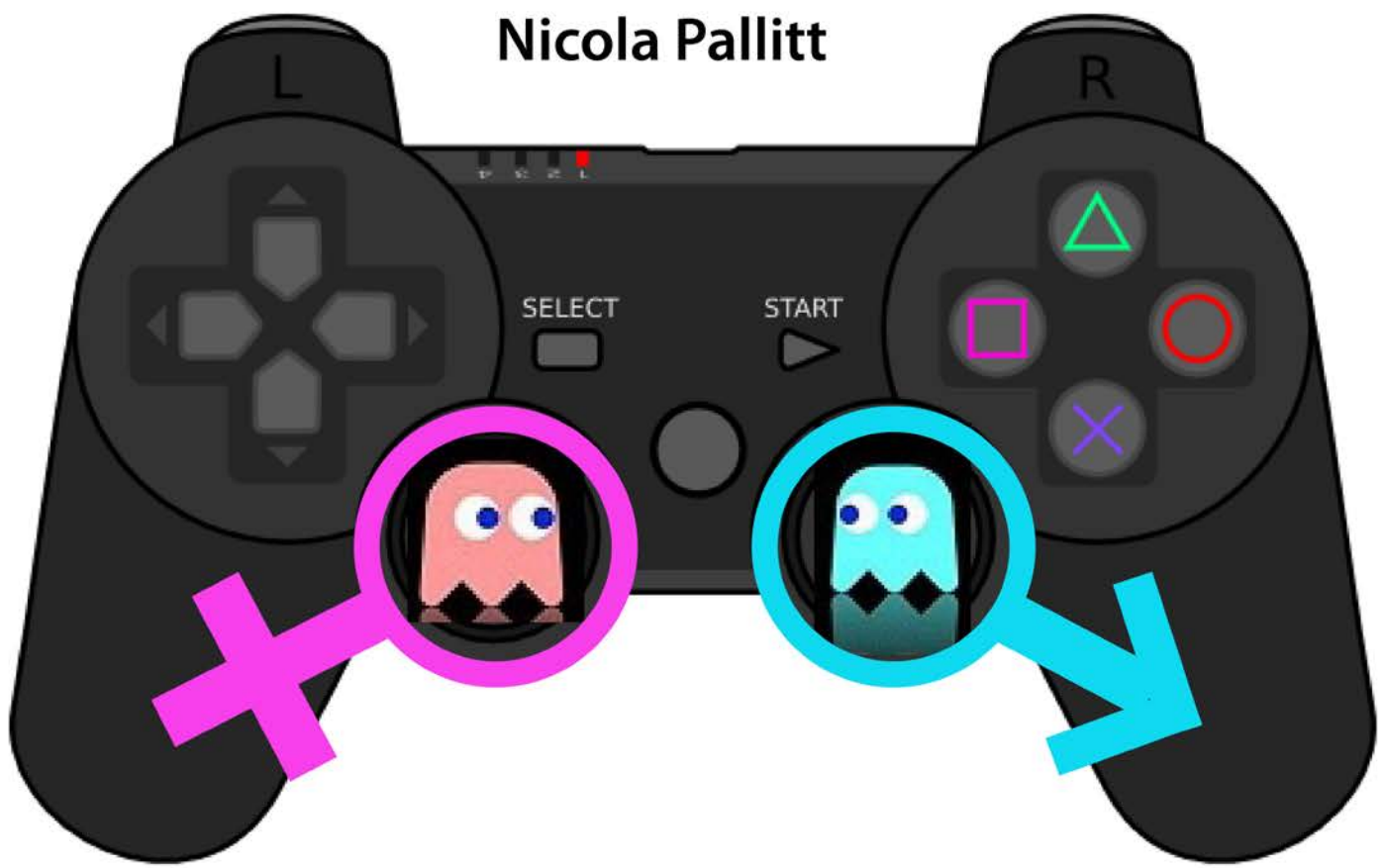# Gender identities at play:

children's digital gaming in two settings in Cape Town

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Gender identities at play:

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Abstract

This thesis investigates children's gaming relationships with peers in out-of-school settings, and explores their interpretation of digital games as gendered media texts. As an interdisciplinary study, it combines insights from Childhood Studies, Cultural Studies, Game Studies, domestication and performance theory. The concept *ludic gendering* is developed in order to explain how gender 'works' in games, as designed semiotic and ludic artefacts. Ludic gendering also helps to explain the appropriation of games through gameplay, and the interpretation of gendered rules and representations. The study expands on audience reception research to account for children's 'readings' of digital games. Social Network Analysis (SNA) is used to study gaming relationships. Combining SNA with broadly ethnographic methods provided a systematic way of investigating children's peer relationships and gendered play. The study finds that children responded to ludic gendering, performed gender and other identities for peers, and navigated meanings of games in contextual ways. Children preferred less-strongly-gendered games for cross-sex play in both fieldsites. They transgressed hegemonic styles of gaming associated with boys and girls during borderwork with peers, where they performed gender identities in response to the activation of gender differences during cross-sex play. Children's gaming was also marked by their playground practices, suggesting that the domestication of games in after-school settings involves drawing on these practices while appropriating digital games for peer play. Familiar playground practices such as dramatic role-play, playground sexualities and heterosexual games were all salient in children's gameplay. Children negotiated meanings of game rules to orchestrate their own social scripts in service of performing peer relationships and gender identities. They also learned to amuse their peers or to send up authority through 'remix' strategies. In some cases, children's digital gameplay involved transgression and parody of adult discourses about childhood innocence, age and gender norms. The prevalence of meta-gaming illustrates how games were domesticated in ways unique to the fieldsites, where specific spatial arrangements, turn-taking and time constraints informed varieties of play. These kinds of 'learning' and domestication tactics form part of children's peer pedagogy.

(333 words)

Chapter 1: Introduction

It is probably no mere historical accident that the word *person*, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role...It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves.
–Erving Goffman quoting Robert Ezra Park (1990, p. 30)

… what exists is far from filling all possible spaces… What can be played?
–Michael Foucault (1997, p. 139-140)

The gender and games nexus has been a popular topic in contemporary Game Studies research, and Feminist Game Studies in particular. Scholarship in this emerging field has come a long way since Cassell and Jenkins's *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* (1999), one of the first collections of research on gender and games. According to a more recent definition, "Feminist Game Studies examines how gender – and its intersections with race, class, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, nation and other axes of power – is produced, represented, consumed and practiced in and through digital games" (Huntemann, 2012). Differential power relations between children and adults can be considered an additional dynamic[1]. This thesis introduces the concept *ludic gendering* to describe the social process whereby games are interpreted as gendered based on their ludic and representational dimensions. This gameplay study explores the interplay between children's responses to ludic gendering in games, and their gaming relationships to provide a nuanced understanding of how children appropriate digital games and play to signify gender and other identities. The study investigates small groups of South African middle-class children's play practices in after-school settings, and analyses their identity performances from a Cultural Studies and Childhood Studies perspective.

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[1] I acknowledge the politics of naming and will refer to my research participants as 'children' rather than 'learners' (which assumes that children are always learning in educational contexts, even after-school), tweens (marketing discourse where the role of girls as consumers is foregrounded), 'players' or 'kids'. I have chosen the word 'children' because it suggests particular power relationships with adult society, in addition to being an age-defined category.

This study contributes to research on digital games in the Global South[2] – an under-researched area – and considers children's appropriations of games. Children's gaming has a particular kind of relationship between design and domestication. Children mark gameplay through gender tactics in their play with peers and transform these technological objects in the process, giving rise to contextual meanings. Childhood Studies (Corsaro, 2009) helps to explore digital games within children's peer cultures, and in their relationships with adult society. This study builds on domestication theory (Silverstone, 1994) by paying closer attention to children's peer groups, an important feature of children's everyday lives, often excluded from notions of 'domestic' settings. It also makes a contribution to Game Studies where children's voices are largely absent: adult-centric interpretations of digital (often individual) play continue to define how gameplay is theorised and investigated by researchers.

This study builds on earlier insights on children's technology use. Claims for universal 'multiliteracies' (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), 'digital literacies' (Buckingham, 2000; Burn, 2009; Rowsell & Prinsloo, 2012; Sefton-Green, 2006) and 'game literacy' (Buckingham & Burn, 2007; Burn, 2009) normalise northern models of childhood and youth, and make ideological claims about literacy. Preoccupations with literacy as an assumed form of appropriation are foregrounded. Notions of 'good games' for learning (Gee, 2003) perpetuate progress rhetorics of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997). If we acknowledge the diversity of children's gaming practices, we notice that children's main preoccupation is sociality (i.e. playing games with friends). This study calls for a broader definition of games, gaming and play to understand children's mediatised play and their appropriation of digital games for peer play and identity work. By encouraging an alternative frame for investigating children's digital gaming, researchers can gain a nuanced understanding of how children use games to signify gender identities and peer relationships.

Ethnographic research entails a particular epistemological view of text and context: 'context is not something we can just add to text – it is text, it defines its meanings and

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[2] I have chosen 'Global South' rather than 'developing countries' to acknowledge the global North-South divide, which is both socio-economic and political. The nations of Africa, Central and Latin America, and most of Asia are collectively known as the Global South. These countries are considered to be less developed than the Global North (North America, Western Europe, Australia, and Japan) and are characterised by severely limited resources, such as access to safe drinking water, adequate sanitation, electrification, Internet access, and so forth.

conditions of use' (Blommaert, 2005, p. 45). While ethnographies of children's playground practices and gendered play patterns are common in Childhood Studies, this method is the 'road less-travelled' in games research with children. Childhood Studies research (much like Cultural Studies) is more likely to adopt an ethnographic perspective and its theories of culture and inquiry practices are derived from Sociology (Green & Bloome, 1997) which guides the research. Game Studies, on the other hand, has only just started to examine the relevance of social theories (Crawford, 2012). Until recently, Game Studies research has been dominated by two perspectives. Early debates revolved around whether emphasis should be placed upon play (ludic) or representational (such as narrative) elements (Crawford, 2012). While narratologists treat games as texts, and use frameworks derived from literature and film, ludologists study games as rule-driven play, using classic theories of play and games. Scholars from both sides of this debate ignore the importance of the play context. Crawford (2012) notes that most contemporary scholars recognise that analysis of both ludic and representational dimensions of games, along with a consideration of the role of the social, are important.

Children appropriate digital games in contextual ways, and scholars need to attend to gaming as part of children's play practices in different settings. Often, researchers (such as Lucas & Sherry, 2004; Taylor *et al.*, 2007; Walkerdine, 2006) claim to be studying children's gaming, but they are in fact studying children's gaming in specific research settings, where children create particular play contexts in their relations with others. I have chosen to use research orientations shared by Childhood Studies and Cultural Studies, which account for children's agency as media users, and for power relationships, including gendered relationships with peers, and between childhood and adult society. This gameplay study combines ethnographic methods with Social Network Analysis to provide a visualisation showing the scale of my study and gendered play patterns in the two settings.

Research Questions

This study focuses on two after-school play settings in suburban Cape Town, where groups of middle-class children (ages 4–13) engaged in supervised play with digital games. The research focused on addressing the following question:

- o How do children's performances of gender and other identities during gameplay with peers signify their interpretation of games as gendered media texts?

Peer relationships and gender identities are the overarching themes investigated in relation to digital games. In this study, I conceptualise gender identities as performances (Butler, 1990, 1993). Children's contextual play practices with digital games allow them to signify gender and other identities. Their appropriations of digital games and gaming relationships with peers structure their gameplay in particular ways. Games acquire gendered meanings, through children's responses to ludic gendering in games, and gender tactics during play with peers. This is contingent upon the children's shared identities as members of middle-class South African society, where access to expensive, leisure forms of ICTs is commonplace for this income group.

Digital games in contexts of inequality: the case of South Africa

This investigation of middle-class children's gaming takes place against the background of what is known about young people's digital gaming practices in South Africa more generally. South Africa's income inequality is one of the highest in the world: households which by global standards would be considered lower middle-class and above earn significantly higher than the median incomes, and constitute a relatively small elite (Seekings & Nattrass 2006). This middle-class is characterised by a higher income distribution amongst 'White' people, and is thus still not deracialised.

Walton and Pallitt (2012) investigated patterns of association between household income and access to gaming platforms in South Africa, using data from the South African Advertising Research Foundation's AMPS survey[3] (July 2010–June 2011). They illustrate how post-apartheid class inequalities influence consumption patterns, and shape South African experiences of digital games. Levels of access to consumer goods, the internet and

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[3] The All Media Products Survey (AMPS) is a South African national survey (N=25 160) conducted twice a year for market research purposes by the South African Advertising Research Foundation. Although the AMPS sample is constructed to meet the needs of marketers, and thus oversamples higher-income groups, it nonetheless provides a useful national picture of the relationship between income, media use, and technology adoption.

electrification are sharply unequal, resulting in diverse socio-technical practices. Differential levels of mediatisation shape young people's knowledge and experience of games as commodities (Walton & Pallitt, 2012). Mediatisation refers to the meta-process by which practices of the everyday and social relations are increasingly shaped by mediating technologies and media organisations (Livingstone, 2009). Walton and Pallitt's (2012) study shows how local gaming trends are linked to income and access. Cellphones are the only relatively accessible gaming platform for most of the population, and wealthier groups are still more likely to have access to a cellphone. Access to computers is even more strongly associated with income. The poorest four income groups (almost half of the population) have negligible home access to computers, and even the comparatively wealthy and predominantly urban middle-class do not all live in households with computers (only 30–50% do). With regards to gaming consoles, the Sony PlayStation is the most popular dedicated gaming console, but features in only 10% of households in the highest income group. Daily digital gaming in South Africa takes place on cellphones, rather than on consoles or computers, although this preference for cellphones applies only to the younger age groups. Despite the general accessibility of cellphones, older age groups (35+) are no more likely to be involved in daily digital gaming on their phones than they are on computers or consoles. Gaming is also associated with gender, with women less likely to play games daily. Young men in the lower age groups (15–24) are somewhat more likely to play games daily than young women in the same age groups. Gender distinctions in gaming are more marked in the case of PlayStation or computer gaming than with cellphone gaming.

Studying digital gameplay in this context is a reminder of the complex ensembles of material and economic resources involved in the domestication of gaming technologies. Walton and Pallitt (2012) note that these resources are seldom foregrounded in calls for inclusion of digital games in educational curricula. While play and games are universal, studying games in South Africa demands a more context-sensitive approach. In summary, gaming on computers and consoles is a predominantly middle- to upper-class pursuit in South Africa. Gaming technologies are not neutral objects of everyday life, and most South Africans would regard consoles and computers as expensive consumer items.

A non-representative survey (N= 5 835, 8–22 year olds) of urban South African youth (conducted by the *Sunday Times* in 2010) found that only 30% had a gaming console, almost all of whom had a PlayStation (28.3%). Gaming was most popular with the youngest age group (9–13 years), with 62% reporting regular gaming. Young men and women reported preferences for different genres: young men preferred sports, action and strategy genres, while female participants reported a preference for music games and the Nintendo Wii. This report also suggests gendered interest in games, claiming that South African boys are more interested in gaming than girls: "53.3% of boys play console games regularly, whereas only 35.2% of girls do the same" (*Sunday Times*, 2010). In comparison to quantitative surveys of access, use and time spent playing digital games, this study takes a qualitative, broadly ethnographic approach, and attempts to offer a more nuanced understanding of the significance of gaming in middle-class children's play relationships. This study also contributes to existing research on games and gender, investigating gendered gaming by considering how children appropriate games within their peer groups, perform gender identities and configure game titles and platforms as gendered in the process.

Race, class and assimilation in Cape Town

Cape Town is composed of suburbs or neighbourhoods, differentiated by socio-economic status hierarchies, with residential segregation on the basis of ethnicity or race (Deumert 2010). This city has over 600 neighbourhoods, but residents reduce its complexity by talking about the following neighbourhoods as being similar in economic, ethnic/racial and/or linguistic terms:

> ... the "Cape Flats" (former Coloured working-class townships towards the east of the city), the "southern suburbs" (wealthy, mostly White and English-speaking), or the "northern suburbs" (affluent, also mostly White with a large proportion of Afrikaans-speakers). (Deumert, 2010, p. 20)

The fieldwork for this study took place in the southern suburbs at a co-ed school, St. Mary's*, and a children's holiday club hosted at an all-boys school, Riverside Boys*[4]. According to Deumert (2010), Cape Town's typology of neighbourhoods categorises this area as upper middle-class, predominantly English-speaking (more than 75% English, 15–20% Afrikaans), majority White (close to 90% White, around 5% Black), with low

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[4] The names of schools have been substituted with pseudonyms for the purpose of anonymity.

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unemployment rates, medium- to high-income, and high educational achievement. Most of the holiday club children live in this suburb, whereas half of the children from St. Mary's live in Wynberg, Rondebosch East and similar middle-class suburbs, and commute to the southern suburbs for schooling. Census data (Census, 2001) categorises the neighbourhoods where many of these children live as English-speaking (over 80%), medium-income, ethnically mixed (50% Coloured and one-third Indian/Asian, 15% White, less than 5% Black), also with low unemployment and good educational achievement. While linguistically and ethnically diverse, the participants in this study can therefore all be described as advantaged in comparison to the country's poor majority.

While this study is concerned with children's out-of-school gaming practices, it is important to offer some background on the educational context in the Western Cape, as this provides insights into the race-class nexus in the lives of the children discussed in this study. In their discussion of childhood in post-apartheid Cape Town, Bray *et al.* (2010) note that race is often a proxy for class, and scholars routinely preface their work with an apology for using apartheid-era categories, rarely reflecting on how and why they are using them. They argue that "race and class are no longer coterminous, primarily because of an increasing diversity of class within the majority racial groups nationally and provincially in the Western Cape" but "nonetheless, racialised identities are still salient in the lives of most South Africans – albeit alongside other identities of class, religion and so on" (Bray *et al.*, 2010, p. 30)[5].

Soudien (2007) notes that young people often use racial categories in self-report and thereby the categories remain important. However, the participants in this study never referred to race when describing themselves, other people or game characters. When classifying or categorising others, children referred to language, neighbourhood, and whether or not one of their peers used public transport or owned particular consumer items to signal class distinctions during their conversations.

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[5] Like Bray *et al* (2010), I will try to avoid making racial distinctions except where such description is necessary to provide demographic information about my fieldsites. In these instances, I employ the vocabulary 'African' (rather than 'Black', often used to encompass previously-disadvantaged groups which include the 'Coloured' population), 'Coloured', 'Indian/Asian' and 'White'. For example, in the methodology of this study the two contexts are described using this vocabulary. 'Coloured' is one of the four major racial groups delineated under Apartheid. They form the majority ethnicity of the Western Cape, and while the term refers to black South Africans of mixed race, many self-identify as black (Bosch, 2007).

Many parents associate historically 'White', middle-class schooling with an upward socio-economic mobility from their own class backgrounds (Lemon & Battersby-Lennard, 2011). Children integrating into middle-class schools encounter various challenges as a result, one of which is assimiliationism. South African children attending middle-class schools engage in practices of cultural assimilation: children of various linguistic, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds have to master middle-class tastes and characteristics as an unspoken pre-requisite for integration. Such integration is often masked by the discourse of 'multi-cultural education'. Although this is most often used in relation to schooling contexts, this process also happens in out-of-school settings where children play. Soudien (2004) argues that assimilationism is overwhelmingly hegemonic as a practice of integration in schools, playing out in various ways. Soudien (2004) notes resentment towards newcomers manifested in how children play, and claims that formal ceremonies at the school and pedagogical practice amount to what he calls 'aggressive assimilationism', characterised by intolerance and even violence. Middle-class schools in Cape Town are also characterised by more subtle kinds of assimilation where access to and play with specific globalised consumer goods and electronics are normalised and desirable. This includes global media products such as digital games, and American movies (such as *High School Musical*, and other Disney franchises) and pop stars, which are preferred to local ones. The children in this study had a limited knowledge of and interest in South African celebrities and music artists. In my experience, the desirability of American media products reinforces 'whiteness' as hegemonic in children's play. In her discussion of vexed race debates in South Africa, Solomon (2010) notes that 'whiteness' involves the invisibility of 'White' as a racial category, as if race only applies to the 'non-white'. Solomon (2010) argues that members of other races are frequently identified by their perceived race, whereas the race of 'White' people often goes unnamed. Many games involve playing with 'White' characters as an unquestioned default, while other games (such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series) are vilified for their stereotypically racial representations. Middle-class consumption and mediatised play forms part of gendering in these contexts.

