At its core, *The Rule Book: The Building Blocks of Games* is a text offering a comprehensive understanding of rules’ ubiquity, complexity, and impact across digital and analog games. Using a theoretical lens dubbed “constructionist ludology,” which positions games as social constructions that are heavily informed by the regulations scaffolding them, Jaako Stenros and Markus Montola separate rules into five distinct categories: formal, internal, social, external regulation, and material. With these conceptual distinctions, *The Rule Book* works through and disentangles the “mangle of play” by articulating how rules are intimately intertwined with other constitutive elements (such as fiction, narrative, and media representation) while calling attention to their situation as cultural phenomena—not in spite of, but in concert with, the procedures inherent to any particular game.[1] These categorizations are shown to be intersectional; each of the typologies may intersect with the others in ways that make gameplay meaningful to those who partake within a particular spatiotemporal moment. Rules then guide subsequent experiences due to the generation and maintenance of “endogenous systems,” co-constructions that have contextual meaning but might not bear any weight beyond the game itself.[2] For example, *Settlers of Catan* (1995-2015) resource cards and tokens hold no inherent value beyond the confines of the game but are crucial to the navigation and completion of a play session. These endogenous meanings are portrayed as drivers that keep people returning to games because of the experiential value shared between players and uniting past, present, and future experience(s). As such, *The Rule Book* showcases how the organizing power of rules moves into and out of gaming space, guiding the interactions that constitute so much of our social lives while simultaneously reminding readers to consider how they are linked to power and cultural domination (*who* is allowed to play a particular game, and *under what* conditi-
tions?). The Rule Book is therefore another reminder that games exist within a “magic circle” of play, but also beside and beyond it; they are emblematic of the social, cultural, and material conditions encompassing them (Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens ILS 86 [2014]).

The Rule Book’s foremost strength is its accessible, sequential mapping of the rule categories described above, interspersed with numerous examples of games in which they are employed. By beginning with formal rules, Stenros and Montola allow readers to familiarize themselves with their basic tenets and importance; audiences are brought up to speed as to how and why formalization matters (that is, differentiating between constitutive and regulative rules, a distinction grounded in whether rules constitute new activity or regulate play) and why tension exists between codification and inferred design principles. In other words, The Rule Book explores what it means to play by the rules and the ludological, social, and cultural implications that may occur when we—the players—bend or break them. Internal rules, covered by the second chapter, underscore player interpretation(s) of formal rules, the influence of social connections encircling games, and the external regulation and materiality that ensure subjectivity and variation between games. The third chapter, covering social rules, situates the social as tradition; understanding and competency generated through lived experience influence our interactions with new games and affect how we play those familiar to us. Likewise, external regulation (covered in The Rule Book’s fourth chapter) emphasizes the influence of culture, societal values, and even legal environments in which games are played. For instance, there are myriad examples of games and play being restricted or prohibited altogether based on their intersections with things like gambling, alcohol or other substance use, violence, gender identity, and player age. The last chapter, focusing on material rules, reminds readers that games are kept grounded by the material conditions in which they are played and that an attempt to understand games is also to reconcile their sociocultural and physical context: “Balls do not bounce if bouncy material is missing or if the lack of gravity does not bring the ball back down” (p. 169). As the book points out, in the case of ancient games for which we possess no written rules (such as the ancient Egyptian game Senet), we are relegated to understanding them vis-à-vis what material artifacts we have been able to recover. However, The Rule Book reminds readers that materiality alone does not dictate the way a game is felt, experienced, or otherwise conceptualized by players; the constructionist ludological view suggests nearly anything can be made into a game with the simple implementation of a few rules—formal and social—thereby extending gameplay into contexts hitherto unexpected.

For all of its accessibility and careful attention to various perspectives on the philosophies of rules and play, the weight of this text’s technical terminology may feel overwhelming to some. The Rule Book introduces many key terms and ideas, replete with explication and the intermittent case example cutaway. For those unfamiliar with game studies, the volume of this jargon might be perceived as formidable or, in some cases, too complex. The natural counterweight to this realization is time—while written with accessibility in mind, The Rule Book does not appear to be a text meant to be finished in one sitting. Indeed, the subtext throughout is that audiences, fans of digital or analog games alike, can and should return to their gameplay to reconsider how rules shape the sense-making of their favorite games. Perhaps more so than some headier philosophizing applied to other areas, this allows readers to observe The Rule Book’s contents directly in their own gaming experience(s), providing a tangibility otherwise lost amongst the more abstract theorizing provided elsewhere.

The Rule Book is a welcome read for scholars who work in and around game studies and communication and media studies more broadly. In-
deed, *The Rule Book* reminds its audience that rules extend well beyond games and can be understood via the lens of things like communication theory (such as communication systems), the sociology of play (that is, highlighting how rules govern socialization and vary based on spatiotemporal and cultural context), and new and emerging media (such as how rule-based interactions evolve on and around emerging media forms). *The Rule Book* may be of interest to scholars of ludology, anthropology, cultural studies, and even legal studies; with so much of contemporary daily life being affected by games and playfulness, scholars from across the social sciences and humanities will find something worthwhile for them in its chapters.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that *The Rule Book* may be particularly interesting to those who teach introductory game studies at the undergraduate level, especially if read alongside critical/cultural texts like Aaron Trammell’s *Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology* (2023). Emerging subfields like postcolonial game studies will find *The Rule Book’s* systematic overview of rules helpful in locating (for eventual critique) the canon of Western play theory established by thinkers like Huzinga and Roger Caillois (*Man, Play, and Games* [2001]). Quotes abound regarding the need to learn rules properly before breaking them; perhaps a more poignant conclusion to this review lies in *The Rule Book’s* assertion that our negotiation of rules, no matter their consequence, begets the very praxis of gameplay in the first place.

Notes


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