “civilizing process” to racing and training that emerges when he more closely investigates the concept of flow. His ending questions complicate any easy notion that hyper-masculine drives must always form the foundation of bicycle racing ethos. [Read the full note here.](#)

In the third note, “Community in Competition: The American Birkebeiner Cross-Country Ski Race,” teacher and skier Tim Donahue meditates on the intricate balance of independence and dependence necessary in mass-start competitive Nordic ski races. Skiing is old. According to Mark Jenkins writing in *National Geographic*, this form of transportation may have originated 10,000 years ago, and countries such as Norway, Russia, and China try to establish their roots as the oldest. In modern times, few people use skis as transportation, but each year, millions of people in colder climates enjoy cross-country skiing for recreation and fitness. And those familiar with the Winter Olympics know that it is also a serious sport. Donahue is particularly interested in exploring the idea of the “train,” in which a large group of skiers bind together like a pack to harness group dynamics in the largest ski race in North America, the 50 kilometer American Birkebeiner, in Hayward, Wisconsin. In Donahue’s own words, the train motivates a sort of “tacit trust,” that “not only helps with the physical rigor, but it frees the grating and exhausting menace of anxiety as well. A group that can move efficiently and responsibly, without the high-school antics of constant attacks and ‘boxing out,’ will simply spare its energy better.” The key, implies Donahue, is knowing and deciding when to compete *with* and when to compete *against*. [Read the full note here.](#)

And lastly, in an interview with artist, curator, art historian and critical theorist Michael Betancourt, we discuss the nature of agnotology, a term that means the “creation of uncertainty and ambivalent ‘fact’; it is a competitive tool incompatible with the *idealized* ‘free market’ of capitalism.” Betancourt is skeptical of Big Data and the ways that the consumers who unknowingly “produce” data for business interpretation are increasingly becoming transformed into a “token of exchange (valorized) by the database.” He contends that soon enough,

businesses will not compete with each other, but instead will compete directly “with their customers as ‘Big Data’ becomes an increasingly intrusive part of the agnotological marketplace.” In this conversation, we discuss the ways that social media and digital marketplaces seem to undermine the free market and subvert assumed relationships between sellers and buyers and between producers and consumers. [Read the full interview here.](#)

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