Children's mediatised play and consumption in SA

It is important to put mediatised play and consumption into perspective, to understand these concepts in relation to South African children more generally. Digitally mediatised

play in the form of digital games can be considered a minority practice, given the country's stark socio-economic inequalities. To date, South African studies of games have documented mainly non-digital play (with the exception of Amory 2010) amongst disadvantaged children (Harrop-Allin, 2011; Janks, 2006; Prinsloo, 2004). There is a need to acknowledge both digital and non-digital play. While the latter constitutes the current reality for the majority of children in the country, access to digital games is also growing.

Local scholars who research children's play are not positioned within Game Studies. However, research on South African children's non-digital gameplay has been adopted using other research traditions (such as New Literacy Studies) that contribute to playground studies of 'multiliteracies' in children's games. Prinsloo (2004) discusses the unsupervised, choreographed peer play of 'African' children in Khayelitsha, a township in Cape Town. He focuses on two games, 'rounders' and 'wait', which he explains as: "versions of ball-tag and skipping games that are cross-cultural, if not global, in many of their details, including the terms used, though they are substantially redesigned and elaborated on by local children" (2004, p. 294). For Prinsloo (2004), such game playing can be seen as emergent literacy practices. He argues that the site of play is a distinctive domain, where the children he observed were able to mediate and model the semiotics, practices and resources of school, local and popular culture, religion, mass media and home for one another. He sees these as resources which allowed the children to "experiment as meaning-makers and sign-makers under conditions of peer feedback in a situated context where there is both contained specificity and freedom to innovate" (Prinsloo, 2004, p. 291). I will return to this notion of play, as involving freedom and play within constraints, when I discuss Caillois' (1958, 2001) notions of *ludus* and *paidia*, and distinctions between play and games.

Other scholars who write about children and games in a South African context are Janks (2006) and Harrop-Allin (2011). Janks (2006) discusses a book and video archive produced by 'African' Grade 4 children about township games (which they exchanged with an Australian school) as a case study of multimodal and multilingual pedagogy. Her wider concerns included the ability to "demonstrate the importance of using play for learning" (2006, p. 117), multimodal representation, and how the games illustrated playing and learning with limited material resources. Harrop-Allin (2011) documents the musical

games of township children and their connection with music education in the primary-school Arts and Culture curriculum. She sees children's musical games as significant for two reasons: they are rich cultural practices worthy of documentation and study, and embody children's musical identities, prior knowledge and potential. Her broader concern involves how music teaching can develop musicality already evident from children's musical play. Both Janks (2006) and Harrop-Allin (2011) see games and play as constructive. Like Prinsloo (2004), they are preoccupied with literacy in some form which, as I will discuss, involves an ideological view of play as progress (Sutton-Smith, 1997). This notion of progress positions children's play primarily in relation to development. In this case I have chosen not only to consider appropriating games as literacy. I argue that a broader perspective on children's play may be gained from shifting the focus to power and identity rhetorics (Sutton-Smith, 1997) in children's peer relationships.

Prinsloo (2004), Janks (2006) and Harrop-Allin (2011) studied disadvantaged (i.e. under-privileged children whose household incomes are within the lower socio-economic rungs of South African society) 'African' children, and are concerned with how these children orchestrate meaning with the limited resources available to them. This study is one of the few South African studies about middle-class children and the play of the country's more-affluent minority. I investigate play as worthy of study in its own right, not merely as a form of 'literacy'. Children's mediatised play depends on their socio-economic environments, which afford access to play spaces and leisure technologies. If the purpose is to develop a South African Game Studies more broadly, constructing a binary between non-digital and digital play is unhelpful for local scholars. More nuanced understandings may be gained by considering both of these as forms of mediatised play. Playground studies of 'multiliteracies' in children's games may allow for a more inclusive approach to games and play.

Children's digital gaming in two middle-class settings in Cape Town
This study took place in two urban settings in Cape Town: an after-school Arts and Crafts club at St Mary's (a co-ed primary school), and a holiday club attended by children of working parents hosted at Riverside Boys (an all-boy primary school). The children from both settings can be regarded as middle- to upper-class, considering the fees of the schools they attend and the holiday club fees their parents are able to afford.

School fees at St Mary's* are R2 852 per month (357 US dollars or 224 British pounds) and exclude textbook levies, art fees, music fees, aftercare and other extra-curricular activities. This is high in relation to the average monthly incomes of the majority of South Africans[6]. St Mary's is an English-medium, co-ed school. The children at the Arts and Crafts club were 'Coloured' and 'African'. 'White' children were a minority at this school, and there were no 'White' participants in the club, apart from one 'special-needs' boy whom I felt should be included in the group owing to his previous involvement in the Arts and Crafts club. The children who attended the Arts and Crafts club were between 9 and 10-years-old, and the group consisted of a similar number of boys and girls, although the gaming sessions were more regularly attended by girls. Many of the children were school friends who also attended other extra-mural activities together, such as choir, drama, hip-hop dancing and swimming. Thus cross-sex play was an established norm in this setting.

In contrast, the Riverside Boys holiday club was attended by a variety of children from neighbouring schools in the area, which also have high school fees relative to other South African schools. The majority of the holiday club goers were 'White' boys who attended Riverside Boys, and the rest attended nearby co-ed, mainly private schools. The children's ages ranged from 4 to 13-years-old. The holiday club organisers charged parents R130 (18.11 US dollars or 10.97 British pounds) per day per child, and a week's attendance cost R 650. The children were generally from financially well-off, middle to upper middle-class suburban homes. Their parents' occupations included doctors, lawyers, university lecturers, a professional photographer, a graphic designer for one of the country's restaurant franchises, business owners and consultants. The children attended the holiday club because both parents work. None had a stay-at-home parent. In some cases a domestic worker[7] collected children from the club.

Play differed greatly between my two research sites. Children in both settings nonetheless shared a 'common ground' in that digital games formed part of middle-class children's culture among other forms of mediatised play, interests and media tastes. Access to ICTs

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[6] According to Leibbrandt *et al.* (2012) this figure was R 816 for 'Africans' and R 6275 for 'Whites' in 2008. Comparing income data from 1993 to 2008, they argue that inequality has increased over the post-apartheid period, because an increased share of income has gone to the top decile.
[7] In the South African context, this refers to someone who is employed to do a family's household chores, and supervise children while parents are at work.

for leisure purposes is considered the norm for this group. Many studies of ICTs and South African children investigate access and use from the lens of disadvantage, including my own Masters dissertation, which considers ICTs to be 'scare resources' (Pallitt, 2008). By contrast, this study prefigures access to digital games as advantage, since gaming technologies in some form are nearly ubiquitous in middle-class homes. All of the children I encountered had access to digital games in some form, except for one girl at the arts and crafts club, and one boy at the holiday club. In these cases, their parents took a strong stance against games and had rules for time spent with other media as well, such as watching television. Overall the children in both settings enjoyed access to expensive digital games. More than half had a gaming console at home in addition to a family computer, and they played games at friends' houses too. The Nintendo Wii and PlayStation 2 were the dominant consoles, in addition to computer and Internet games. Handheld consoles such as the PSP and Nintendo DS were also popular, although the Nintendo DS seemed to be a favourite of the girls in particular. Only a minority had access to a PlayStation 3 or Xbox. Gaming online with a console via PlayStation Network or Xbox Live were exceptional gaming experiences rather than the norm. The children at both St Mary's and the Riverside Boys holiday club reported owning more gaming technologies than AMPS figures suggest to be the case among higher income groups. For these children then, consoles, home computers and satellite television appeared to be everyday items.

Theoretical position

The theoretical perspective of this investigation relies on merging ideas from complementary fields of study, namely, Cultural Studies, Childhood Studies, Game Studies and domestication theory. Within the Cultural Studies tradition, "popular culture is understood as a critical site of both the circulation and contestation of dominant ideologies" and "affords us a way of thinking about media consumption, identity and pleasure in everyday life" (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, p. 2). Cultural Studies focuses on identities and ideologies and uses critical approaches, such as post-colonialism and gender theory (Ensslin, 2012). Childhood Studies (often referred to as the *Sociology of Childhood*) concerns the "nature of children's everyday lives, including the activities and settings within which children live and construct their life worlds" which extends to "how children's everyday lives are perceived by peers and adults and how children's lives are

enabled and constrained by specific aspects of the wider adult culture" (Qvortrup *et al.*, 2009, p. 11). Game Studies (also known as *Ludology*) is the study of games and gaming that emphasises the experience of rule-based interactions (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, p. 147). Domestication theory studies how technologies are integrated into the structures, daily routines and values of users and their environments (Berker *et al.*, 2006).

This study also combines social constructionist perspectives with post-structuralist theories, such as Butler's (1993) work on gender performance, and de Certeau's (1984) work on consumer responses to power in society. Social constructionism, which acknowledges that childhood and gender are social constructs, provides the epistemological basis for Childhood Studies and Cultural Studies research. Post-structuralist perspectives encourage researchers to question *inter alia* binary oppositions, such as sex and gender, childhood and adulthood, social power and oppression. Butler's work is often adopted by Cultural Studies scholars to describe gender and identity, and to emphasise the social context of gender performances.

The following concepts and theoretical ideas provide the foundation for this study: literature on children's identities and media use (Buckingham, 2008a), gender identities and peer relationships (Butler, 1993; Corsaro, 2009), borderwork (Thorne, 1993), appropriation (Silverstone *et al.*, 1992), definitions of play and games and typologies of play (Caillois, 1958, 2001), rhetorics of play (Scott, 1990; Sutton-Smith, 1997), strategies and tactics (de Certeau, 1984) and Frasca's (2003a) typology of game rules. Games are doubly articulated (Silverstone, 1994) in children's peer groups as material objects of consumption and as media with symbolic meanings. Children draw on these meanings to interpret gaming platforms and titles as gendered in the process of gameplay, thus forming part of their appropriation of games. A wider theoretical frame is needed to understand children's appropriations of games. This frame, developed from de Certeau's (1984) distinction between strategies and tactics, allows children's gameplay to be situated as tactical creativity in relation to institutions and power structures, such as peer groups, gender norms and roles, ludic gendering in games, middle-class parenting and age ratings. Such a perspective is useful when considering children's gameplay in relation to structure and agency.

Key definitions and concepts used in this study

Gender identities and performance

Sociologists and psychologists distinguish between a person's biological sex (male or female) and gender identity (masculine or feminine) rather than approaching the body with certain assumptions about gender where the sexes are seen as constituting complementary opposites (Champagne, 2007). Gender identity refers to "the differing cultural and social roles that men and women inhabit, as well as the ways in which individuals experience those roles, both internally and in terms of the ways they present themselves to the world through their manner of dress, behaviour, physical comportment, and so forth" (Champagne, 2007, p. 614). Thus, gender roles are "culturally defined behaviours" and "there is much variation within the categories of the masculine and the feminine, both in terms of the possible presentations of gender and the tasks deemed appropriate to each gender" (Roof, 2007, p. 616). Such roles are subject to gender stereotypes which can be defined as "predetermined sets of attitudes and behaviours that are believed to be typical of all men or women" (Veenstra, 2007, p. 622). These stereotypes about gender assume that there are only two genders (ie. male and female), that all men and women are heterosexual and that gender is determined by or related to a person's sexuality (Veenstra, 2007).

De Beauvoir's famous statement that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (1972, 1949, p. 249) emphasises the notion of gender as a social construct. Both de Beauvoir (1986) and Butler (1993) argue that sex is already gender, since gender is a way of 'doing' the body (Salih, 2004, p. 21). Butler's (1993) theory of performativity is concerned with the productive force of discourse, and she defines gender as the effect of discourse, and sex as the effect of gender (Morris, 1995). In accordance with feminist practice, I will use the word 'sex' to refer to the biological sex (i.e. being male, female or intersex based on anatomy) with which people are born, and 'gender' to refer to an achieved status of learned masculinity or femininity. Lindsey (2011) argues that according to feminist frameworks, gender can be viewed on a continuum of characteristics demonstrated by a person regardless of the person's biological sex. Gender identities are thus subject to fluidity. By contrast, gender roles are hegemonic.

'Gender identities' refers to how people express their masculinities and femininities. The notion of 'gender performativity', and how it relates to gender identities was developed by Butler, who argues that performativity "constitute(s) the identity it is purported to be ... there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (1990, p. 25). Gender performances give gender particular meanings, since gender has to be constantly "reaffirmed and publicly displayed by repeatedly performing acts in accordance with the social norm" (Cameron, 1997, p. 49).

Butler describes identity as something we *do*, rather than something we *are*. The idea of 'doing' gender is key. I use the term 'performance', drawing on Butler, where social interaction is viewed as performance, and identity is a socially enacted 'doing'. 'Identity' is a slippery term, and Gee (1999) notes that some people tend to reserve the term for a sense of self that is relatively continuous and fixed over time. Ivanič (1998) argues that although 'identity' is a useful term and everyday word to describe people's sense of who they are, it is misleadingly singular and she therefore proposes the notion of 'identities':

> ... because it captures the idea of people identifying simultaneously with a variety of social groups. One or more of these identities may be foregrounded at different times; they are sometimes contradictory, sometimes interrelated: people's diverse identities constitute the richness and dilemmas of their sense of self. (1998, p. 11)

Ivanič's (1998) description of identities is particularly relevant to this study as children's identities as children, according to adult society, are interrelated and sometimes contradict the gender identities they develop with peers, e.g. the idea of children not being sexual beings.

In my study, I adopt Butler's (1990, 1993) view of gender performances, and consider how identity emerges in relationship to others to describe how boys and girls embody a 'feel' for digital games. For children, gender performativity is an important part of their play, as they cite norms through their performances, such as performances informed by beliefs about gender roles and heterosexual relationships. I also use the work of Childhood Studies scholars on gender identity to complement Butler's (1990, 1993) work on gender performances. Thorne's (1993) notion of 'borderwork' is relevant to this study as it concerns how children signify gender through their interactions with one another. She

looks at how children organise themselves as groups around playground interactions and games, such as 'chase-and-kiss', 'cooties' (where children pretend that the opposite sex is contaminated), 'goin' with', and teasing. These may be regarded as playground gender games as they all communicate differences between boys and girls. According to Thorne (1993), children's meanings of gender are influenced by age, ethnicity, race, sexuality and social class, and thus gendering shifts with social context. She also sees gender identity as a social process involving groups of children, rather than through the lens of individual socialisation or difference. Similarly, this study contributes the notion of children's gender performances with digital games in relational terms, rather than focusing on individual players and/or preferences.

Children's identities and media use

Cultural Studies "seeks to understand children's uses of media in their own terms and from their own perspectives, rather than comparing them with those of adults; and it seeks to explore the *social* experiences of children, not least as these are constructed through the operation of other dimensions of social power, such as social class, gender and ethnicity – as well as focusing on intergenerational differences and relationships" (Buckingham, 2009a, p. 352). Cultural Studies research has much in common with Childhood Studies, since "Cultural Studies researchers are broadly inclined to regard children as 'active' participants in the process of making meaning – as competent social actors, rather than as passive or incompetent victims" (Buckingham, 2009a, p. 355). Buckingham's extensive research describes how children define and construct social identities through talk about television and other media. Rather than analysing television programmes as 'texts' (i.e. representation), his research encourages the use of discourse analysis to challenge positivist use of audience data within mainstream research. He argues that "instead of regarding what children say at face value, as some kind of self-evident reflection of what they 'really' think or believe, it [discourse analysis] argues that talk should itself be seen as a form of social action or performance" (Buckingham, 2009a, p. 354).

This study draws on sociological and Cultural Studies approaches to study children's digital gameplay. I draw on Bourdieu's *habitus* to explore how children develop identities and mark social distinctions in relation to peers and digital games. Bourdieu (1991) uses *habitus* to explore the process of reproduction, and asserts that individuals acquire

practices through socialisation within a particular social structure which shapes how they engage in the world. Bourdieu's concept has been criticised as being deterministic, but he argues that:

> Habitus is not the fate that some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structure. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 133)

Crawford (2012) recognises that *habitus* is "not a set and inflexible culture, which remains static throughout people's lives" (2012, p. 110), and argues that Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* (although being a rather under-utilised concept in video game analysis) may offer a useful way forwards in Game Studies research. Crawford (2012) argues that *habitus* retains an awareness of structural social forces through its emphasis on the embodiment of play located within a social context. He notes that Bourdieu, being an ex-rugby player, often used games as examples for understanding social patterns, such as describing *habitus* as being like a "feel for the game" (Webb *et al*., 2002, p. 94). Like Crawford (2012), I argue for the importance of social theories to locate children's gaming within a wider social context.

While this study offers insights into the gaming practices of middle-class children in the Global South, it also contributes to games research on social class. This is an under-studied area compared to other social distinctions, such as gender. Bourdieu's notions of *distinction* (as embodied in class tastes) and *cultural capital* are relevant to discussing middle-class children, as it is possible that different forms of capital play a role in shaping their media use. Crawford (2012) notes that the social class of video gamers is often discussed in relation to gender and ethnicity, and rarely in terms of how class affects and shapes patterns of play and video game cultures. He criticises the work of Greenfield and Cocking (1996) in the following way:

> ... (they) highlight how social class affects, in a rather straightforward way, what video games and technologies can be purchased, and also how class can shape video game choices, suggesting that middle-class parents are more likely to encourage their children to play, and buy for them, video games that involve puzzle-solving or odyssey-like exploration, as opposed to the more working class choices, which tend to favour military or urban-themed video games. Greenfield and Cocking's (1996) consideration of video gaming and social class, and this area of research generally, is, however, rather limited and desperately in need of further examination. (2012, p. 57)

This study considers the influences of social class (and middle-classness specifically) in relation to other social distinctions such as age and gender. It differs from Greenfield and Cocking's (1996) research in the way it prioritises children's voices and meanings that emerge for them through their play with digital games during the gaming sessions in the two fieldsites discussed. Rather than relying on interviews with adults or surveys of access to gaming technologies, this study takes a broadly ethnographic approach to understanding middle-class children's appropriations of digital games in suburban playground settings in Cape Town.

Digital games and play

In this study I use the term 'digital games', rather than 'video games' to refer to electronic games with software interfaces used across a range of platforms: gaming consoles such as the PlayStation 3, laptops or handheld gaming devices such as the Nintendo DS. Crawford (2012) notes that defining games is not as straightforward as one may assume. The two dominant readings have been of digital games as either media texts or games, reflecting wider theoretical debates between narratologists and ludologists (discussed earlier in this chapter). This study discusses digital games in terms of their representational dimensions and rule systems but, more importantly, as media that are appropriated in contextual ways. Gameplay acquires meaning depending on the context of play and the gaming relationships involved. By contrast, Gee and Hayes (2011) use the term 'game' to describe the software that sets up gameplay, while the social practices that happen 'inside' or 'outside' the game is the meta-game, and they use the term 'Game' to refer to a combination of the two. The 'inside' and 'outside' metaphor is problematic, as it suggests an uncertainty about where the interaction is happening, as well as the scope. 'Outside' could refer to the immediate moment of gameplay, or how game design attempts to mediate the play of children in a different cultural context (i.e. software localisation).

