A review of *Pastplay: Teaching and Learning History with Technology* by Adam P. Barger, Ph.D.

“Community, relationship, and play” is the simple and succinct premise referenced by editor Kevin Kee in the recently published volume entitled *Pastplay: Teaching and Learning History with Technology* (2014). Volume contributor Stephen Ramsay proclaims community, relationship, and play to be the best approach to navigating the complex role of technology in the humanities. According to Kee, this approach is the mantra of *Pastplay* as contributors seek to help bridge the gap between two seemingly opposite paradigms. The first is the traditional approach to teaching and learning history as experienced and appreciated by many academics and educators. The second paradigm is a modern approach to the discipline; one characterized by digital technologies and potentially limitless access to information. Rather than taking a position of advocating technology as a cure-all for teaching and learning history, the authors advocate a “playful” perspective from which historians and educators can work in community to utilize technology and interact with the discipline in new ways. *Pastplay* contributors provide a thorough and effective defense of this perspective in what is likely to be a continuing conversation in the field.

Kee explains the primary concern of this collection is to discuss technology as applied to the discipline of history rather than the subject. To that end, the twenty-two contributing authors do not specifically address pedagogy or content. Instead, each chapter contains a unique approach to utilizing technology to support thinking about the past in new or different ways. The book is organized according to four general foci: Teaching and Learning History, Playfully, With Technology, and By Building. Each section offers readers varied perspectives regarding the affordances and constraints of playing with technology in history.
Authors of the first section, Teaching and Learning History, discuss how history is framed in the educational world. Specifically, they trace the growing focus on historical thinking as a necessary skill within the discipline of history and how technology relates to its development. As contributors Sandwell and Lutz describe in their chapter entitled “What Has Mystery Got to Do with It”, the importance of scaffolding historiographical methods can enhance the access to vast repositories of digital primary sources and provide more focused use of such resources. Similarly, Levy and Dawson describe the leveraging of technology to create virtual reconstructions of artifacts that no longer exist for observation. Their chapter, “Interactive Worlds as Educational Tools for Understanding Arctic Life” provides meaningful examples of public archaeology providing learners the opportunities to study aspects of arctic life that are encountered only through technology and digital reconstruction. Throughout this first section of Pastplay, the reader is continually reminded of how technology can clearly provide opportunities to interact with history in new and engaging ways. However, questions of balancing engagement and entertainment are more fully addressed in part two.

The second section, entitled “Playfully”, most directly addresses the arguments for a playful perspective on technology and history. Contributors offer current examples of teaching and learning history through gameplay while arguing that game-like methods have been a part of western thinking for generations. From Socratic dialogues to Google searches, the authors point to playful engagement as a natural, though somewhat limited learning activity. This perspective is convincingly refined by Gouglas, Ilovan, Lucky, and Russell in their presentation entitled “Abort, Retry, Pass, Fail: Games as Teaching Tools. Gouglas et al. frame the significance of gaming to promote inquiry within the challenge of designing gameplay to support high-level learning activities such as dialogue and debate. More theoretical, though profoundly less
practical, is Nowviskie’s chapter “Ludic Algorithms”, which details the history of algorithms as a learning tool. This is one of very few contributions that miss the mark of exploring useful applications technology play in history. However readers will note a significant turn towards the practical as well-documented attempts to promote learning through inquiry and discovery fill the remaining pages of *Pastplay*.

The final sections of the volume, entitled “With Technology” and “By Building”, provide readers with various applications of exploring history through hands-on and highly engaging methods. In many ways, the second half of the book is the actual practice of “play” built upon the theoretical foundation of the earlier contributors. Applications range from traditional computer gameplay to game creation, game modification, and even 3D construction of models to promote what Turkel and Elliott term “experimental history” (p. 180). Behind all of these applications lies an important theme of purposeful play. As elucidated by McCall in his chapter entitled “Simulation Games and the Study of the Past: Classroom Guidelines, “… gameplay must offer defensible explanations of historical causes and systems” (p. 232). From this perspective, games and other technology applications will, of course, undergo continual scrutiny as the field develops. Social and political scrutiny from beyond the confines of academia is a part of the journey towards purposeful play. As noted by Kirschenbaum in “Contests for Meaning: Playing King Philip’s War in the Twenty-First Century”, games and their perceived meanings can have political ramifications that further complicate the role of play in educational gaming. Should events characterized by killing and death be part of gameplay? Should political complexities influence gaming applications in learning environments? These questions are not easily answered, but they are an important part of the discussion presented in this section.
Pastplay contributors succeed in presenting a convincing case that the discipline of history can be enhanced through “playfully” utilizing technology to think about the past in new ways. The collection offers a timely and unique approach to practical as well as theoretical developments in an ever-changing field. Notably summarized by Compeau and MacDougall in their discussion of alternate reality games, history gameplay should “unite mechanics and subject, procedure and context, what players do and what we hope they learn to avoid simply teaching students how to play the game, but rather encouraging learning” (p. 93). Playing to encourage learning is very well supported in Pastplay and the discussion started within will certainly continue.

Kee’s afterword claims the co-equal purpose of the volume is to honor the roots of the discipline. This claim is not convincingly substantiated and did not come through as a central premise throughout. The extremely varied perspectives represented in Pastplay do more to support unique technological applications than traditional historical learning methods. Noticeably absent is a discussion of how technology supports the activities of established or aspiring historians. Despite these shortfalls, Pastplay contains a trove of applications for teachers and learners.

Researchers in the field as well teacher educators and educational technologists will find Pastplay a useful resource for reference and discussion. Researchers will find new and intriguing approaches to engaging with historical sources. Similarly, teacher educators and educational technologists will benefit from the discussions of innovative technology applications that take unique approaches to teaching and learning in both K-12 and higher education environments. Perhaps the most applicable aspect of Pastplay is the experimental perspective taken by many of the contributors and their efforts to approach the history and technology in nontraditional ways.
In the spirit of what Kee and his fellow contributors wanted to accomplish, a more lasting influence of the book will be the ongoing community, relationship, and play that continues from the further exploration of teaching and learning history with technology.

References