

**BOOK REVIEW**  
***The digital is kid stuff:  
Making creative laborers for a precarious economy***



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**Book review**

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Digital media has evolved dramatically in the past twenty years. A large part of our lives now exists in the online world, and we are aware that the development of digital media has implications for our daily lives. The focus is mainly on the youngest generation, who have practically grown up with digital media from birth. Adults are watching this youth closely to see if this fact has any significant impact on their lives, behavior, and creativity. They are trying to understand and interpret all these rapid changes because “notions of children and childhood have become central components to [their] understanding and shaping of an ever-changing world” (Selwyn, 2003, p. 351). But how adults perceive today’s children may have nothing to do with their everyday reality. The discourses that accompany children and their creativity in the digital world are what Josef Nguyen, an assistant professor of critical media studies at the University of Texas at Dallas, set out to address in his first book *The Digital Is Kid Stuff: Making Creative Laborers for a Precarious Economy* that was published by the University of Minnesota Press in December 2021.

Nguyen offers very different examples of children’s creativity in four main chapters called *Minecraft and the Building Blocks of Creative Individuality*, *Make Magazine and the Responsible Risks of DIY Innovation*, *Instagram and the Creative Filtering of Authentic Selves* and *Design Fiction and the Imagination of Technological Futures*. Although each of the chapters could also be a stand-alone piece, the chapters are united by the same theme - describing the ideas and expectations of adults towards children and adolescents, who are the future of the creative economy. In addition, Nguyen’s book captures this phenomenon at all stages of adolescence, from children to teenagers to adults. Through chapters on children’s widely popular game *Minecraft*, the DIY magazine for parents *Make*, the visually based social network Instagram, or design fiction, he promises readers to explore what we are to make of creative digital youth.

Nguyen argues that creativity is attributed to children, and today’s children in particular, as a natural and socially expected quality. The presented book, set in the context of the USA, is more a study of images and discourses about youth rather than of youth itself (p. 2), which we would probably predict from the title. In the book’s content, however, we can consider the adult rather than the child as the main object of interest.

In the Introduction, Nguyen presents various aims of the book and emphasizes that his primary interest is “how youth, digital media, and creativity are imagined closely together as part of broader creative economy

discourses” (p. 20). Researchers have previously pointed out that adults’ perceptions of children’s lives in the digital world often do not intersect with reality. For example, danah boyd, whom Nguyen also cites in his book, wrote: “For adults to hear the voices of youth, they must let go of their nostalgia and suspend their fears. This is not easy” (2014, p. 17). And Nguyen tries to capture these fears and expectations using concrete examples.

Through different chapters, Nguyen places various mainstream discourses in the context of gender or race which adds another significant dimension to the book. It makes it easier to understand how the multiple images of “creative youth” are and always have been constructed. These insights have a perfectly logical place in the discussion of digital youth and creativity, and the author emphasizes them.

Nguyen manages to draw the reader in right away in the decisive first chapter, which deals with the gaming phenomenon *Minecraft* that influenced and still influences children worldwide. In this game, the main aim is to survive on an island using the available resources. The metaphor of desert island is something that has been around in culture for centuries. Nguyen works with parallels to Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, and Thomas More’s *Utopia*. He reminds us that being on a desert island shows the contradiction between individual autonomy and social belonging. The island is also seen as a place for experimenting and exploring unusual solutions, and therefore for developing creativity, as in this video game, where young players are expected to become digital creators while playing (p. 47) and to participate in its large community. This chapter is the best constructed as the author explains his points in a complex and engaging manner. The chapter also exudes the author’s passion for the game, which was probably one of the reasons why he chose this example and how well he did. He supplements the text with images from the game and succeeds in enhancing the text with appropriate pictorial appendices throughout the book.

In the following chapter, Nguyen examines American magazine *Make* which is intended for parents who want to encourage their children to “be makers”. This time, the author addresses the relationship between creation, responsibility, and risk. The magazine depicts children who must try, discover, create, and take risks under adult supervision. Risk-taking is considered essential for innovation and economic success (p. 73). In the case of this magazine’s view, parents are the ones who are responsible for being natural risk-takers

themselves and at the same time educating their children to become innovators and risk-takers over time who would contribute to the creative economy (p. 76).

In one of the subchapters, the author also draws attention to *Craft* magazine, which later emerged as a variant of *Make* for girls, which contains instructions for more “soft” creative activities and projects for girls. It supports the age-old stereotype of men putting themselves through hard work and risk and tender women taking care of the household. In addition, Nguyen notes that *Make* magazine excludes other groups from its target audience when its content revolves around middle-class white men and their sons. In contrast to the previous chapter, the author’s view of the described subject, *Make* magazine, is apparently negative.

Adolescence is inseparably linked to the use of social networks. That’s probably why Nguyen, in chapter three, addresses the topic of the development of social networks and their effects on young people, which some adults, who also use them, see as dangerous and some as beneficial. He focuses on selfies and Instagram, believing these two become synonymous (p. 93). In this case, how Instagram users choose to present themselves and what they show to whom is recognized as creative (p. 104). The phenomenon of selfies that are, as Nguyen claims, typical for adolescent girls and have become both a symbol and an object of mockery has also been a popular subject of various scholars. Nguyen, therefore, understandably works with quotes from others and sums up what has been said about the sense of this phenomenon. While Nguyen’s chapter on creative youth on Instagram is not particularly new, it is a worthwhile contribution to the ongoing discussion.

Nguyen tries to explain why designers are seen as the ideal laboring subjects of a creative economy in the last chapter of his debut (p. 128). The cycle ends in the fourth chapter, which no longer explores youth, but adults who have developed their creativity in childhood. Specifically, designers are expected to find inspiration for their futuristic and innovative work in their childhood experiences. Nguyen emphasizes that design is strongly connected to the (creative) future and our imagination, so he talks simultaneously about futurism and innovation fiction. He adds plenty of examples to support adults’ imagination of youth’s creativity. At the same time, he reiterates that “not all youth are granted the same access to childhood, to innocence, to imagination, or to their own futures. (p. 160)” It is something he emphasizes and wants the reader to take away from his book. The stress on social inequalities and

our heavily distorted ideas about childhood and creativity are among the leitmotifs of this book, and it is in these passages that the author is most vital.

In conclusion, Josef Nguyen, who is currently working on his second book, is able to draw on the works of relevant authors, extract what is essential from their works and add further context. Therefore, his debut can be a beneficial resource for all scholars interested in digital youth in relation to creativity and the creative economy. However, it may also interest a broader audience, e.g., designers, teachers, or parents. Unfortunately, some of the examples he has chosen to expose the phenomena are linked to American culture and may be distant or irrelevant to readers in other parts of the world. At the same time, those who set out to read this book with the prospect of learning more about children’s digital world and how children’s activity in the online space is supposed to achieve creativity will not know much afterward. Most of the text is about adults and their perceptions of children and teens concerning the creative economy. The reader has to reckon with that. In summary, however, Nguyen’s book *The Digital Is Kid Stuff: Making Creative Laborers for a Precarious Economy* is a successful and thought-provoking debut.

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