Any study of games or gameplay requires a theory of *play* and a definition of *game*, since games cannot be regarded in isolation from play (Newman, 2004). Huizinga, often heralded as the father of Game Studies, sees play as a cultural phenomenon and defines a game as "a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and space, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in

itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'" (1949, p. 28). Huizinga's magic circle metaphor, used to describe play being separate from ordinary life, involves an artificial boundary between the game and the rest of the world. The magic circle is imagined as being free from everyday power relationships. Notions of social power between players or members of society (for example, between the Global North and South, or adults and children) are largely absent from Game Studies. Access to digital games (like other media use) is linked to broader socio-cultural issues and the socio-economic backgrounds of players, as well as power relations inherent in everyday practices of society, such as the relationships between children and adults discussed in this study. In the process of play, children develop their identities in relation to peers and adult authorities. Hierarchies and social power inform their play to a large extent. Additionally, the separation of 'play' from 'work' and 'ordinary life' as a defining feature of play does not make sense when applied to middle-class children. Their play may be considered 'work' from the perspective of play as development or progress.

Huizinga (1949) does not classify different forms of play, a contribution made by Caillois (1958, 2001), who offers a broader definition by considering diversified forms of play and the social functions these perform. Caillois argues that play is "an activity that is (1) free, (2) separate, (3) uncertain, (4) unproductive, (5) regulated, and (6) fictive" (2001, p. 43). Caillois (1958, 2001) develops four categories of play and games: *agôn*, *alea*, *mimicry* and *ilinx*. While *agôn* refers to games of competition such as football or chess, *alea* concerns games of chance, such as roulette or a lottery. *Mimicry* relates to role-play such as playing pirates, while *ilinx* involves a state of dizziness and disorder, such as rapidly whirling in a circle. Caillois asserts that games in these categories can be placed on a continuum between *paidia* (games without rules involving free improvisation) and *ludus* (games with rules). When discussing counter-attacks in fencing or football, the return of a tennis ball and turns in chess, he argues that "the game consists of the need to find or continue at once a response *which is free within the limits set by the rules*" and that "this latitude of the player, this margin accorded to his action is essential to the game and partly explains the pleasure which it excites" (2001, p. 8). This acknowledges players' agency, and the notion that how play occurs along the *ludus-paidia* continuum is not a default feature of a

particular kind of game or play. Caillois sees play and games as involving pleasure derived from freedom as well as constraint, or the pleasure associated with conforming to rules.

Current Game Studies theorists (such as Frasca, 2003a and Juul, 2003) extend these concepts, but continue to describe digital gameplay in terms of agonistic or competitive play, which has arguably become a hegemonic lens in this field. Revisiting concepts and definitions of *play* and *games* used in Game Studies theory provides a way of understanding how these have been used to articulate particular positions and 'rhetorics of play' (Sutton-Smith, 1997), of which some are historically gendered in Western thought. This will be discussed in further detail in the following chapter.

This investigation considers the social functions of children's gameplay in peer groups, such as girls playing with romance in *The Sims*, and boys indulging in adult-rated games as a rite of passage through masculine performances. In this way, I adopt a Cultural Studies perspective on gaming, which addresses the significance of children's play beyond the mechanical game rules thought to structure play, and considers children's social agendas and creativity as players who act under the constraints imposed by particular socio-economic and gendered contexts. Rule-based definitions of games are challenged by proposing the idea that children appropriate games and rules, or even create their own, in ways that make the games playable and conform to their own interests (such as strengthening friendships or using games for masculine display) within their peer groups. This study thus makes an important theoretical contribution by integrating ideas from Game Studies, Cultural Studies and Childhood Studies, and using social theories to offer an inter-disciplinary perspective on gendering in children's gameplay.

Rhetorics of play

This study argues for a shift from progress to power and identity rhetorics of play, which recognises children's play identities, such as friends and siblings, as well as their social position as children (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Sutton-Smith (1997) argues that scholars often ignore the power and identity rhetorics of play that have relevance for children's lives. He asserts that "the rhetoric of progress has tended to obscure the time that children give to their own affairs of power" (1997, p. 111) and that "children's play is an area of power crisis in modern parent-child relationships" (1997, p. 113). Digital games are embroiled in

this struggle. In discussing play, games and rhetorics of child power and identity, Sutton-Smith poses an important question: "can a power or identity rhetoric say something about a theory of children's play that is less misleading than the progress rhetoric seems to have been?" (1997, p. 114).

This thesis contributes an understanding of children's play with digital games that shifts the focus from games and learning, or gendered gaming preferences, to children's peer relationships and how they perform gender identities during gameplay. Such an approach provides a nuanced understanding of digital gameplay in a particular context. The issues of power discussed in this study describe children's gender relations, peer hierarchies, and their social power. All of these factors are considered in relation to adult society and the children's socio-economic status.

Appropriation

Silverstone and Haddon's (1996) work sketches a particular relationship between concepts of domestication, appropriation, and consumption that are used to explain the more general process of how people integrate technologies into their everyday lives. They argue that domestication involves consumers in appropriation, making technologies familiar and acceptable in particular ways within constraints that are part of the established patterns of their everyday lives.

Appropriation happens during the actual use or consumption of media and technologies. Silverstone argues that "appropriation involves bringing meanings home: the more or less successful, more or less complete, embodiment, consumption, domestication of meaning" (1999, p. 14). The explanation of how people convert things to ends of their own is closer to the original use of 'domestication'. According to Silverstone,

> Domestication is, indeed, about bringing things under control, but as Eric Hirsch (1989) points out it is also about the expression of the subjectivity of those who are involved. Domestication does, perhaps literally, involve bringing objects in from the wild: from the public spaces of shops, arcades and working environments; from factories, farms and quarries. The transition, which is also a translation, of objects across the boundary that separates public and private spaces is at the heart of what I mean by domestication. Through it, objects and meanings are, potentially, formed and transformed. (1994, p. 98)

For Silverstone, domestication is about the boundary between public and private, where technologies are doubly articulated into public and private cultures. Technologies are both the means/media whereby public and private meanings are mutually negotiated, as well as being products themselves (through consumption) of such negotiations of meanings (Silverstone *et al*., 1992). This is a central idea expanded on in this study, which considers how children appropriate digital games as objects of middle-class children's culture, how they make these technologies acceptable within constraints that are part of the established patterns of their everyday lives, signify peer relationships and gendered identities, as well as how these objects become reconstituted in the process. Morley (2006, 2003) argues that the familiar story of the domestication of the media will need to be complemented by a new narrative of their de-domestication arising from new technological developments such as the mobile phone and fully wired 'smart home'. His later research emphasises the shifting nature of domestication processes arising from the changing needs of users, thus giving rise to a dislocation of domesticity.

The research design of this study involved the reverse of domestication theory in its more traditional sense, because domestic objects (a PlayStation 3 console and laptop) were introduced in two school settings (one after-school, and the other at a children's holiday club hosted at a school). The appropriation of gaming titles and platforms in these settings cannot be generalised to children's use of these technologies at home, as it is specific to their peer relationships and play in these contexts. This study interrogates domestication theory, which often assumes a domestic setting, and shifts the study of appropriation to the out-of-home settings and peer relationships which shape the contexts of consumption of digital games, and children's socio-technical identities and game cultures.

Children's appropriations of digital games: strategies and tactics

I theorise children's agency and appropriation of digital games using de Certeau's (1984) distinction between strategies and tactics. This perspective allows one to consider the creativity involved in consumption when tactical 'users', who lack power, negotiate the functions of institutions (such as middle-class schooling and homes, global game industries, ratings bodies and child targeted media franchises) in their everyday lives. According to de Certeau:

> The space of a tactic is the space of the other... it is a manoeuvre "within the enemy's field of vision" ... and within enemy territory... It takes advantage of opportunities and depends on them... It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of proprietary powers. It poaches them. It creates surprises in them ... It is a guileful ruse. (1984, p. 37)

Whereas strategies are used by institutions and power structures, individuals use tactics to negotiate strategies that are set for them. This study looks at how children appropriate games and make them desirable within their peer groups, during play and in relation to adult society.

Peer groups are an important power structure in which children perform their gender identities. Borderwork (Thorne, 1993), and the emphasis on heterosexual relations in children's play, may be considered as tactics used to affirm and activate gender boundaries. This study finds that children's play practices with digital games are inflected with existing gender relations in the research settings. Additionally, digital games are expressions of designers and marketers, and children appropriate these objects in particular ways, sometimes gendering particular game titles and platforms during play. Even at the level of gameplay, children negotiate the strategies or encoded rules of game designers and develop their own tactics to make them playable, or to imbue them with meaning during the moment of play. The family, ratings bodies, and other institutions constrain children's play with digital games in particular ways, by imposing progress rhetorics (Sutton-Smith, 1997) of play, and age-ratings on game genres and titles. Middle-class parents exercise strategies to control children's gaming and maximise protection according to beliefs about 'good parenting' by *inter alia* purchasing 'appropriate' games, enquiring about games played at friends' houses, and regulating playing time. Children's gaming with peers (which also presents rules and constraints) can therefore be viewed as ways of exercising some freedom from adult strategies.

Gender tactics

Children develop gender tactics when appropriating digital games for peer play. I have formulated the notion of gender tactics by amalgamating Butler's (1993) notions of gender performativity with de Certeau's (1984) concepts of strategies and tactics. I use this term to encompass children's gendered play patterns, gender performances, and borderwork as responses to ludic gendering in games i.e. the process whereby games are interpreted as

gendered based on their ludic and representational dimensions. I argue that children's appropriations of digital games should be understood in the context of their gender tactics.

Although a younger academic field than Cultural Studies, findings and methodologies from Childhood Studies can help to inform research on children and games, as well as offer a more nuanced understanding of the meaning of digital gameplay in relation to children's peer cultures, gendered relationships and connections with adult society. Thorne found that gender segregation increased towards the end of pre-school and the early grades of elementary school, which led her to argue that "it is meaningful to speak of separate girls' and boys' worlds" (1986, p. 167). Later (1993) she argued that much research has a tendency to exaggerate gender differences, ignoring similarities between boys and girls. Corsaro (2009) provides examples of more recent and nuanced findings, arguing that these reflect new theories of gender identity which focus on children's collective practices in their peer cultures. Corsaro suggests that "as children's lives, especially in western societies, become more institutionalised and children are increasingly affected by media and technologies, it is clear that future work on peer cultures must pay careful attention to these trends" (2009, p. 312). I will discuss Corsaro's (1992, 2005, 2009) work on peer cultures, and how children make meaning with media within their peer cultures in more detail in the next chapter.

Corsaro (2005) sees play as an important way for children to address issues of serious concern to them, such as sexuality, and notes that often sexual tensions make particular activities appealing to children. According to Corsaro (2005), teasing, conflict and tension in peer relations are very apparent in cross-sex relations amongst pre-adolescents. He notes that some researchers have found that children often play in cross-sex groups in neighbourhoods, especially if play groups were mixed in age, while others have also found consistent cross-sex interaction in settings not controlled by peer groups, such as classrooms and extra-curricular activities. He argues that "it is in peer-dominated and highly public settings in schools – like cafeterias and playgrounds – that gender separation is most complete" (2005, p. 215). He also notes that many activities and routines of pre-adolescent children's peer cultures in these settings are all about gender, where girls and boys try to make sense of and deal with ambiguities and concerns related to gender differences and relations.

Borderwork "refers to activities that mark and strengthen boundaries between groups" (Corsaro, 2005, p. 216) and, when gender boundaries are activated, "other social definitions get squeezed out by heightened awareness of gender as a dichotomy and of 'the girls' and 'the boys' as opposite and even antagonistic sides" (Thorne, 1993, p. 60). Similarly, I observed consistent cross-sex play at the gaming sessions at the co-ed school with the extra-curricular Arts and Crafts children. In contrast, the holiday club (where boys from an all-boys school formed the majority) was marked by single-sex play and strong gender boundaries. Girls were a minority, and conflict, teasing and sexual tensions marked rare instances of cross-sex play with digital games in this setting.

Thorne (1993) identified different types of borderwork: contests between girls and boys, cross-sex chasing, taunting and teasing, rituals of pollution (where specific individuals or groups are treated as contaminated, 'having cooties') and invasions (such as a group of boys deliberately interrupting the activities of a group of girls). I found all of these types of borderwork at the holiday club, but to a notably lesser extent at the after-school Arts and Crafts club. Thorne (1993) finds that borderwork often tips the balance of power to boys, because they are frequently the aggressors who also control more space, and do not seem to suffer negative implications from engaging in such rituals. Corsaro (2005) argues that this form of borderwork supports gender stereotypes and exaggerates gender differences and, as a result, girls are more apt to be adversely affected by the negative elements of borderwork than boys. However, Thorne (1993) argues that borderwork can create a space where pre-adolescent girls and boys can come together to experiment and reflect on how they relate to one another. In this study, I consider how borderwork manifests in children's digital gameplay with peers. Borderwork is important for both same-sex and cross-sex interactions, where children negotiate gender differences by performing gender identities.

Chapter exposition

This study provides a South African perspective on children's digital gaming. The following chapters will discuss how boys use games for public display to establish a pecking order, reaffirm their masculinity, and use teen- and adult-rated games as a marker of maturity and aspirational masculinity. By contrast, girls' gaming at the holiday club was much more private, becoming a secret space to strengthen friendships and perform 'good

girl' femininities associated with home and school, as well as exploring more subversive pleasures associated with sexuality. This gameplay study thus investigates how children 'activate' gender boundaries when playing games with peers.

Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical framework of this study in greater detail, by expanding on contributions made by Cultural Studies, Childhood Studies, Game Studies and social theories regarding gender and identity. The chapter discusses children's gendered play with games as appropriation and performance, and attends to children's gender tactics as responses to ludic gendering in games. It also argues that research findings and orientations in Childhood Studies can enrich research involving children and digital games. It questions definitions of 'play' and 'games' used by Game Studies scholars, and proposes more inclusive understandings, initiated by Childhood Studies' ethnographies of children's play. This chapter expands on theories of appropriation to account for children's digital gameplay with peers and relationships with adult society. This is balanced with discourse analytic perspectives in Cultural Studies which account for existing power relations in wider society which impact on *in situ* play. Such a broader perspective is largely absent from Game Studies research which often tends to view the 'magic circle' (Huizinga, 1949) of play as a space which is free from the power relations of everyday life. This chapter also discusses rhetorics of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997) and the rhetoric of progress informing studies of digital literacies and 'good games' for learning (Gee, 2003), which currently dominates the literature on children and digital games. Strategies and tactics (de Certeau, 1984) provide a frame for understanding how children develop tactics to exercise some agency in response to power relations within peer groups and in relation to adult society. This is combined with Butler's (1990, 1993) notion of gender performativity to provide a theoretical basis for gender tactics.

Chapters 3 and 4 outline the methodological underpinnings of this study, and Childhood Studies orientations to studying childhood that informed various aspects of the research design. It discusses the multi-methods approach to studying children's gameplay and their responses to ludic gendering in games. I examine how this compares to traditional forms of reception analysis. The insights provided by Social Network Analysis (SNA) are discussed, since such mappings of peer play provide a visual summary of gendered play in the two fieldsites which can be expanded by detailed descriptions of particular play

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sessions (i.e. *who* played with *whom* and *what* they played). Such social network diagrams, or sociograms, summarise the overall observed and recorded data set, as well as providing a visual representation of same-sex and cross-sex play, thus allowing data from the fieldsites to be compared more systematically. As a representation of play, the sociograms highlight the notion of children's gaming relationships. This technique is thus an important and novel contribution of this thesis in that Childhood Studies and Cultural Studies approaches to children and games have not employed techniques such as these. This discussion sets the context for the play episodes discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

Chapter 5, *'Clique' to play: Ludic gendering and peer relationships in context*, analyses play patterns between the children, and play with gender-specific and less-strongly-gendered game titles in the two settings. It provides contextual data to explain the significance of same-sex and cross-sex play relations. It focuses on the role of social distinctions (gender and age) in the children's peer groups, and how they appropriated particular meanings of games to signify gender identities.

Chapter 6, *Gender games: Unmasking childhood innocence and mimicry*, presents examples of cross-sex play, and focuses on borderwork and how children transgress particular forms of childhood gendering that adults consider to be age-appropriate. It discusses how games can become a stage for performing gendered identities and heterosexual relations. Television and laptop screens become virtual playgrounds where hegemonic discourses around gendered identities are regulated within peer groups. While some of the children's representational choices can also be seen as motivated by storytelling, they are all instances of gendered performances: children perform their gender identities in the process of customising characters. This chapter considers power and identity rhetorics of play in more detail, to provide a more nuanced understanding of children's identities in relation to adult society where middle-class children's play is strongly regulated. Some of the older boys at the holiday club asserted their agency through playing teen- and adult-rated games for masculine display in front of peers. I explore this group of boys' understandings of game ratings, and their comparisons of different teen- and adult-rated games in relation to notions of masculinity. The boys'

fascination with teen- and adult-rated games suggests a preoccupation with the social meaning of these games, which is about performing aspirational masculinity.

Chapter 7, *Meta-gaming: Game rules, peer relationships and identity*, explores how the children played particular games with one another by negotiating game rules during play. The chapter starts by returning to formal definitions of 'play' and 'games' from Game Studies, and applies Caillois' (1958, 2001) concepts of *ludus* and *paidia*, and Frasca's (2003a) typology of game rules to the children's gameplay. This chapter makes a contribution to Game Studies by illustrating how these concepts can be understood empirically. The main finding is that much of what children do with games can be considered along a continuum of *paidia* and *ludus* play, which differs from Frasca's (2003a) approach of categorising games as *ludus* or *paidia* by virtue of the presence or absence of particular kinds of rules. This chapter also highlights how children appropriate single player games for social play as a result of sharing and turn-taking practices in the two settings. Children transform both the game and the social situation to make games more playable.

Chapter 8 concludes the study by summarising my findings about ludic gendering in games, and the kinds of gender identities and peer relationships that middle-class children signalled through their play with digital games in the two settings I studied. I discuss the theoretical and methodological contribution of this research, and the implications of my arguments for emerging fields of enquiry, such as Feminist Game Studies.

Chapter 2: Ludic gendering and gender tactics – how children perform gender identities through appropriating digital games

I'm interested in having fun with ideas, throwing them up in the air like confetti and then running under them.
– *Ray Bradbury (The Art of Fiction No. 203, The Paris Review, Spring, 2010)*

…combinatory play seems to be the essential feature in productive thought.
― *Albert Einstein (letter to Jacques Hadamard, 1945)*

Introduction

This chapter provides a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between children, gender and digital games. Social relational contexts (any situation in which individuals define themselves in relation to others in order to act) play significant roles in the gender system (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004, p. 511). Game design constitutes one such context, while children playing digital games comprises another. These contexts, or 'game cultures' (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006), interact during children's play practices and influence their appropriation of digital games. Contexts of reception and contexts of production are inextricably linked (Carr, 2006). Digital games are gendered through their ludic and representational dimensions (Buckingham & Burn, 2007) and become gendered artefacts as a result of the game cultures responsible for their design and marketing, and those who play them. I refer to this process as *ludic gendering*. Children's *gender tactics* with peers encourage them to interpret ludic gendering in games in ways that articulate gender boundaries and gendered meanings of games in their same- and cross-sex peer groups.

In this study, I employ the concept of *appropriation* from domestication theory to explain children's responses to ludic gendering in games, as briefly discussed in Chapter 1. Silverstone *et al.* explain that "an object – a technology, a message – is appropriated at the point at which it is sold, at the point at which it leaves the world of the commodity and the generalized system of equivalence and exchange, and is taken possession of by an individual or household and owned" (1992, p. 21). More recent uses of the term (e.g. Hynes & Rommes, 2006) suggest that it is less about owning the technology, and more about how it involves 'getting to know' the technology, and how this is bound up with

symbolic interpretations. Digital games are appropriated and have symbolic, gendered interpretations in different game cultures. This study argues that play is contextual in different sites of appropriation, and that children's responses to ludic gendering interact with the peer relationships developed in these settings.

Childhood Studies needs a vocabulary to talk about children's play with digital games which accounts for how these games are similar and different to non-digital games. This is where Game Studies concepts and definitions are helpful. Early play theorists (Caillois, 1958, 2001; Huizinga, 1949) did not consider gender in their categories or definitions of play and games, nor did they have a sociologically informed perspective on children's gendered play practices. Cultural Studies and Childhood Studies can provide this kind of theoretical richness. Game Studies theorists (for example, Juul, 2003) tend to essentialise about gameplay, seeing it as unrelated to a broader process of domestication and game cultures, an important critique made by Crawford (2012).

Games Studies definitions of play have thus far not considered how various rhetorics of play shape how play is defined, especially in relation to child players. Play as progress has become the dominant view concerning the meaning of play in children's lives. Sutton-Smith argues that "rhetorics of play express the way play is placed in context within broader value systems, which are assumed by the theorists of play rather than studied directly by them" (1997, p. 8). Any study of children and games assumes a particular rhetoric of play. Sutton-Smith (1997) identifies seven rhetorics of play: play as progress, fate, power, identity, the imaginary, the self and as frivolous. Sutton-Smith (1997) notes that educators over the past 200 years have represented playful imitation as a form of children's socialisation and moral, social and cognitive growth, thereby constructing play as developmental. He argues that rhetorics of power and identity in children's play can provide a nuanced perspective in comparison to progress rhetorics of play. His claim, that the rhetoric of progress has tended to obscure the meanings that children give to their own affairs of power and play, resonates with Childhood Studies literature. For Sutton-Smith (1997), a rhetoric of play as identity involves acknowledging children's numerous play identities and relationships (siblings, friends, boys or girls, classmates, etc). Power and identity rhetorics of play can thus assist in understanding how children signify gender and other identities through their gaming with peers.

Progress rhetorics are often foregrounded in fields studying children's digital gameplay in relation to education, learning, literacy, etc. Other explanatory frames, such as play as identity, power, frivolity, etc., are downplayed or absent. In addition to play as power and identity, I consider how children communicate gender identities among peers more specifically. This study draws on Butler's (1990) notion of gender performances to account for children's gendered play with digital games and peers, and therefore claims a Cultural Studies perspective on children's identity performances through gaming. The investigation also draws on the work of Carr (2005), Pelletier (2008, 2007), Taylor et al. (2007), Buckingham (2008a, 2008b, 2009a) and Burn (2009) on young people's media use and identity formation, competing discourses of childhood, and the role of technology in children's everyday lives. Such Cultural Studies perspectives are helpful in understanding children's appropriation of games as media, and how their gameplay may be seen as a form of creative consumption and identity work, which sometimes involves transgressing the boundary of childhood by assuming markers of maturity and masculinity (Burn, 2008).

Children's gameplay with peers may be seen as sites of freedom and constraint. While Childhood Studies ethnographies of children's play have researched children's gendered peer relationships and play (Corsaro, 2009; Thorne, 1993), this perspective has not yet been combined with domestication theory or Game Studies. Game Studies research often focuses too narrowly on gaming at an interface level, rather than studying how definitions of games and play can be applied to understand gameplay among research participants. Thus far, many game scholars have relied on their own interpretations of games, which are necessarily shaped by their adult perspectives and experiences. I hope to contribute to these fields, as well as to Childhood Studies, where ethnographies of children's digital gameplay are still emerging (Taylor *et al.*, 2007; Walkerdine, 2007).

Game cultures: technicity and hegemony

In order to situate children's game cultures, it is important to understand the "identities and sensibilities that have driven the development of game cultures" (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, p. 64). Dovey and Kennedy (2006) argue that games have been produced by particular kinds of people who have developed very particular cultures, and that these give rise to particular identities or technicities. The authors define these cultures in terms of

dominant and resistant technicities. Dovey and Kennedy see technicity as a key concept for understanding game culture, defining it as:

> ...the interconnectedness of identity and technological competence. People's tastes, aptitudes, and propensities towards technology become part of a particular 'identity'. This identity then becomes a basis for affiliations and connections with like-minded others. Our particular habits with, for instance, mobile phones, iPods, computer games or DVD collections can become expressions of our 'technicity' (2006, p. 64).

Dovey and Kennedy investigate how games are embedded in a wider culture compared to particular settings, such as households, and they claim that "the meaning of computer technology, and by extension computer games, is not embedded in the technology or artefact itself but is always brought about by a set of cultural processes through which meanings are generated and contested" (2006, p. 65). One may argue that dominant technicities involve particular appropriations of digital games. Dovey and Kennedy (2006) assert that meanings associated with computer games produce an ideal subject that is naturalised as 'White', male and heterosexual. When children play digital games, they are also playing with these ideologies and gendered meanings that are manifest in games' ludic and representational dimensions. At the same time, their social position as children introduces additional power relationships. On the one hand, they may be aware of adult game culture(s) and its dominant technicities. On the other hand, they negotiate their own game cultures which may partially be seen as a response to these hegemonic, adult male technicities.

Hegemonic masculinity, hypermasculinity, hyperfemininity and gaming

Howson (2006) argues that it is imperative to know how hegemonic masculinity operates if one is to understand gender in the contemporary situation. Given the pervasiveness of dominant technicities, where gamer culture privileges certain kinds of male players, the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculinity require further discussion. The concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' has been attributed to Connell (1982, 1983) who rejected the conceptual singularity of masculinity and opened up new possibilities for understanding it as a socially-constructed multiplicity (Howson, 2006). Connell argues that, within masculinities, there is a symbolic, ideal type that imposes upon other masculinities and femininities. He terms this ideal 'hegemonic masculinity', to signal that

it is a powerful ideology about male privilege which is naturalised through various institutions in society, and asserts that it develops in a socio-cultural milieu, and is thus subject to change. In their reflections on the intellectual origins of this concept, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) note that the Gramscian term 'hegemony' was current at the time, and used in an attempt to understand the stabilisation of class relations. They argue that this import later became a source of difficulty:

> In the context of dual systems theory (Eisenstein 1979), the idea was easily transferred to the parallel problem about gender relations. This risked a significant misunderstanding. Gramsci's writing focuses on the dynamics of structural change involving the mobilization and demobilization of whole classes. Without a very clear focus on this issue of historical change, the idea of hegemony would be reduced to a simple model of cultural control. And in a great deal of the debate about gender, large-scale historical change is not in focus. Here is one of the sources of later difficulties with the concept of hegemonic masculinity. (2005, p. 831)

Connell argues that 'hegemonic masculinity' becomes essentialised and reified as the benchmark against which men gauge their success in the gender order (Howson, 2006). Thus, it may be seen as having an inhering aspirational quality for men and boys. Donaldson (1993) summarises hegemonic masculinity as having some of the following features: it involves a strategy for the subordination of women and common-sense about breadwinning and manhood, it is exclusive and anxiety-provoking, brutal and violent, pseudo-natural, socially-sustained through institutions of male dominance, and not all men practice it, though most benefit from it.

Hegemonic masculinity is embedded in many gaming communities, particularly online. Penny Arcade, a webcomic and blog (a dominant voice in video game culture), posted a comic strip depicting a character who claimed to have been 'raped by dickwolves'. Penny Arcade used the 'dickwolf' comic character (see Figure 2.1) as a personification of the slang term for an aggressive online gamer who enjoys inflicting damage to opponents' avatars. The comic's use of this character may be seen as an attempt to satirise, and thereby 'normalise', the pervasiveness of rape culture in online gaming communities. 'Rape' is used in online gaming discourse to refer to killing another player's character in a game. i.e. it is slang for victory over a fellow player. Owing to the popularity of rape jokes in this comic series, Penny Arcade started selling 'Dickwolves' t-shirts on their online store. A public outcry ensued following complaints, and the debacle finally came to an end

when Penny Arcade stopped selling the t-shirts online, and one of the writers of the comic series, Mike Krahulik, made an apology.

Focusing on the recent 'Dickwolves' incident[8] (October 2010–February 2011), Salter and Blodgett (2012) discuss issues of hypermasculinity and sexism within online gaming communities, and highlight the hostility encountered by gamers who express a female identity or femininity. They note the offensive gendered discourse in gaming communities. According to Salter and Blodgett (2012), a rape survivor intended to boycott the Penny Arcade Expo because of the sale of these t-shirts at the event. The comic creators mocked the boycott, suggesting that rape survivors' responses to such aggressive gendered discourse within the gaming community were laughable. The writers incited the community to silence the protest with anonymous, online threats to protestors. Salter and Blodgett (2012) argue that this 'othered' female participants in a male-dominated space even further, and that this incident exemplifies how the privileging of hegemonic masculinity discourages women from engaging in gendered discourse within online gaming communities. While this may be an extreme example of male power in online gaming communities, children may encounter more subtle variants of this as part of their own gaming experiences, albeit offline, through discourses of hypermasculinity related to games in various forms, from representations in games to gameplay (discussed in the following section).

Figure 2.1: Dickwolves comic by Mike Krahulik and Jerry Holkins[9]

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[8] See http://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Dickwolves for an overview and timeline at http://debacle.tumblr.com/post/3041940865/the-pratfall-of-penny-arcade-a-timeline

[9] Source: http://www.giantbomb.com/profile/sweep/blog/anti-dickwolves-protesters-threaten-family-of-penn/77066/

Hypermasculinity may be considered as part of the practice of hegemonic masculinity. There are many variations of hegemonic masculine identities, ranging from the sporting gentleman, to the powerful businessman. These are not hypermasculine. Schroeder (2004) argues that while many beliefs or behaviours may be 'masculine' in appearance, the prefix 'hyper' implies a sense of extremes, thus creating the stigma that hypermasculinity involves becoming masculine in the wrong way. According to Schroeder (2004), hypermasculinity may have a variety of complementary or overlapping hypermasculine archetypes. In Western culture, these are often found in films and digital games in the form of characters such as warriors, cops and gangsters who use violence as a form of manly problem-solving and, therefore, as a display of manliness. Hypermasculinity is defined by existing cultural values, and definitions of what is 'masculine' vary by culture and over time as values shift or diverge (Schroeder, 2004). However, it is the social and cultural agreements on such values which are seen in opposition to femininity (Schroeder, 2004) that makes hypermasculinity such a pervasive and patriarchal discourse in society. When studying ludic gendering in games, hypermasculinity cannot be ignored, and nor can hyperfemininity. Hyperfemininity concerns the amplification of female stereotypes, with an emphasis on dependence, submissiveness, and sexuality as the basis of a woman's value (Scharrer, 2004). Male and female game characters are often depicted as hypermasculine and hyperfeminine respectively, although there are often contradictions regarding playable characters. Many female game characters are non-playable, and form part of the setting or narrative. These characters can be likened to objects with little function other than to be gazed at by male players. The following section argues that while game characters are an important part of ludic gendering, it is not the only factor that encourages players to interpret games as gendered media texts.

Ludic gendering in games

Research on gender and digital games (in the context of making and playing games) has been divided into two camps: "those from the psychological perspective who have focused on gender differences in preferences, representation and experience, and those from the feminist perspective who have focused on the production of gender in spaces, games and design in order to explain girls' and women's lack of interest and absence in the field" (Kafai *et al.*, 2009, p. 2). I use the concept *ludic gendering* to describe how gender 'works'

in games, both as designed semiotic and ludic artefacts, and also as they are appropriated through play. I would argue that this new concept is necessary for scholars to theorise, firstly, the gendered rules and representations in game designs and, secondly, gendered gameplay practices and performances i.e. relationships between game designs and gameplay practice and/or performance.

A large body of literature exists on gender stereotypes in games (Brenick *et al.*, 2007; Bryce & Rutter, 2002; Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Dill *et al.*, 2008; Taylor, 2003; Yee, 2008). These scholars concur that female characters in games are less-frequently encountered than male characters, and that when they are present, they often embody hegemonic gender stereotypes, particularly in the representational dimension. Female game characters are often depicted as hyperfeminine. In her ethnographic research into the online role-playing game *Everquest* and its player community, Taylor (2003) found that both male and female avatars have exaggerated physiques. Whereas large chests and biceps on male avatars act as symbolic sexual characteristics and power, large breasts of female characters only act as sexual markers (Taylor, 2003). Taylor (2003) argues that this involves female players in a struggle with conflicting messages around their online characters, and that they feel the need to 'bracket' out or ignore how these characters look (Taylor, 2003). Taylor's (2003) study is exemplary because she goes beyond a content analysis of 'gender' based on the physical characteristics of avatars, and attends to the level of gameplay. Understanding how gender operates in games is a more complex process than how avatars are represented as gendered on-screen.

Carr (2006) argues that gender in games needs to be examined in terms of its rules and representations. She notes that:

> While the 'look' of a body represented on-screen can be analysed in terms of its face, physicality or wardrobe, the realization of an avatar through play will involve a combining of its menu of movements with the player's operational skills and playing style. The input of players and their ability to determine the actions of an avatar (to some degree or other) means that, while avatars are characterized, there are important differences between avatars and characters in films or novels. (2006, p. 165)

The 'world' in which the game takes place also contributes to its gendering. Flanagan argues that *The Sims* "offers the ability to create a virtual house, wherein players control

characters as though it were an interactive, intelligent Dollhouse" and that "the space of the game is a site of negotiation between the real and the virtual domestic experience" (2003, online). She postulates the feminisation of this game, through its focus on the domestic household setting and gendered labour, manifests through the design of the game space, game tasks, and game goals. Flanagan (2003) analyses ludic gendering in *The Sims* based on her own analysis of the game, rather than how other players interpret this game. My study contributes a perspective which extends game analysis (a popular method among both ludologists and narratologists) to an investigation of gameplay, considering how players negotiate ludic gendering during play.

For some, *Tomb Raider* protagonist, Lara Croft, is the ultimate exemplar of hyperfemininity, while others see her as a site of empowerment for female players. Kennedy (2002) evaluates existing feminist frameworks by applying them to explain the gendered pleasures of Lara Croft as games character and cultural icon. She analyses Lara primarily as an object of representation – a visual spectacle – and considers the ways in which the act of playing *Tomb Raider* as Lara disrupts the relationship between spectator and 'spectacle'. She thus attends to what might be different about the relationship between representations within the game world, and the experience of playing the game. She concludes that a broader range of representations of femininity than those currently being offered in games are required to encourage more girls into gaming culture. Kennedy (2002) invites scholars to critique the discourse around gaming which serves to create the illusion that it is a masculine preserve. She sees a need for "innovative and alternative images of men and women that do not simply reinstate doggedly rigid gender stereotypes" (Kennedy, 2002). Her work may thus be seen as an example of Feminist Game Studies, which has an activist agenda (Westecott, 2012).

Other games researchers have also investigated how gendering 'works' during gameplay. Burn and Schott (2004) offer a multimodal analysis of Cloud from *Final Fantasy 7* and draw on interviews with players, and fan-writing to discuss player-avatar relations. These scholars attend to the kind of play that the game invites players to partake in, arguing that Cloud is a "heavy hero" who is "exaggeratedly attractive, good with his sword, and equipped with a mysterious myth of origin, combining ordinary mortal and supernatural features, like Achilles" and that he "operates agonistically – his problems are expressed in

terms of physical combat or the overcoming of physical obstacles" (2004, p. 218). In relation to the previous section, Cloud is an exemplary hypermasculine avatar.

These concepts are applied to a selection of games in Chapter 5. It elaborates on the notion of a continuum of ludic gendering in games, since the binaries of masculinity and femininity are not always clear-cut. Additionally, many games allow players to customise their avatars, thus complicating the idea that some games are more- or less-strongly-gendered than others by default. The following sections consider children's game cultures more specifically, and how gaming (which includes interpreting ludic gendering in games) with peers may be seen as a form of borderwork (Thorne, 1993), which activates gender boundaries. Children's interpretations of games may also be considered in relation to game literacy and peer pedaogy.

Game Literacy and identity

Burn (2009) argues that children's interpretation of digital games involves an understanding of how the semiotic resources provided by media texts are understood, employed in the service of identity and social action, and reshaped into new texts by players. He notes that the "thrust of research and practice in the fields of digital literacy, media literacy, and multiliteracies has been much more about the production of texts by young people than about their critical interpretation of them" (2009, p. 13). This study shares Burn's (2009) concern, and thereby investigates how children interpret ludic gendering in games.

Buckingham and Burn (2007) offer an account of what a theory of game literacy might entail, and the kinds of functions it may be expected to serve. They argue for "a theory that addresses both the representational and the ludic dimensions of games; that incorporates a critical as well as a functional dimension, that addresses the textual dimensions of games, while also recognising the social contexts and social processes through which literacy is manifested and developed; and that entails a focus on the creative writing dimensions as well as on reading or consumption" (2007, p. 345). Buckingham and Burn (2007) see the potential of making games as a form of creative cultural expression, and as a means for developing students' critical understanding of the medium. Burn's (2009) summary of the evolving model of game-literacy recognises the following elements: game-literacy draws

on children's cultural experience of games and other media texts, it involves developing an understanding of key concepts important to game-texts (such as rules, principles of narrative and economies which construct the interpersonal function of the game) and may include peripheral literacies (such as interpretive writing, walkthroughs and fan fiction - forms of communication that surround the game proper). Like Burn (2009), Pelletier (2008) is also interested in how children interpret games in relation to gameplay and game design.

In her examination of how young players use gameplay and game design to construct their own identities (including gendered identities), Pelletier (2008) shows how the ways in which young people make sense of games, the ways in which they interpret them, and the way they make their own games are related to how they construct a sense of their self in a social and cultural context. She notes that this goes beyond previous discussions about gender and games which have tended to focus on preferences in game play and content. Pelletier (2008) worked intensively with two small groups of eight students, one in a co-ed and the other in a girls' school, a decision "taken in light of concerns regarding the marginalization of women in game-related social practices" (2008, p. 146). Carr (2005) also explored computer gaming preferences of girls through observations of a games club at the same all-girl state school in the UK. Pelletier (2008) notes that their understanding of the data collected in the co-ed school was influenced by their experiences of working in a girls' school. In this context, girls attached a different meaning to their experience as gamers compared to the girls in the co-ed school, and given that gender was not a source of difference among these girls, they constituted their identities along other axes, such as being *Harry Potter* fans, their maturity in liking more adult-oriented games, their preference for anime, and so on (Pelletier, 2008, p. 157). Pelletier argues that "in a social context where gender identity did not need to be established through difference (boy vs. girl), the way girls discussed, interpreted, and designed games was not used to achieve a gendered identity but rather other aspects of their identity" (2008, p. 157).

This is not only true for children in same-sex schools, as children from co-ed schools also play particular games to foster other identities. Many of the boys and girls in the after-school Arts and Crafts club bonded over the karaoke games because they were also members of the school choir. This study considers game literacy in relation to children's

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game and peer cultures. The concluding chapters question whether definitions of game literacy adequately describe the kinds of play and gaming relationships I observed in my two fieldsites.

Understanding children's game cultures

Discourses of childhood and the role of technology in children's lives

Competing discourses of childhood are pervasive in society. Buckingham (2003b) argues that established relations of authority between adults and children, and social definitions of childhood, are changing. Childhood is a life phase or age group. It also has a special character as a social and conceptual space (Jenks, 1996). Buckingham notes that social institutions, such as the nuclear family, that have sought to define childhood are eroding. At the same time, childhood is also becoming increasingly institutionalised, as children spend more time in formal education and are less independently mobile. Yet, in a context characterised by extreme socio-economic inequalities such as South Africa, one may argue this to be the experience of the middle-class, rather than that of the majority of children in the country.

Research on children and games from the Global North dominates. There are similarities between the Global North and South pertaining to the desirability of games and the need to inform parents about game content via ratings bodies. The global distribution and marketing of digital games have rendered game titles and gaming consoles as desirable consumer objects on a worldwide scale. Ratings bodies across the world have responded with classification systems to inform parents about the content of games. The 'protection' of children against potentially harmful media content in games has been foregrounded locally and internationally. Since this study investigates the play of middle-class children, it is acceptable to draw parallels with research on middle-class children in other countries which share these trends.

How researchers make sense of the changing nature of childhood is important for how they approach the question of children's engagement with technologies. Postman (1982) asserts that childhood is disappearing because today's children are exposed to 'adult' ideas sooner, through increased access to information via the media. While Postman's claim may be considered quite radical, the relationship between modern childhood and adult

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society is a subject of much debate. Buckingham argues that while some authors bemoan the media's destruction of childhood innocence, claims about the new 'digital generation' (Tapscott, 1998) or 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2006) tend to essentialise about modern childhood. Today's children are assumed to have particular attributes and competencies related to increased mediatisation and access to technology, which mark them as different from the children of previous generations.

Buckingham (2012) finds that, in addition to utopian and dystopian views of technology in society, there are polarised public discourses between harm and risk, liberation and empowerment which seem stuck in an either-or debate. He argues that this relates to the ways we talk about childhood, such as the contrast between chronic sentimentality in how we talk about children, and the ways we talk about technology. e.g. 'the internet is changing how we think and live'. Buckingham (2012) asserts that current research tends to position technology as the active agent and that this lends itself to technological determinism. In other words, the belief that technology itself *causes* social change, often referred to as medium theory after McLuhan (1967) who argued that the medium is the message. The opposite belief is social determinism (Winner, 1997), the theory that society is an autonomous force that changes technology. Buckingham (2012) argues for domestication theory (Haddon, 2004; Silverstone *et al*., 1992), which considers the social shaping of technology as a way to negotiate the tension between social and technological determinism. Influenced by Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT), Social Shaping of Technology (SST) authors theorise the relationship between technology and society as mutually shaping (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999; Silverstone & Haddon, 1996). These views are important to identify in research on children and digital games, since these explanatory frameworks have repercussions for how scholars theorise children's agency in relation to technologies.

Children's gaming as peer pedagogy and relational agency

Digital games are an important part of middle-class children's consumer culture, and exemplify polarised debates about children and media which involve a struggle between empowerment and protectionist discourses. While marketers often claim that children are becoming 'empowered' in new commercial environments, children are typically seen as victims of a powerful form of consumer culture (Buckingham & Tinstad, 2010). Although

contemporary research in the Sociology of Childhood emphasises children's autonomy and competence, debates about children's media consumption are highly polarised: "children are either powerful agents or passive victims; either sophisticated and 'media literate' or innocent and naïve; either competent or incompetent" (Buckingham & Tinstad, 2010, p. 2).

Buckingham and Sefton-Green (2004) find the binary between structure and agency to be problematic, and instead they propose viewing children's involvement in their media cultures as a form of peer pedagogy. From this perspective, children's friendship networks are seen as learning spaces, and gameplay is seen as a form of creative consumption. Sefton-Green (2006) warns that there is a danger in appraising new kinds of media learning, as this can normalise contemporary childhood and lead to a new form of progressivism, where terms such as 'digital literacies' (used to characterise the kind of learning presumed to be occurring) serve to explain the changing nature of middle-class childhood. Sefton-Green notes that 'literacies' are often used as a shorthand to describe the kinds of learning relationships between children and media, thereby concealing assumptions about learning, as well as alternative forms of engagement. Children playing games together cannot necessarily be assumed to be always learning, problem-solving, practicing their reading skills, or analysing representations in games. While some children may do this some of the time, they may also be using games to strengthen existing friendship networks, or explore shared interests. These peer activities might not qualify as 'literacies' but they count as a form of peer pedagogy.

This study discusses children's gaming in terms of relationships. Notions of agency thereby entail a shift, as studying children's peer groups encourages a relational, rather than an individual or collective, view of agency. Cultural Studies perspectives view agency in relation to active audience models and meaning-making, which assumes a collective agency. In this tradition, children are perceived as creative consumers. A limitation of this approach is that it often downplays societal structures and power relations beyond the media, because children's 'readings' take precedence over how their agency is partly formed in relation to dominant structures, and their 'readings' are infused with power dynamics. Structure in social theory is often defined as "constraint while agency becomes defined as freedom, structure is regarded as static while agency is regarded as active;

structure becomes defined as collective while agency becomes defined as individual"
(Hays, 1994, p. 57). This conceptualisation of structure and agency underplays the
interconnections between the two. While theorists located within the Sociology of
Childhood (such as Prout & James, 1997) recommend ethnographic methods for
understanding children's lives more generally, Qvortrup (1993) has warned that this
encourages a focus on agency which does not pay enough attention to the position of
childhood in macro societal structures. i.e. social structures which produce certain types of
childhood, and how children actively produce forms of social structure while acting as
agents under structural conditions. Previous theorists who sought to reconcile polarities
between structure and agency include Bourdieu (1977) and de Certeau (1984).

French sociologist Bourdieu's main theoretical contribution may be summarised in relation
to his conceptualisation of power which he sees as being unconsciously reproduced
through the interplay of structure and agency over time. He argues that this occurs through
'habitus' or 'the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting
dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in
determinant ways, which then guide them' (Wacquant 2005: 316). Another term central to
his theory is the notion of fields which include a range of social and institutional arenas
where people reproduce their dispositions. He also conceptualised inequalities in his
classic study on French society in relation to different forms of capital which may be
social, cultural or symbolic (Bourdieu 1986) to describe how the 'social order is
progressively inscribed in people's minds' through "cultural products" including systems
of education, language, judgements, values, methods of classification and activities of
everyday life' (1986: 471).

French theorist de Certeau was more of a cultural critic, as his work combined history,
psychoanalysis, philosophy, and the social sciences. While Bourdieu considers how fields
influence habitus to make sense of power in society, de Certeau (1984) is more interested
in the micro level practices of everyday life where people use 'tactics' to subvert the
disciplining powers of institutions i.e. 'strategies'. He considers the ways in which
individuals unconsciously navigate power in society. Unlike Bourdieu's habitus where
people act through the unquestioning guide of their dispositions, de Certeau's 'tactics' are
unconsciously resistant. He argues that 'tactics' can only operate in the space of

'strategies' for brief moments. Bourdieu and de Certeau thus both use binary terms to explain the relationship between structure and agency in society, although Bourdieu's 'habitus' may appear to be more enduring than de Certeau's 'tactics'.

Bourdieu (1977) accounts for practice through his theory of *habitus*, which involves the internalisation of external structures, and agents externalising interactions through social relationships in the field. Bourdieu connects *habitus* to agency in the following way:

> [Habitus is] the strategy generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and everchanging situations... a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and made possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks. (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 72-95)

While some scholars have critiqued Bourdieu's formulation as highly structuralist (Jenkins, 1992), others have focused on the notion of improvisation within his concept of habitus (Pahl, 2008). North *et al.* (2008) argue that young people's habitus influences their digital tastes, and that the link between cultural capital, habitus and cultural form produces a socially entrenched digital inequality, rather than an economically entrenched digital divide. Their notion of digital tastes, expressed in the cultural forms of ICT young people use, relates to how young people make technologies their own, using them in ways which fit into their habitus. Thus, in appropriating technologies, young people use tactics to negotiate strategies that are part of their habitus.

Unlike de Certeau (1984), Bourdieu (1977) attends to the reproduction of cultural practices. de Certeau (1984) argues that the practices of everyday life involve 'poaching', using cultural products in a way that is influenced but not determined by those products. His notion of strategies and tactics communicates a particular view of the relationships between structure and agency. He links structure (i.e. strategies) with powerful institutions in society, and agency with users who "make (bricolent) innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules" (1984, p. xv). He refers to the way users appropriate strategies ('the game of the powerful') as tactics ('the game of the weak') where he defines the space of the tactic as "the space or the other... it is a manoeuvre within enemy territory... an art of the weak" (1984, p. 37). He sees tactics as a form of resistance.

This view has been appropriated by Fiske (1989), who argues that readers engage in a form of semiotic subversion when reading texts. Fiske's position has become popular within Cultural Studies, and contemporary theorists are often attracted to subversive consumer tactics, rather than more general appropriations that naturalise dominant structures in society. This is one of the contributions of this thesis, as it illustrates how children's gender performances with games and appropriations of technology can involve normalising dominant beliefs, such as gender stereotypes, as discussed in Chapter 1. Some of children's gender tactics with games can be considered as transgressing the boundary between childhood and adult society, although this may involve conflict with adult norms, it is not necessarily subversive. In this thesis, 'tactics' is not used as a synonym for resistance against power structures or dominant beliefs. Instead, I use the term in a more general sense to attend to nuances in children's relationships with adult society beyond narrow ideas of resistance.

Current sociological perspectives on social networks suggest that "relational thinking may be a way to overcome stale antinomies between structure and agency through a focus on the dynamics of social interactions in different kinds of social settings" (Mische, 2011). Like Mische (2011), I propose a theoretical agenda that highlights the way communicative action and the performance of social relations mediate between structure and agency. I refer to this perspective as relational agency, as it provides a heuristic to describe how children's gender tactics are connected to broader social strategies, such as ludic gendering, middle-class schooling and parenting, and ratings bodies. Walkerdine (2007) has also stressed a relational approach in her study of children and games, arguing that relationalities are gendered. This study shares salient features of her work in that she also draws on Butler (1990, 1993): games are sites for the performance of masculinities and femininities. Walkerdine argues that each child player is "a position, an assemblage, a figure, a fantasy, a who, which is lived and created through the flows of a number of discourses and practices... an aspiration... an always elusive fiction" (2007, pp. 206–7). While Walkerdine considers the practices of children as individuals in relation to gendered subjectivities, this study focuses on their peer relationships. A relational perspective is crucial to studying children's digital gameplay in peer groups because it goes beyond individualistic notions of agency, and attends to broader social trends and beliefs about the gendered play practices of middle-class childhood. In the following section, I discuss

Childhood Studies literature, which provides a starting point for considering children's relational agency.

Childhood Studies: agency and the role of peer and adult culture

Childhood Studies shares resonances with Cultural Studies, such as the importance of everyday life, agency and power relationships. Childhood Studies and social studies of childhood emerged for the following reasons:

> … it aimed at studying childhood in its normality, it was critical of the conventional socialization perspective, it purported to give voice to or acknowledge agency in children, it tried to expose structural opportunities for and/or constraints on children, and it intended to use as far as possible ordinary sociological or anthropological methods in the study of children and childhood. (Qvortrup, *et al.*, 2009, p. 4)

Adult perceptions that "define the proper ways children are to participate in and are affected by the adult world" (Qvortrup *et al.*, 2009, p. 12), and the cultural framing of leisure, are important research considerations for work in this field.

Corsaro (2009) argues that children create their own peer cultures from very early childhood, and he maintains that these cultures are not separate from the adult world, but intricately interwoven. He considers the role of communal sharing and resistance to adult authority within children's peer cultures. Corsaro argues that children and their peer cultures are worthy of documentation and study in their own right. He defines peer culture as "a stable set of activities or routines, artefacts, values and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers" (2009, p. 301). He argues that the concept of peer culture differs from peer group:

> Children are *members* of peer groups (i.e., groups of children of relatively the same age although the age range may vary), while children collectively *produce* their peer cultures. In fact, children produce and participate in a series of peer cultures that are affected by arrangements of children in various settings (neighbourhoods, schools, city streets, village compounds and so on) that result from age grading and other mechanisms of placing cohorts or groups of children together for extended periods of time. (2009, p. 301)

According to Corsaro (2009), children appropriate information from adult culture to produce their own peer cultures, and such appropriation is creative in that it both extends or elaborates peer cultures, and simultaneously contributes to the reproduction and extension of the adult world. He refers to this process as 'interpretive reproduction' (1992,

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2005). Corsaro argues that "interpretive reproduction differs from other theories of social reproduction in that it sees social structure as both constraining and enabling" and the process is interpretive because "children do not simply individually internalize the external adult culture" (2009, p. 302). He sees peer culture as being at the core of reproduction and change. Similarly, Bourdieu (1991) uses *habitus*, which describes the sign systems made through consumer choices, work and cultural capital to produce distinctions (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, p. 146), to explore the process of reproduction. Bourdieu (1991) also asserts that individuals acquire practices through socialisation within a particular social structure which shape how they engage in the world, but Corsaro (2009) examines this process in children's lives specifically.

Corsaro notes that childhood is a social construction, "related to but not determined by, physical maturation, cultural beliefs about age and institutional grading" (2005, p. 191), and he therefore finds it hard to define its boundaries. He considers preadolescence as the period between 7 and 13 years old. Corsaro's work is highly relevant to this study, which focuses on children within this age group. He argues that children's desire for sharing and social participation, and their attempts to gain control over their lives, are important themes produced and extended in their peer cultures, and extensions of these patterns are related to their development of unique selves or identities as they make the transition from childhood. This may not be true for all 'cultures' of childhood, but resonates with conceptions of Western middle-class childhood.

Social differentiation: Gender and Play

Children's gendered play practices are an important facet of Western childhood. Corsaro (2005) notes the growing debate about whether or not girls and boys have different peer cultures. Gilligan (1982) is one of the early scholars whom Corsaro acknowledges as having played a central role in theorising children's gendered play relationships. She claims that girls have a different 'voice'. According to her, girls' peer culture values relationships and caring, as opposed to boys' concerns with individual rights and abstract notions of justice. Corsaro argues that Gilligan's (1982) work led to the general acceptance of the 'two cultures' view of children's gender socialisation, differences in men's and women's styles of talk, and the nature of social relationships across gender groups more generally. The 'two cultures' view perpetuates an essentialist view of gender, employing

distinctions between biological sex and gender roles. This orientation is still visible in much research on gender and games, and gender-inclusive game design.

Corsaro (2005) argues that the 'two cultures' view is problematic. Not only do studies based on this view have limited generalisability, but findings and interpretations in line with it imply that there is something about the very nature of being male or female that leads to these differing values and social relations. This implies a universal pattern for which there is little support. He argues that the issue runs deeper than possible class and cultural differences in gender relations among children. He asserts that "there is also the problem of interpreting data only in line with the 'two cultures' view, which stresses very clear-cut, almost dichotomous, sexual differences and perspectives" because "in many of the studies, exceptions to the general pattern are pushed aside and seldom pursued" (2005, p. 198). Corsaro interrogates why earlier researchers did not search for negative cases, and poses the question of how to go about identifying and interpreting exceptions to the 'separate cultures' view. To elaborate on such nuances, he turns to the work of Thorne (1993) who argues for the importance of grounding observations in a wider range of social contexts, and studying groups of core and less-popular children. Corsaro also turns to Goodwin (1985, 1990, 1998, 2003) whose microanalysis of naturally-occurring events shows how children actually go about playing games like jump rope, and discussing friendships and gossiping in their everyday lives. These perspectives allowed me to recognise social dynamics beyond the instances of children's gameplay that I observed, and encouraged me to see my research from the broader vantage point of children's peer cultures.

According to Corsaro (2005), despite the recent increase in ethnographic studies of peer relations, there is still a common reliance on reports of children's activities rather than on direct study of the activities themselves. This thesis tries to strike a balance between reporting on children's gaming with peers, how they respond to ludic gendering in games, how their play involves particular relationships with adult society, analysing their gameplay *in situ* as gender tactics, and how they perform gender and other identities. Sociograms of play patterns in the two fieldsites helped me to consider broader social dynamics in these settings, thus going beyond micro-analyses of play episodes.

Developing identities through gender tactics

Play and games in children's peer cultures

To understand children's game cultures, one needs to understand how play and games (both digital and non-digital) function within their peer cultures. Corsaro (2005) argues that by participating in organised and informal games, verbal play routines, and collaborative storytelling, preadolescents explore developing norms and expectations about themselves and their place in peer and adult culture. Children of this age are also able to "talk about their play and games in a reflective way" (Corsaro, 2005, p. 201). According to Corsaro (2005), preadolescent children often address concerns about appearance, self-presentation, and heterosexual relations within play routines and games. He notes that although a great deal of work has documented games and how children's participation influences their cognitive, emotional, and social development, studies of children actually playing games are rare[10]. This study makes a contribution to Childhood Studies in this regard, as well as offering an account of digital gameplay that can supplement existing studies of children's non-digital play.

Thus, children's games are situated activities. Goodwin (1990, 1995) and Evaldsson (1993) both studied games produced in real settings with children who have played together for a long time. Goodwin studied the play and games of African-American and Latino children in the US for many years, observing, recording and analysing children participating in a range of play and games in their neighbourhoods and nearby playgrounds. She found that children's play and games are marked by complex verbal negotiations, disputes and conflicts through which they display and develop their social identities and organise their peer cultures. Evaldsson studied children's participation in games in Swedish after-school programmes. She found that children repeated games day after day, and focused on how they relied on repeated performances of games, such as marbles and jump rope, to create a locally-shared peer culture, and to display and evaluate selves and identities in that culture. Evaldsson found that the status of individual children within the groups she observed was linked to their possession and negotiated value of marbles and things. My study suggests that status hierarchies also emerge when children

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[10] Exceptions include Fine's (1987) study of Little League baseball teams, and Goodwin (1985, 1990) and Evaldsson's (1993) studies of children's playground practices.

play digital games with peers. In some instances, this is related to children's ownerships of games and gaming expertise.

Evaldsson (1993) and Goodwin (1985) also examined the role of game rules and how they influence participants to have a particular orientation to one another during play. They both show that jump rope (as one example they have in common) is much more complex than suggested by previous studies, such as Lever (1978), whose work is highly influenced by the early 'separate cultures' view. Lever argued that 'girls' games', such as jump rope or hopscotch, are eventless turn-taking games with fewer competitive structures than boys' competitive sports games. By contrast, Corsaro (2005) shows examples from Evaldsson's (2003) work, and argues that repetitions of jump rope among boys and girls who spend a lot of time together take on characteristics that have as much to do with their developing relationships toward the opposite sex as they do with their competitive skill in jumping. Competitive play can be cross-sex and is not restricted to boys' same-sex play. In this study, I describe children's gameplay in relation to gender tactics, instead of providing an inventory of characteristics of gendered play (such as boys are competitive, girls are nurturing and co-operative) which perpetuate a two cultures view of children's play.

Gameplay and performing gender tactics

Children use digital games to perform masculinities and/or femininities when playing with peers. They appropriate and improvise with games to display a sense of who they are in relation to peers and adult society. Children's gameplay involves tactics which respond to adult and wider societal strategies, such as ludic gendering, Western gender norms and adult constructions of idealised childhood.

Walkerdine's (2007) ethnographic study of 24 girls and 24 boys aged from 8–11 in an after-school games club in Australia investigates the gendered nature of children's gameplay. She argues that games can be understood as sites for performing femininities and masculinities. She finds that girls are ambivalently positioned in game playing, as they have to negotiate complex performances which demand qualities traditionally ascribed to masculinity alongside those ascribed to femininity. She argues that this produces difficulties for girls in competing to win while also displaying sensitivity, caring and co-operation. While girls have to mask their desire to win to maintain an appropriate

femininity, boys' competence in games increases their status amongst other boys, while for girls, such competence mitigates their friendships with other girls. She also considers the gender-inflected nature of parental regulations, where boys playing games are encouraged, while girls are subtly regulated against game playing, finding that middle-class tastes, dispositions and femininities encourage particular regulatory practices. Walkerdine's (2007) study provides a starting point for considering children's gender tactics with games.

Children develop their gender identities by performing them in relation to others. Butler argues that the process of gendering "emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves" (1993, p. 7), but this "is not to claim that there is a singular matrix that acts in a singular way to produce a subject as its effect" (1993, p. 8). Similarly, she argues that performativity is "not a singular 'act', for it is always a reiteration of a norm or sets of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition" (1993, p. 12). For Butler, the power of regulatory norms is maintained through the citation of gender norms. Drawing on the work of Foucault, Butler sees the repetition of these citations as central:

> Gender reality is performative…The [gender] act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again. (1988, p. 526)

Thus, it is important to consider repeated actions and behaviours that form part of performances. Butler (1993) sees discourse as gaining authority through citing the conventions of authority. A norm takes hold "to the extent that it is 'cited' as such a norm, but it also derives its power through the citations that it compels" (1993, p. 13). Therefore, she suggests that one may read others' citing of norms as part of the process of approximating or identifying with such norms. This study draws on Butler's (1988) notion of gender performance and de Certeau's (1984) theory of strategies and tactics to account for children's gender tactics, and the relationships between peer interactions, digital games, adult society and ludic gendering.

de Certeau (1984) was interested in practices of everyday life and theorising the nature of creativity involved in consumption. As discussed in Chapter 1, he uses the battlefield metaphor of strategies and tactics to argue that consumers are weak compared to

institutional powers, and they have to navigate this "enemy territory" (1984, p. 37) in a creative way to produce their own meaning in acts of consumption. He sees tactics as being determined by the consumer's absence of power, which requires operating within a terrain imposed on them. For de Certeau, tactics can offer emancipation for ordinary people through consumption of consumer goods. The power relations between childhood and adult society suggest that this notion of tactics can help understand gameplay and children's gaming as "the art of the weak" (1984, p. 37), since children are consuming products produced by adult society, which go hand in hand with other strategies such as gender norms and idealised notions of childhood. Although these are not physical institutions, they are very powerful discourses in society.

As discussed in the previous section, this study challenges and expands on de Certeau's theory of strategies and tactics. de Certeau argues that consumers manipulate events to gain small victories over larger systems – again, this leads us back to questions about structure and agency. Children's gender tactics are part of their game cultures. As much as they are shaped by game designs, they may also be seen as a response to ludic gendering in games designed predominantly by adult male game designers in the Global North. If children's gameplay and pleasures are acknowledged and identified as different to those imagined by adult game designers, and if children's play practices inform game design by suggesting a need for more diverse forms of ludic gendering, their tactics may be seen as influencing game design. Currently, the games industry is based on dominant technicities (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006), and children's game cultures are marginal by comparison.

Strategies and tactics in studies of gender and games

Previous game scholars have applied de Certeau's (1984) concepts of strategies and tactics to digital games. Nakamura and Wirman (2005) use strategy to refer to the gameworld, its objects, items and rules. They argue that the strategy aims to control the player by isolating the space in which the player moves, and the rules of the game are ways to control the player and provide a basis for the player to interact in the game world and interact with objects. Strategic choices are made by game designers, whereas tactics are performed by players, as they move within a space defined by an outside power, often characterised by male-dominated culture and preferences. Nakamura and Wirman (2005) argue that tactics are ways to move and make choices in a game, which involves struggling within a

dominated space. This is especially true for female players. The authors use de Certeau's theory in relation to female players specifically, arguing that feminine tactics with male-targeted games often mean counter-playing: "in order to play according to the girlish taste girls need to *counter-play* 'male-targeted' games: use the given set of rules to match their preferences into the defined themes and actions" (Nakamura & Wirman, 2005, Gamestudies.org).

Nakamura and Wirman (2005) draw on Feminist Game Studies, and provide an inventory of 'features' that authors such as Cassell and Jenkins (1999) and Graner Ray (2004) claim to appeal to girls, identifying them as possible tactical approaches to gameplay: alternative pathways, caring, character development, co-operation, female characters, non-violence, peaceful pace, realistic settings, social relations, and story. They then played three different games themselves and analysed the games according to these tactical approaches. Nakamura and Wirman's (2005) study does not ask girls for their interpretations or preferences, and thus offers a narrow and artificial application of de Certeau's (1984) concepts, which were originally formulated to understand practices of everyday life, as opposed to ludic gendering in games. Nonetheless, it is a starting point for considering how de Certeau's (1984) concepts may serve as a heuristic device for understanding marginalised forms of gameplay.

My study investigates how children negotiate strategies, such as game design, game ratings, and parental rules. Interpreting ludic gendering in games is bound up with tactics which respond to these strategies. Domestication theory is useful here, as it explores and theorises the interface between design and domestication (Silverstone & Haddon, 1996).

Gaming as appropriation

Very few Game Studies scholars (with the exception of Crawford, 2012 and Wiemker, 2007) have considered digital games in relation to domestication theory. Carr (2006) argues that, unlike other media texts, games have rules and are played. The rule-centrism inherent in much Game Studies scholarship has been criticised as being in need of a more context-sensitive and sociological approach to the study of gameplay (Crawford, 2012). Domestication theory can help game scholars to attend to the social meanings that players may ascribe to their gaming during play. The concept of domestication arose as a way of

arguing against a textual determinism that dominated much of media and communications research, and responded to the need for contextually-sensitive research (Berker *et al.*, 2006). A core concept in the early formulation of the domestication approach was double articulation:

> ...the ways in which information and communication technologies, uniquely, are the means (the media) whereby public and private meanings are mutually negotiated; as well as being the products themselves, through consumption, of such negotiations of meaning. (Silverstone *et al.*, 1992, p. 28)

Morley and Silverstone (1990) argue that media are doubly articulated, where the first articulation concerns the material object, and the second involves the media texts made available by these objects. Silverstone and Haddon (1996) consider the practices, discourses of production, marketing and use of technologies as part of the first articulation. The second articulation involves interpreting symbolic meanings of media texts.

While the domestication concept has been criticised for assuming a household environment (Berker *et al*., 2006; Haddon, 2004), one of its main advantages is that it attends to how users ascribe symbolic meanings to technological artefacts. Silverstone and Haddon argue that it is important to consider the relationship between domestication and design, since:

> both constrain and enable the capacity of consumers to define their own relationship to the technologies that are offered to, or confront, them. These constraints... are embodied in design and marketing and in the public definitions of 'what these technologies can and should be used for'. (1996, p. 46)

Ludic gendering may be seen as part of the design of game titles. Constraints can also be found at the level of the user, and children's gender tactics may be seen as a response to the constraints or affordances of ludic gendering. Drawing on Silverstone *et al.* (1992), Hynes and Rommes explain the process of appropriation in the following way:

> Appropriation is an activity within which both actual and potential consumers engage. It consists of imaginative work: commodities are constructed as objects of desire (or as something they do not want) and not only to fulfil specific functions but also a construction of the desire for difference and social meaning (Silverstone *et al.* 1992:62-63)... Some users (divided by class, age, gender and ethnicity) never pass the appropriation phase as they never make a 'technology-representation' of computers that fits their self-image; they simply never transform the public meaning of the artefact towards a personal meaning of something that is 'desirable'. (2006, p. 128)

Through appropriation, digital games become (or do not become) objects of desire, and the notion of technologies fitting into users' self-image is useful when considering gender identity. Yet it is important to ask the question, 'Desirable according to whom?' Marketing messages tend to foreground the game cultures of those with dominant technicities, and thereby the desires of 'White', heterosexual males, even though games production and marketing forces are gradually trying to reach female consumers (Carr, 2006; Dovey & Kennedy, 2006). When applied to children, this public meaning is transformed, and adult desires (e.g. for violence), are not permitted, and are regulated by parents and game ratings bodies. Investigating the kinds of gender identities children perform when playing games with peers involves understanding the meanings boys and girls attribute to games, and what makes games desirable to them. Additionally, particular game titles enable or constrain gendered desires as developed within children's peer groups. The following section revisits Game Studies definitions of play and games, and considers these concepts in relation to children's gaming.

Revisiting Game Studies definitions

Definitions and conceptualisations of digital games have shaped what game scholars have been able to say about the relationships between children, gender and games thus far. Games have been described as being texts/literature, narrative/dramas, movies, rule-systems, simulations or representations (Nørgård, 2009). Corliss (2010) argues that unsettled debates have not yet resolved a satisfying definition of a 'video game'. He notes that it is not surprising that game studies have been characterised by such a broad range of theoretical and methodological approaches hailing from various disciplines, since games and technologies are changing rapidly, and video game scholarship is still in its formative stages. Corliss warns that "what remains an essential consideration, however, is the way in which, as social scientists, our decisions in positioning the game object – as a storytelling mechanism, a communications tool, an art object, or a simulation, for example – affect the kinds of research questions we can access" (2010, p. 4). The research question largely informs one's conceptualisation of games. This study positions games as mediating relationships and identities of players.

In this study, I use the term 'digital games' to refer to commercial game titles that are played on a range of platforms, such as computers, consoles (PlayStation 2 and 3, Xbox,

Nintendo Wii, etc) and hand-held devices (mobile phones, Nintendo DS, etc). Game Studies often ignore gaming technologies as objects, instead focusing on specific game titles. In this study, I consider digital games as both technological objects situated in socially defined spaces, and as media texts. I also attend to Game Studies definitions of games as rule-based systems by considering games in relation to their ludic and representational dimensions (Buckingham & Burn, 2007; Carr, 2006).

One of the contributions of this study involves providing a nuanced understanding of how children's gameplay with peers enables them to shape gaming platforms and titles in a way that allows them to signify gender identities. Children improvise (in Bourdieu's sense) their play with digital games in relation to the play setting, the game platforms and titles on offer, and in interaction with one another. Their play is also inflected with larger social dynamics. It is important to remember that gaming is performed in the context of existing social and cultural networks, friendships and relationships; and children's improvisation, performances and social displays of gaming assist them in communicating particular gender and other identities.

'Play' and 'game': A return to Caillois' classification of games

The previous chapter contrasted definitions of 'play' and 'games' by Huizinga (1949), Caillois (1958, 2001) and Frasca (2003a). Salen and Zimmerman (2006) argue that much of Caillois' *Man, Play and Games* (1958, 2001) is a direct critique of Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1949), which expands on Huizinga's contest-oriented notion of play to include a range of cultural forms. I would argue that Game Studies, despite the diversity of play forms proposed by Caillois, has privileged competitive play. As Caillois' framework attends to a range of play forms and games, it assisted me in understanding children's gameplay. This section returns to Caillois' (1958, 2001) classification of games, and highlights the tension between freedom and constraint present in different kinds of play.

Caillois' classification of games attends to the diversity of play forms. Players can play competitively (Caillois' notion of *agôn*), engage in role-play, or participate in other forms of improvised play. This kind of 'creative' play, labelled as 'emergent behaviours' (Juul, 2005), lends itself to Caillois' conceptualisation of *paidia* in that it is less structured by rules. It is important to remember that Caillois was French, and that the translation and use

of his work in the English language has played a major role in how his concepts have been understood. In the French language, 'play' and 'game' share the same word, and so Caillois invented *ludus* and *paidia* for the purpose of differentiation. Nonetheless, Frasca (2007) notes that *paidia* and *ludus* do not match the English 'play' and 'game', and argues that the English language may be biased towards a material, objectified idea of games, to the detriment of framing them as performance[11]. Frasca (2007) argues that Caillois distinguishes between play categories based on rule complexity. Rather than rule complexity as Frasca would have it, this study notes that Caillois sets up a spectrum between the pleasures of freedom in play and the pleasure of freedom within constraints, such as game rules. Caillois' classification of games along the *paidia-ludus* spectrum highlights forms of play in the following order: tumult, agitation, immoderate laughter, kite-flying, solitaire, patience and crossword puzzles (see Table 2.1). These forms of play show a progression, from play where pleasure relies on freedom, to forms where pleasure is gained from conforming to constraints.

Table I. Classification of Games

	AGÔN (Competition)	ALEA (Chance)	MIMICRY (Simulation)	ILINX (Vertigo)
PAIDIA ↑ Tumult Agitation Immoderate laughter	Racing, Wrestling, Etc., Athletics } not regulated	Counting-out rhymes Heads or tails	Children's initiations Games of illusion Tag, Arms Masks, Disguises	Children "whirling" Horseback riding Swinging Waltzing
Kite-flying Solitaire Patience Crossword puzzles **LUDUS** ↓	Boxing, Billiards Fencing, Checkers Football, Chess Contests, Sports in general	Betting Roulette Simple, complex, and continuing lotteries*	Theater Spectacles in general	Volador Traveling carnivals Skiing Mountain climbing Tightrope walking

N.B. In each vertical column games are classified in such an order that the *paidia* element is constantly decreasing while the *ludus* element is ever increasing.

* A simple lottery consists of the one basic drawing. In a complex lottery there are many possible combinations. A continuing lottery (e.g. Irish Sweepstakes) is one consisting of two or more stages, the winner of the first stage being granted the opportunity to participate in a second lottery. [From correspondence with Caillois. M.B.]

Table 2.1: Caillois' classification of games

Caillois coined the terms *ludus* and *paidia* to describe "not categories of play but ways of playing" and these "pass into ordinary life as invariable opposites, e.g. the preference for

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[11] Frasca (2007) uses the notion of performance differently to how it is used in this study.

cacophony over a symphony, scribbling over the wise application of the laws of perspective" (2001, p. 53). Caillois chooses *paidia*, because its root is the word for child, to describe "improvisation and joy" (2001, p. 27), "spontaneous manifestations of the play instinct" (2001, p. 28) and play that has an impromptu and unruly character. In opposition to this, *ludus* involves "the taste for gratuitous difficulty" (2001, p. 27), such as games of skill. He argues that *ludus* "is complementary to and a refinement of *paidia*, which it disciplines and enriches" (2001, p. 29). I argue that Game Studies scholars are attracted to *ludus* play because *ludus* "provides an occasion for training and normally leads to the acquisition of a special skill, a particular mastery of the operation of one or another contraption or the discovery of a satisfactory solution to problems of a more conventional type" (Caillois, 2001, p. 29). In other words, Game Studies also leans towards a rhetoric of play as progress (Sutton-Smith, 1997) in its construction of games as worthy of academic study.

This framework also suggests a divide between adults' and children's games, since explicit mention (see Table 2.1) is made of 'children's initiations' (*mimicry*) and 'children whirling' (*ilinx*). While Caillois' framework is useful for considering the diversity of games and play, it is also necessary to acknowledge its limitations, especially in relation to how his framework implies a division between childhood and adult society. For example, children have initiations and 'whirl', whereas adults do not.

Children's gameplay can be seen as taking place along a *ludus-paidia* continuum. They gain an awareness of and learn the rules of the game through self-discovery, or through peers. Their rejection of the game rules and imposition of their own rules, which constitutes improvised play, but is still rule-dependent, or ignorance of official or formal game rules and preference for rule-breaking, often leans towards *paidia* (discussed in more detail in Chapter 7 in relation to meta-gaming). Some game scholars (Gee, 2003) seem to assume that the majority of children's play with digital games is analogous to *ludus*, or take for granted that *paidia*-like play will evolve into *ludus* at a later stage. Gee argues that "when people learn to play video games, they are learning a new literacy" (2003, p. 13), and that 'good games' have learning principles embedded in their design which are "better than those in many of our skill-and-drill, back-to-basics, test-them-until-they-drop schools" (2003, p. 205). Gee's (2003) claims assume that children interpret game rules in

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ways intended by game designers, and engage with 'learning principles' during gameplay, but this is not always the case. Chapter 7 discusses children's actual gameplay with game rules and peers, and proposes that it is useful to think of children's gameplay along a *ludus-paidia* spectrum. This spectrum attends to diverse forms of gameplay, and enables a nuanced understanding of children's appropriations of digital games.

Typologies of game rules, types of games and gamers

This study contributes to the emerging field of Game Studies by considering how definitions of games, play and game rules can be applied to children's gameplay. Frasca (2007) offers a typology for game and simulation rhetoric along four different axes. The first deals with sounds and images (what he refers to as 'the playworld'), while the last three deal with rules: manipulation rules, goal rules and meta-rules. Manipulation rules regulate what the player can do within the simulated model, whereas goal rules state what the player has to do in order to win the game (Frasca, 2007). Meta-rules define how the player can modify the game itself, such as creating a mod, or changing its difficulty through a cheat code. Frasca (2007) discusses game mechanics – procedures through which something is done or manipulated in a digital game – and argues that in many cases, it may be difficult to distinguish between the role played by mechanics and the playworld, when a player creates meaning during gameplay. He argues that this is because rules and game elements are close together. He cites an example from *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* where the player is ordered to "Kill the Haitians!" This functions as a clear goal rule for the mission. i.e. stating that the player must kill somebody. This rule is also related to game elements, such as narrative. Frasca (2007) asserts that this classification was originally intended for videogame rhetoric and not for traditional games, toys and play activities, but notes that he would like to accommodate it to this broader universe of cases. Chapter 7 of this thesis demonstrates how Frasca's (2007) typology of game rules may be applied to children's *in situ* gameplay to understand how game rules function in play contexts. I argue that children's interpretations of game rules are often socially motivated and form part of their appropriation of games.

It is important to understand how Frasca (2003a) uses Caillois' (1958, 2001) concepts to refer to different types of games, and what 'regulated play' means in relation to middle-class children. Frasca distinguishes between *ludus* games (games with clear rules, such as

Mario Bros) and *paidia* games (more 'open world' games, such as *The Sims*, which involve more freedom). Caillois' original formulation of these concepts as forms of play allows for broader application, since rule-based (*ludus*) and unregulated, sometimes rule-breaking play (*paidia*) can be applied to play as it unfolds, rather than being defined by the game before play has even started. The notion of 'unregulated play' is problematic when applied to middle-class children, for whom play is highly regulated by parents, adult authorities such as game ratings bodies, and peers with regards to what is played, where, when and for how long. When considering broader social dynamics, one may argue that for Western middle-class children, all play is regulated, although this must not be conflated with the assumption of constant parental supervision. This study argues that children's play is always regulated, but not necessarily by game rules. Much of their gameplay involves negotiating 'game rules' as defined in their peer group. Through their gender performances, children also regulate the kind of gaming that they consider desirable and appropriate for same-sex and cross-sex interactions (i.e. what can be played).

Another typology, although part of popular discourse, is that of 'casual' games and gamers, which are seen in opposition to 'hardcore' gamers. DeVane and Squire (2008) argue that it is important to examine a player's actual practices empirically, instead of treating all forms of play as equivalent. Their study of *Grand Theft Auto* players provides a situated theory of gameplay. They discuss the gameplay of 'at-risk' youths in three different peer groups to understand how they make particular meanings of the game. They identified three different groups: 'The Gamers', who saw the game in terms of challenges and missions, and valued skill, expertise and encyclopaedic knowledge of the game; 'The Athletes', who had a shared interest in basketball and affinity for hip hop culture, which sparked their interest in the game, and whose play changed depending on the social arena they were playing in; and 'The Casuals', whose main interest in the game was performing in the game space for friends. DeVane and Squire (2008) also report that these three groups had different views about the meaning of race and violence in the game. Returning to Frasca's (2007) rule typology, it can be argued that DeVane and Squire's 'gamers' were interested in all three rule types, whilst the 'athletes' and 'casuals' were more concerned with the manipulation rules of the game and using its playworld to perform for friends, rather than showing off their expertise.

This is also true for the children in this study, as their main motivation was performing gender identities among peers. The fieldsites became particular gaming spaces where even skilled players played in a more casual way because of turn-taking rules and limited playing time available in these settings. Thus, games were appropriated as 'casual' games which shaped children's interpretations of game rules.

Conclusion

The framework proposed by this study incorporates theories from across the social sciences (Cultural Studies, Childhood Studies, Game Studies, domestication theory, as well as poststructuralist and postmodern perspectives on power and identity) to provide a nuanced understanding of the relationship between children, gender and digital games. The theoretical contribution of this study describes how middle-class children appropriate digital games using gender tactics as a response to adult strategies, such as ludic gendering, notions of gendered play, and idealised views of childhood which are dominant in Western societies.

While the marketing of games construct and define players in particular ways, children also construct their own pleasures and identities through their appropriation of games. This study will look at one site of consumption, children's peer groups in after-school settings, to discuss how children appropriate games in gendered ways during play with peers.

Chapter 3: Researching children's digital gameplay

> A person's a person, no matter how small.
> – *Dr. Seuss (Horton Hears a Who! 1954)*

Childhood Studies ethnographies of children's play focus on naturally-occurring events, such as jump-rope and marbles, in school playgrounds or neighbourhoods (Evaldsson, 1993; Goodwin, 1990, 1995). This chapter critiques the descriptor 'naturally occurring events' employed by childhood studies ethnographers studying children's play. The study diverges from most ethnographies because I introduced a laptop, PlayStation 3 console and a variety of games into the setting. The digitally-mediated play that forms the focus of my study cannot be described as 'naturally-occurring' in the same way, since my entry into the settings and my introduction of games lends an artificial dimension to the study. My focus on particular games aligns the study with audience reception research. This study expands on audience reception studies by using a broadly ethnographic approach which I found necessary for child-centred research. This gameplay study employed ethnographic observational methods because of the lack of fit between conventional audience research methods (interviews and focus groups) and very young children.

Applying reception research to children's gameplay

Jensen (1991) argues that any study that calls itself by the name of reception research needs to offer a systematic, comparative analysis of audience discourses and media discourses. My emphasis on ludic gendering in games and the meanings these have for children in their peer groups resonates with this tradition. Reception research investigates the encounters of active audiences with media meaning, where meaning is regarded as a joint product of text and reader, and the situational and social contexts of reading affect the meanings actualised by audiences (Schrøder *et al.*, 2003). My research can be seen as an updated extension of this reception tradition, because I focus on how digital games are interpreted (in light of their ludic and representational dimensions) while they are being played. Children are regarded as active audiences that interpret games in gendered ways depending on the play context. This gameplay study is similar to reception studies of other media, in that I was interested in how children interpreted particular games, but differs in that I studied interpretation of games media *as played*.

The methods used in this study evolved in response to the challenges that audience reception researchers face when addressing children's engagement with new media (Livingstone, 2008). Reception research hails from Hall's (1980) encoding and decoding model of communication in relation to television discourse. This model introduced key insights regarding the role of audience interpretation. Reception research has been labelled as "less than ideal for understanding non-verbal meanings" (Schrøder *et al.*, 2003, p. 131). This model is thus not easily transferable to the study of games because gameplay is embodied, often collaborative and non-verbal. Children's play as interpretation of digital games cannot easily be accessed through purely verbal approaches common in this research tradition. Current audience reception studies of digital media such as Das's (2011) study of 17 to 23-year-old people's use of social network sites, relies on data obtained from interviews and focus groups. Such methods elicit explicit verbal knowledge and are particularly problematic when studying primary-school-aged children's digital gameplay, where embodied performance and non-verbal data is crucial. After piloting some traditional methods, it became apparent that I needed to devise a gameplay equivalent of a focus group and study children's interpretations of games as they were played. In addition to difficulties of studying play, child-centred approaches require one to use more creative methodologies than focus groups or interviews. These traditional methodologies are quite difficult with children because of the power dynamics between children and adult researchers. Theoretical perspectives on childhood also needs to be considered along with how games and gameplay are defined in research (as noted in Chapters 1 and 2).

Traditional reception research's notions of 'audience' are also a difficult fit when applied to digital games. Carr notes that games are actualised through play and that "the user is a player, as well as a viewer, a reader, a consumer, and a spectator" (2005, p. 466), and that current conceptualisations of the relationship between player, game and play are limited. Documenting children's gameplay requires observational methods which are capable of focusing on gameplay as mediated interaction (i.e. studying games as they are being played, rather than relying on self-report methods). Analytical methods, including Social Network Analysis (SNA) (Hansen *et al.*, 2011), can then be applied to the observational data. This allows researchers to construct social maps (sociograms) of relationships, for example of how children play together and how they appropriate particular game titles within their peer groups. To summarise, investigating children's gaming during play as

mediated interaction and socially-configured, rather than relying on interview or survey data about children's access to digital games and preferred gaming titles (i.e. reception), can provide a more holistic account of the gendered ways in which children appropriate digital games.

Ethnographic approaches to fieldwork with children

Ethnography has been the dominant research tradition for investigating children's play as a naturally-occurring social phenomenon (Corsaro, 2005). Definitions of a 'real-life context' or 'naturally-occurring' play are central to my methodological stance. Nonetheless, my study involved interventions in two environments (an after-school Arts and Crafts club, and a children's holiday club) where games had not previously been present. I introduced digital games in both settings, as discussed below. As a researcher, I followed a systematic process for selecting digital games (to be discussed in more detail in the following chapter), became a facilitator and participant observer of the gaming sessions in the two settings, and introduced turn-taking rules among the children. These play environments were thus constructed through my interventions and facilitation, but were not approached as artificial experiments. Digital games are not permanent fixtures in these settings in the same way as they are in children's homes or a computer class. These after-school contexts were nonetheless ideal for focusing on children's peer relations, and the double articulation (Silverstone *et al.*, 1992) of play and games (as discussed in the previous chapter).

Thus the study is not an ethnography, because I introduced the games into the two fieldsites, yet it includes many insights and strategies gleaned from ethnographic methods of data collection (such as participant observation, fieldnotes and video documentation). Furthermore, the narrative style I adopt when reporting on children's interactions in forthcoming chapters is influenced by ethnographic writing.

The ways in which the children appropriated the games in gendered ways in the two settings, and how they interacted with their peers while playing games, cannot be regarded as artificial. I would argue that, while my study differs from the ethnographies of 'naturally-occurring' playground games often documented by Childhood Studies ethnographers, such contexts are themselves constructed by institutional rules which ban digital technologies. To label the play episodes reported on in this study as less 'natural'

than ethnographies of children's playground games (Evaldsson, 1993; Goodwin, 1985) involves the tricky argument that particular contexts of play are more authentic than others. Carr (2005) argues that the facilitation of a manufactured scenario by a researcher is not always an impediment to research, and questions the judgement that other settings are relatively more 'natural' or 'authentic'. Middle-class children's play is highly regulated by adult gatekeepers, and the decrease of play in public places has become a notable feature of Western childhood. To regard children's playground games in an institutional context as unregulated, more free and authentic may therefore entail a romanticised view of childhood. I will discuss Carr's (2005) work in more detail in the following section, which considers the methodologies used by other scholars to study children, gender and digital games.

One may regard 'ethnography' and 'experiment' as disparate and incompatible research traditions, yet the notion of an 'ethnographic experiment' has been entertained, such as in the field of distributed cognition in human-computer interaction research (Hollan *et al.*, 2000) and discussions in Second Life (Fragoso *et al.*, 2008). Whitehead (2005) argues that one of the characteristics of an ethnographic study is that it is not a rigid investigator-controlled experiment, but a process of discovery, making inferences, and continuing inquiry in the attempt to achieve the highest 'emic' validity possible (ie. when a researcher's interpretation of events may be regarded as unbiased, closely matching the consensus of research participants). Whitehead (2005) further argues that fieldwork situates the ethnographer in the world of his/her host community and that it is difficult to have investigator control. However,

> ... this lack of investigator control is sometime very valuable in the ethnographic attribute of discovering cultural phenomena that may be most meaningful to the host community regarding the topic of study, but would have been missed if the research would have followed a positivist orientation of investigator control. (2005, p. 6)

The issue of investigator control is thus a central issue for the methodology of this study which involved introducing digital game media into two settings where they had not been present before. I introduced particular game titles and technologies after conducting a survey in my pilot site. Findings about popular games and decisions about age-appropriate games (discussed in more detail in the following chapter) influenced my choice of games. The children self-selected their play partners and which games they wanted to play

together. As a researcher, I was more interested in how children's gameplay emerged in the fieldsites than in controlling it. I thus occupied a complex role as a participant observer and 'peripheral interventionist' (Wardekker, 2000, p. 269). This study also differs from that of traditional experiments in that the research contexts were not lab-based, and I was not interested in measuring the 'effects' of the intervention using quantitative methods. The purpose was to understand children's gaming with peers, document their interpretations of ludic gendering in games, and investigate the ways in which they performed gender identities through gameplay in after-school contexts.

Observing ludic interactions

A researcher's methodological choices need to coincide with his/her theoretical framework. According to Giddings (2009), studies of video gameplay and players to date nearly always reproduce assumptions of the primacy of human agency and identity. Such studies foreground individual players, instead of considering gameplay to be the interaction between players and games, where players interpret ludic and representational aspects of games during gameplay. This creates a challenge for child-centred approaches researching children's gaming, as researchers also need to attend to games as particular kinds of media if they are to study their appropriation.

Carr (2009) asserts that games have rules and are actualised through various modes of play, as well as the fact that play is experiential and ephemeral, yet embodied and culturally-situated. According to Carr (2009), theorising game textuality is not straightforward, but it is important because such work might usefully inform research into related issues, such as representation or interpretation. Carr argues that "theorising interpretation is important to those engaged in game analysis, but it also has implications for those designing the research of less obviously related topics including, for example, games and learning" (2009, p. 2). Carr (2009) sees structural analysis, which is used in a great deal of existing game analysis, as related to design and form, while textual analysis relates to signification and to the game as actualised in play. Therefore, "textual analysis of games does not necessarily involve a focus on 'the game itself' as if divorced from considerations of play" and "textual analysis means thinking about the game *as played*" (Carr, 2009, p. 2). Carr (2009) notes that if one uses a model of textuality that incorporates aspects of practice, and that characterises meaning and interpretation as emergent and

situated, then emphatic distinctions between the 'game as text' and the 'game as played' might prove difficult to sustain. In this study, I offer a short textual analysis of the games that the children played in the research settings, and considered gender-specific or less-strongly-gendered games, based on their content (gender roles on offer and the presence of gender stereotypes) and game rules (see Chapter 5).

Children's discussions with peers are analysed in order to investigate the performative functions of their discourse in relation to games. Ensslin (2012) argues that the way in which gamers interact and communicate is an important facet of the 'language' of gaming. This includes how they construct identities and communities discursively, and negotiate the meanings of games and their culture of consumption. Ensslin (2012) further considers how communicative actions and group-specific identities are performed to describe live gamer discourse. According to Cameron and Kulick, "it is in discourse – the use of language in specific contexts – that words acquire meaning" (2003, p. 24). This study uses discourse analysis to investigate children's gaming practices, and the identities and peer relationships they develop through gaming in two different contexts.

This approach is also a critique of the approaches used by some Game Studies scholars, for whom meaning is bounded by the game. Eskelinen (2001) describes how players make meaning from games, claiming that, while played, games are being interpreted in terms of their rules. Performing a meaningful 'configuration' is seen as interpreting the state of the game. This approach to the interpretation of gameplay tends to ignore the context thereof. Schrape (2008) argues that a player interprets the representations of the game in order to configure the rule system in a way that enables the experience of meaningful play. According to Salen and Zimmerman, "meaningful play occurs when the relationships between actions and outcomes in a game are both discernible and integrated into the larger context of the game" and "creating meaningful play is the goal of successful game design" (2004, p. 34). Although Salen and Zimmerman (2004) acknowledge context, they do not offer a strong theory concerning the relationship between gameplay and social contexts. This is mainly due to their use of Huizinga's (1949) metaphor of the 'magic circle' (discussed in Chapter 1) which leads them to emphasise a false dichotomy between the game and wider social life, rather than how games are used and located in patterns of

everyday life (Crawford, 2012). This study attends to children's peer relations and how they use games in gendered ways to develop their identities.

Ethnography, intervention and action research in Game Studies

Few scholars can claim to have conducted ethnographies of children's digital gameplay in the conventional anthropological sense. As a media researcher, Giddings (2007) undertook detailed participant observations of how his two sons incorporated games such as *Lego Racers* into their everyday domestic play, and how digital games are both continuous with and transformative of children's established toy- and play-culture. He describes his methodology as microethnography. He found that established distinctions, between the virtual and the actual across the diverse conceptual frameworks of New Media Studies, are inadequate. He uses his study to make a theoretical argument, in addition to showing how his sons' digital and non-digital play intertwined in complex ways. Giddings argues that "a synthesis is needed between theoretical work on new media/technoculture and ethnographic work with more familiar research objects: domestic space, everyday life, established media and toys, familial relationships, and children" (2007, p. 3). Giddings' study is arguably more detailed than reception research, which relies on interviews and/or surveys with parents about their children's gaming activities at home. An example of this kind of study is that of Ermi and Mäyrä (2003) in Finland, where both children and their parents completed surveys and were interviewed separately.

Gaining access to study children's gaming in their homes is challenging for researchers, a plausible reason for why many researchers choose to conduct experiments, action research, classroom ethnography (where games are an established part of a school setting), or observe their own children (such as Giddings). Researchers also need to consider how 'natural' and ethical observing particular kinds of play are. The children of a games-researcher are likely to be performing for their parents. On the other hand, having an older researcher 'hanging out' in children's bedrooms (if this is where they play their games) could present distinct problems to all concerned. Although I had access to the homes of two children from my first fieldsite, I chose not to explore the option of doing research in these domestic settings. I was more interested in children's non-sibling peer relationships, and the children's homes were likely to afford limited data in this regard. I would have had

to be present for play dates with friends, or else only study gameplay between siblings or other family members.

Giddings (2009) presents his approach as an attempt to escape the systemic bias in his field of New Media Studies. Giddings (2009) argues that the object of study is neither human players nor dynamic software, but what happens when they come together to generate an event of gameplay. He argues for a synthesis between analytical and ethnographic methods, and acknowledges his own "unwillingness to establish an *a priori* asymmetry between video game (as 'text'), video game play (as consumption or practice) and video game player (as embodied media subject)" (2009, p. 147). Giddings (2009) notes that video games are a popular form of screen media, often drawing on films and television for their characters, images and scenarios. However, they are also computer software, and, as such, their algorithmic and procedural operations and structures lie outside the purview of established modes of textual analysis in literary, film, and media studies. This has implications for studies of children and games which use ethnographic methods such as the kind of data one chooses to collect, how many video cameras to use, what to capture, and so forth. Gameplay needs to be understood not only as social interaction (central to ethnography), but also as interpretations of the ludic and representational dimensions of games.

Studies of children, games and gender which are most similar to this study, in terms of using after-school fieldsites and studying children's peer relationships, are those of Walkerdine (2006), Taylor *et al.* (2007) and Carr (2005). Taylor *et al.* (2007) report on gaming in a girls' gaming club. Their research was part of the EGG (Education, Gender and Gaming) project, which they describe as an ethnographic study. Taylor *et al.* (2007) are concerned with games as emerging educational resources and they see equitable access as being thwarted by girls' marginalisation from gaming culture. Because of this ideological impetus guiding the project, where they created the opportunity for girls to play games, their study is perhaps better defined as action research than as a school-based ethnographic study. The EGG project involved creating a series of gaming clubs in Toronto schools, where small groups of children filled out surveys and their gameplay was video-recorded. Different phases of their research involved separate girls' and boys' gaming clubs, and school-based research into gaming in a school library which involved

cross-sex gameplay. Using techniques similar to those employed in my study, games were introduced into the setting. Taylor *et al.* (2007) focus on one play episode of gaming at a girls' gaming club to explore the capacity of multimodal analysis for investigating gendered gameplay. They used software called the *Multimodal Analysis Program (MAP)* to code a video-clip according to different communicative modes present in children's gameplay. They focused on children's embodied play according to their speech and gestures, rather than on their mediated play as represented on a computer or television screen. They argue that these 'semiotic scores', charting children's verbal and non-verbal interaction, afford a glimpse into how children's embodied performances work to enact a discourse where girls have a tenuous claim on gaming technologies. Taylor *et al.* (2007) explore the micro-interaction of a gaming session between five girls whose play was interrupted by two boys who tried to hijack their play. Such multimodal transcription of embodied play affords a fine-grained and novel analysis of micro-interactions, but there are also limitations. This kind of research is highly selective, as multimodal transcripts include a partial representation of interactions (Bezemer, 2012; Jewitt, 2006), rather than a broader view thereof. Transcription is also very time-consuming when dealing with a large corpus of video data, as I found in my own MA study (Pallitt, 2008). Additionally, it is sometimes hard to make sense of children's play when the researcher does not have access to the computer or television screen that children are referring to in their conversations. Much of their communication is deictic and they are pointing out or responding non-verbally to events on the screen.

Similarly, Walkerdine's (2006) study of 8 to11-year-old children playing games in after-school clubs in Sydney, argues that most games are a site for the production of contemporary masculinity, and that this produces difficulties for girls in competing to win while at the same time displaying sensitivity, caring, and co-operation. Walkerdine does not claim to offer an ethnography, explaining that her "analysis is based upon a detailed case study of two girls, Rosie and Bella, who both, in their different ways, exemplify an attempt to perform masculinity while maintaining a performance of femininity" (2006, p. 525). Walkerdine (2006) does not reflect on her choice of methodology in this particular paper, nor in her book, *Children, gender, video games: towards a relational approach to multimedia* (2007). While Taylor *et al.* (2007) are situated in Game Studies and Education, Walkerdine's (2006) background is Child Psychotherapy and Psychology, where case

studies are used for diagnosis. She does not consider the method critically in relation to a broader paradigm of social science and media research, for example the traditions and types of case-study research.

Carr (2005) observed nine girls (average age 13) playing games during lunchtime sessions over the course of a school term at an all-girl school in London. Her methodology included informal interviews, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and observations of how the girls played games and utilised space in relation to the available gaming consoles and their peers. Carr's (2005) study was undertaken as part of a wider three-year project on making games for educational use, and the sessions she observed were facilitated by her colleague, Pelletier (*Making Games: developing game-authoring software for educational and creative use*, September 2003-August 2006). The wider project investigated computer-game-making for media literacy, and the outcome was to develop a software prototype to enable 11 to 14-year-olds to create their own games. Participatory game design was a central focus of the project, which aimed to establish the value of games in educational contexts developing media literacy. One could thus label the broader project as participatory action research. Carr (2005) does not ascribe this label to her small-scale study, but nonetheless acknowledges the artifice of introducing games in an educational context:

> ...the fact that this is an arranged rather than a "found" scenario is not felt to be an impediment…It could be argued that we created something of an artificial environment, an anomalous "bubble" where it was the norm that girls and women enjoy playing and talking about computer games. However, it is also true that outside of any such bubble, the relationship of girls – or boys, women or men – to computer games, is just as constructed. (2005, p. 479)

As was the case with Carr, I participated in creating an 'anomalous bubble' in my two after-school fieldwork sites. I explored the link between ludic gendering and how children appropriate games during play with peers, and how they develop gender identities in the process. The aim of the study is to provide a nuanced understanding of the relationship between children, their peer cultures, and the ludic and representational dimensions that contribute to how children's meanings of games are actualised during play. Although I did not set my study up as an action research project, it nonetheless helped to put games and digital media on the agenda at the co-ed school. A media centre with iPads and gaming technologies was established there shortly after my fieldwork. Thus, although my study

did not have an explicit agenda, I would have achieved my outcome if my purpose was to highlight the importance of digital games alongside other forms of play in after-school settings.

Theory to method: the role of video-recording

Goodwin notes that "in the past decade linguists, researchers in education studies, psychologists, anthropologists, as well as sociologists, have also made use of video recordings of children at play to examine the moment-to-moment work entailed in the negotiation of peer relationships" (2006, p. 23). Goodwin's work on girls' playground games blends "methodologies of ethnographic description and analysis of talk-in-interaction in order to focus directly on children's own social practices" (2006, p. 24). She notes that her approach to conversation analysis differs from those relying on interview data, as she recorded children's behaviour in naturally-occurring settings. She used transcripts of video- and audio-taped interviews. While Goodwin focuses on the language and embodied action involved in children's playground games, my study investigates children's language and mediated interaction during digital gameplay. The kind of gameplay data recorded therefore needs to provide ways of addressing one's research question, and to fit in with the research setting and other practical considerations.

Game Studies researchers, Giddings and Kennedy (2010), used two video cameras: one documenting the screen, and another to record the movements of players. The participants in their case study were a seven-year-old boy and a games researcher who played *Wii Sports* bowling. The gameplay took place in a university setting and the Wii console was connected to a data projector rather than a television screen. This was a practical consideration, as a data projector allows for an expanded view of onscreen gameplay and is likely to record better, not being subject to the same kind of refresh rate as a computer screen, or resolution of a television. Giddings and Kennedy (2010) were interested in documenting gameplay as embodied interaction, and their case-study suggests ways of theorising and studying human and digital bodies during gameplay. This approach involves very detailed transcription, which presents the challenge discussed above, and this is further magnified when studying multiple players.

As in the case of Giddings and Kennedy (2010), scholars using multimodal theory also tend to use more than one camera. Such scholars see games as multimodal texts, and gaming as a form of "multimodal interaction" (Jewitt, 2006; Norris, 2004). In relation to classroom ethnography, Jewitt (2006) used two cameras: one to record the 'big picture' of classroom interaction, and another to capture data displayed on the computer screen i.e. what students were doing with a particular application. Jewitt argues that collecting data on two cameras can be problematic in that it fragments activities and participants, and therefore "the decision to use more than one camera needs to be sensitive to the structure of the interaction and context being studied" (2006, p. 35). For my purposes, one camera and fieldnotes were sufficient, because it was more manageable and allowed me to focus on digitally-mediated play without being too intrusive. I recorded children's speech and the television or laptop screen, to analyse how they responded to ludic gendering and performed gender identities while playing with their peers. If I had broadened my discussion of gender performativity to a more detailed analysis of embodied interaction, an additional camera would have been a requirement.

Conclusion

Field observations of children's gameplay need to be considered alongside a host of methodological challenges. These challenges range from gaining access to children, to identifying what aspects of play to record, and ethical concerns. Boocock and Scott (2005) note that asking children *their* opinions and taking their answers seriously – a revolutionary idea in the 1970s – remains controversial today, as the romanticised notion of childhood innocence, vulnerability and incompetence maintains a strong hold on adult thinking about children and childhood. Morrow and Richards (1996) point out that in terms of methodology, researchers need to think carefully about the standpoint from which they are studying children, and the ethical implications of that standpoint. I have provided a critical perspective on claims about 'natural' play in regulated environments and the illusion of naturalism and authenticity in existing Childhood Studies ethnographies of children's playground games. The following chapter addresses my approach to data collection and analysis in more detail.

Chapter 4: Methodology

> You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.
> — *Plato, 427-347 BC*

Overview of research methodology

This chapter outlines the research methods used to investigate children's peer relationships and performance of gender identities when playing digital games together in two after-school settings in Cape Town. The children's interactions in the fieldsites relied on their peer groups, and I therefore needed to be able to document how the children appropriated digital games in the context of their peer interactions. As discussed in Chapter 3, I needed to draw on a variety of methods to document my introduction of digital games in the two settings. My study describes children's consequent micro-interactions of play, and attends to their developing social relationships. I also explore how their performed identities and negotiations respond to the ludic and representational dimensions of particular games during play. The study combines participant observation, fieldnotes and video documentation of gameplay, with Social Network Analysis (SNA) as a way of focusing on children's gameplay as mediated interaction and peer relationships.

Theoretical perspectives from Cultural and Childhood Studies, which establish the importance of children's agency informed data collection and analysis. The objective of this study was to use a child-centred approach to studying children's gameplay, conceptualised in terms of peer interactions, digital games, adult society, and ludic gendering in games. The theoretical framework discussed in the previous chapters helps account for ludic gendering in games and how children respond to games as media. The methods used in this study allowed me to access and document children's gendered play with peers. This involved triangulating qualitative methods to account for the interaction between gameplay and gender among two small groups of primary-school-aged children.

This chapter explains the processes by which I identified two after-school sites for fieldwork, and a classroom context for a pilot. I also explain how I negotiated with gatekeepers and gained access to children. The complex ethical considerations that arose

during different stages of research for this study are outlined, and I explain how they changed and developed as my relationships with the children strengthened. I clarify how I selected the games for the study. The chapter further outlines my experience of piloting the research in one site, building relationships in two main fieldsites, and the observational and recording methods which I developed to document children's activities in the research settings. As my research progressed, various participatory forms of research were incorporated into children's play. Children often volunteered to video their friends playing games and mimicked my interviewing by asking questions of one another. Finally, the rationale for my approach to sampling, transcription and analysis is explained.

Documenting play

I took fieldnotes to document the events of each day and how the children organised their peer groups around the gaming titles and platforms and the overall context. Video cameras were used to record children enacting meanings of games through their play. As discussed in Chapter 3, this entailed a focus on children's mediated rather than embodied play, and hence detailed records of their in-game interactions were provided through focusing the video camera on the screens of the laptop and PlayStation. Children's bodies were excluded from the video frame: first, for ethical reasons; second, to avoid having to use two cameras in the field setting; and third, to limit the scope of the analytical project. I wished to focus my detailed discussion of performativity on children's recorded speech and their mediated actions as recorded on a television or laptop screen.

Rationale for methodological approach

The methodological choices embarked on in this study are motivated by lacunae in current research on children and digital games. Existing methodologies struggle to access children's interpretations of games, or to account for how their peer relationships contribute to the double articulation (Silverstone *et al.*, 1992) of digital games, whereby games become endowed with particular meanings within social spaces during play. Livingstone (1998) notes that while numerous audience reception studies focus on adults, few consider children's interpretations of media texts. She argues that the notion of 'audience' needs to be reconceptualised, in response to the rise of digital media as a construct which addresses relations between people and media in context, at a number of interlinked theoretical levels.

Social Network Analysis (SNA) is helpful as a way to reconceptualise audience research, as it "aims to make statements about the structure of social relationships among a set of actors through establishing *patterns* of linkages or relationships among these actors" (Mitchell, 1984, p. 267). SNA provided me with a way of documenting children's same-sex and cross-sex peer relationships and the game titles they chose to play. This enabled me to construct composite visualisations (sociograms) of these patterns of interactions in the two main fieldsites. I therefore use SNA in a qualitative way to support my claims about borderwork (Thorne, 1993) and how children appropriated the game titles on offer in the two settings, thus giving rise to gendered meanings of games.

Child-centred research

Studies wishing to employ a child-centred approach to investigating children's play need to distinguish between participant observation and participatory research. When researchers participate in the setting being studied, they are said to be conducting participant observation, whereas participatory research is where people from the setting being studied become active participants in the research project. While this study was informed by child-centred approaches, and valued children's participation (such as their recordings of their peers' gameplay), it was not motivated by a particular activist agenda, in the way that participatory action research is. Action research "encourages egalitarian research relationships and the full involvement of those being researched in every aspect of the research project – from initial conceptualisation to final implementation" (Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006, p. 432). Nonetheless, I used participant observation to research children's gameplay with peers, and participatory research in the form of children's video-recordings and focus group discussions, because I felt it was important to acknowledge children's competency and agency.

James and Prout (1990) argue that ethnography is a particularly useful methodology for the study of childhood, because it allows children a more direct voice and participation in the production of sociological data than is usually possible through experimental or survey styles of research. The 'emic' perspective, assumed to be enabled through good ethnographic research, is difficult with regards to studying children's play within their peer cultures because adult researchers are disconnected from the experience of childhood. Corsaro argues that "children are the best sources for understanding childhood" (1997, p.

103). This precept is known among Childhood Studies researchers as "Corsaro's rule" (Boocock & Scott, 2005, p. 33). Boocock and Scott (2005) assert that children need to be accorded more active roles in the research process, and that their competence to speak for themselves requires acknowledgement. Morrow and Richards (1996) note that discussions of ethical dilemmas raised by medical and psychological research are dominated by a conceptualisation of children as vulnerable, in need of protection from exploitative researchers, and as objects rather than subjects of research. According to Morrow and Richards (1996), the biggest ethical challenge for researchers working with children is the disparities in power and status between adults and children. They argue that the issue of differential power relationships between children and adults in the research process also lies at the level of interpretation of data. How researchers view and study children affects what we can learn about them, and this involves acknowledging our adult ideological bias. Employing a child-centred approach when investigating children's play allows researchers to be reflexive about their position in relation to child participants. My adult bias became clear to me during the process of selecting games for the children to play, as it initially involved making judgements about games I believed to be 'appropriate' for children to play, and selecting titles which I perceived to be more- or less-strongly-gendered.

Rationale for selection of games

As a researcher, I had assumptions about the kinds of games girls and boys would enjoy, and initially bought games that I thought would appeal to either young boys or girls, and games which I thought could be equally enjoyed by both. As a student with limited funds, I bought games I perceived to be popular among primary-school children (based on the survey in my pilot study, and on my young cousins' favourite games). I also considered the age-ratings of the games quite seriously, because my research proposal and consent form promised parents that their children would be playing age-appropriate games (see Appendix 3a). Analytically, I defined 'age-appropriate games' as those classified by the Film and Publication Board (FPB) of South Africa as not containing harmful or violent imagery, swearing, nudity or sexual themes i.e. suitable for primary-school-aged children. Initially, I believed that allowing children to play teen- or adult-rated games would be unethical, given that I did not know how my ratings rule compared to that of some of the children's parents and that ratings are often derived from notions of 'harm' to children. This belief shifted later on, as I realised that my strict definition of 'age-appropriate'

appeared to differ from those applied by the children and their parents. While some children played games rated for adults, this was not the norm – in the middle-class contexts I studied, many parents played a gatekeeping role in relation to the kinds of games their children played. Definitions of 'age-appropriate' games differed amongst families, as did levels of parental mediation – some children reported that their parents played teen- and adult-rated games with them and adjusted graphics settings, e.g. by turning off the 'blood'. In a few cases, the children said that their parents neither cared what games they played nor watched them as they played.

Aside from popularity and ratings, I also bought particular game titles because they were available at a discounted price at particular shops or second-hand game trading stores. The Film and Media department at my university had purchased a PlayStation 3, and I was given permission to use it for fieldwork. The games collection grew depending on feedback from the children about 'age-appropriate' games that they wanted to play, or that they reported playing at home. For example, the girls at the Arts and Crafts club requested racing games so I bought more racing titles. The holiday club children reported playing *The Sims 2* at home, so I also purchased that for them. Despite being a teen-rated game, almost all of the children had played some version of *The Sims* before. The children in both contexts also requested *Grand Theft Auto*. In this case, I did not include it despite the children's claims that they had played it before or that they were allowed to play it at home. As a researcher, I needed to be strategic about not upsetting parents and teachers and I was aware of the 'moral panics' (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1997; Jenkins, 2006) around this particular game. *Folklore* was another exception to my initial ratings rule. I included it because of the amount of writing the game requires players to read, and I was interested to see how the children responded to that. Being aware of progress rhetorics (Sutton-Smith, 1997) of play, I believed that a game with lots of reading would be held in high esteem by adults present in the research sites. I will expand on my approach to interviews and other methods of data collection in the following section.

Laptop (PC) games:	PlayStation 3 games:
Bratz: Rock Angels, Mega Entertainment Inc (2005) FPB: A	*2010 FIFA World Cup South Africa*, Electronic Arts Inc. (2010) PEGI: 3
Candy Capers Volume 1, Cartoon Network (2008) FPB: PG (V)	*Burnout Paradise*, Electronic Arts Inc. (2007) FPB: 16 V BUT PEGI: 3+
Disney Sing It, Disney (2009) FPB: A	*Disney Sing It: Party Hits*, Disney (2010) PEGI: 3
Littlest Pet Shop, Electronic Arts Inc. (2008) FPB: A	*Folklore*, Sony Computer Entertainment Europe (2007) PEGI: 12+
Need for Speed: Undercover, Electronic Arts Inc. (2008) FPB: A	*Little Big Planet*, Sony Computer Entertainment Europe (2008) FPB: PG [BUT PEGI: 7+]
Need for Speed: Pro Street, Electronic Arts Inc. (2007) FPB: A	*Ratchet and Clank: Tools of destruction*, Sony Computer Entertainment Europe (2007) FPB: A [BUT PEGI: 7+]
The Sims 2, Electronic Arts FPB: 13	*Create,* Electronic Arts (2010) [PEGI: 3]
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Electronic Arts Inc. (2005) FPB: A	

Table 4.1: Games used in this study. Local (FPB) age ratings are included where available[12]

Data collection and procedure

Negotiating access to fieldsites

The pilot study for this investigation took place at an all-boy primary school, Riverside Boys*. The children at this school were mainly 'White' and 'Coloured', with a minority of 'African' and 'Indian/Asian' attendees. I conducted an initial study of boys' reported gaming practices in this pilot site. This was followed by research at a co-ed school, St Mary's*, where I started a games workshop as part of an existing extracurricular Arts and Crafts club. The majority of the children at this school were 'Coloured', 'African' and 'Indian/Asian'. 'White' children were a minority at this school. As a religious school, St Mary's resisted racial segregation during apartheid, and still embraces its heritage as a multi-cultural and racially-diverse school. The third site was a children's holiday club, hosted in the gym hall of Riverside Boys, but attended by primary-school-aged boys and

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[12] The Film and Publication Board (FPB) of South Africa mark local ratings by placing a sticker on games over the ratings of other countries. Often these stickers are stuck to the plastic wrapping of games and, once removed, cannot be identified unless one goes online to find the local rating. In my experience, this information is often hard to find online. For the purpose of this study, I have included PEGI (Europe) or ESRB (USA) ratings where I was unable to locate particular FPB age ratings. I have also noted some discrepancies between local ratings and those of PEGI and ESRB regarding PlayStation 3 games. An example is *Burnout Paradise*, rated by the FPB as 16V but 3+ according to PEGI. Walton *et al.* (2011) discuss how these local and international ratings define childhood and assume parental supervision. They argue that the FPB's classification is clustered in the teen-aged years, suggesting a preoccupation with regulating young people on the threshold of adulthood, rather than informing parents of younger children.

girls from a variety of schools. Children in this fieldsite were mainly 'White' and 'Coloured', whereas 'African' and 'Indian/Asian' children were minority attendees. The three fieldsites reported on in this study were chosen primarily based on convenience. In these sites I was able to build relationships with teachers, or to draw on existing schoolteacher contacts in order to gain access to children at their schools. Details of the fieldwork sites and the site of my pilot study are tabulated below (Table 4.2).

Fieldsite and timeframe	Adults present	Number of girls	Number of boys	Age of children	Time spent	Methods used
Riverside Boys (pilot study in April 2010)	1 teacher	0	103	11–13	1 hour	Questionnaire, drawings of favourite game
Arts and Crafts club at St Mary's co-ed school (Sep–Dec 2010)	1 teacher 1 research assistant	12	9	9–11	22 hours	Video recordings, interviews, questionnaire, drawings of favourite games
Holiday club at Riverside Boys (Dec 2010– Jan 2011)	2 club organisers	8	24	6–12	42 hours	Video recordings, questionnaire, interviews, game demonstrations, play schedule
Holiday club at Riverside Boys (April 2011)	2 club organisers	4	14	4–13	30 hours	Video recordings, questionnaire, interviews, game demonstrations, play schedule

Table 4.2: An overview of research conducted in three settings, showing participants, time spent in the fieldsites, and methods used

I was originally interested in observing children's gaming during recess, after-school time, or as part of an existing extra-mural activity. An original round of enquiries to various schools did not turn up any schools willing to accommodate my research during regular playground activities. Instead, I used my existing contacts to run a classroom-based pilot study. I was granted permission for a pilot study in April 2010. The Music and Arts and Culture teacher at Riverside Boys granted me permission to do a pilot study with the boys in his classes and assisted in providing a follow-up lesson exploring designs for South African games. Prior social contact with the Music and Arts and Culture teacher at Riverside Boys helped me negotiate access to his grade six and seven classes, where I presented two half-hour workshop-style lessons, with 11–13 year-old boys. The boys completed a gaming profile questionnaire and drew a picture of their favourite game during an Arts and Culture lesson. The teacher conducted follow-up lessons which explored games in a South African context, and the boys were asked to generate their own

game designs. These demonstrated local meanings of games for primary-school boys (Walton & Pallitt, 2012). This pilot study informed subsequent research design, as the boys' gaming profiles allowed me to learn about the gaming technologies and game titles owned by middle-class children. This influenced my selection of technologies and game titles for use in later fieldsites. The boys' feedback also highlighted the disconnection between teachers' understandings and the realities of children's leisure use of ICTs, and told me about the extent to which they had access to teen- and adult-rated games.

After this pilot, Riverside Boys did not grant me permission to conduct a games workshop with their scholars during term-time. Instead, they recommended that I contact the organisers of a holiday club hosted by the school. The June/July 2010 holiday club was run by teachers. Because the holiday coincided with the FIFA Football World Cup, the teachers had planned a curriculum designed around this event. They did not feel that the games-focused workshops which I envisaged could be accommodated, as their schedule was full. In the process of negotiating with these organisers, I met Sarah* and Dorothy*; a mother and daughter team who were the regular holiday club organisers. They were keen to accommodate me in their future holiday clubs and welcomed my offer to create the opportunity for children to play digital games at their club.

In the meantime, I approached a co-ed school (St Mary's Primary School) which, like Riverside Boys, was situated close to my university in the southern suburbs of Cape Town. The principal was eager to help and put me in touch with one of the Grade 4 teachers, Jennifer*, who offered extra-mural activities such as Arts and Crafts, and swimming. Jennifer helped me to arrange a weekly games workshop for the Arts and Crafts group of 11 children, of whom the majority were ten and eleven years old. Arts and Crafts ran on Wednesdays and Fridays, once formal school time ended. Initially, 11 children participated. Jennifer arranged for their parents to give informed consent before I commenced the game sessions. The Arts and Crafts group met twice a week, and Jennifer allowed me to use both sessions after my first three visits, because the children wanted to play games twice a week. Jennifer had confidence in me, and often let me know when she had to be elsewhere, especially in the final school term when she taught swimming during the same time-period. Since Jennifer was at the pool teaching swimming in the new term, and not checking up on the group, the original participants invited their friends to the game

sessions, and these additional children approached me to enquire about joining. I let them play, and gave them consent forms to be signed by their parents and returned to me at the next session.

Difficulties involved in gaining access to children

Graue and Walsh observe that "getting into the field with children can be very hard" (1998, p. 97). Gatekeepers are "people responsible for groups of children" (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. 97), mostly adults who have varying degrees of control over researchers' access to the research site and activities with children (Christensen & James, 2000). In my study, gatekeepers were the local education department, school principals and teachers, holiday club organisers, and parents of the children. It is understandable that parents are protective of children and their privacy. Nonetheless, such gatekeepers are not only protecting children, but are likely to be concerned about their own privacy, and might not have wished to have their interactions with children observed by a researcher. As Graue and Walsh (1998) explain, gaining entry to a research site is a daily, ongoing process which requires continual negotiation.

Games research involves asking children about what they do in their leisure time, at home, with or without parental supervision. Playing commercial games is generally a 'non-school' activity for the children in this study, and the children's stories often provided insight into their family lives. It was common to hear about fights with siblings about using the family television to play games, or parental rules about time spent playing games in relation to doing homework. For example, one boy at the Arts and Crafts club told me that his mother never plays games with him, she 'only cooks and smokes'. While such a comment may seem amusing, parents are unlikely to appreciate their child talking to an unknown adult researcher about their activities at home.

Regarding the school context, principals and teachers have particular beliefs about games, and these are often influenced by 'moral panics' (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1997; Jenkins, 2006) about the negative influence of games in society more generally. Unlike Jennifer, who majored in Media Studies as part of her undergraduate degree and was curious about games and related debates concerning children's media consumption, some teachers may see games as a waste of time, preferring children to engage in more

'educational' activities at school. Additionally, if a school supports a games research project and informs parents about it, this may be read by parents as implicitly endorsing games and associated 'trivial' play, in contrast with more serious 'learning' assumed to take place in schools.

Ethical research with children

The Western Cape Education department gave permission for me to conduct research at Riverside Boys' Primary School (pilot study) and St. Mary's (see Appendix 2). An extended period of research in the afternoons was negotiated at St Mary's with Jennifer, the school principal, the children, and their parents. Jennifer's Arts and Crafts children wanted to continue with the gaming sessions as an extra-curricular activity till the end of the year, and so the sessions continued until their exam time. Jennifer taught swimming in the fourth term, so she was happy for me to keep her Arts and Crafts children busy, as the game sessions had become a new and much enjoyed extra-curricular activity for the children by this time. I was also grateful to have more fieldwork time with the children.

Research at St. Mary's presented some ethical dilemmas. Jennifer was very helpful in that she informed parents about my research, and assisted in making sure that the Arts and Crafts children returned their consent forms (signed by their parents) to me. Unfortunately, the group of children attending the sessions was subject to an unexpected level of flux at a later stage. While some children were unable to attend because they had been punished by detention, others brought friends along who either did not belong to an existing extra-mural activity, or wished to attend the games sessions instead. Initially, the original Arts and Crafts group chased the other children away, reiterating Jennifer's rule that the games were only for the Arts and Crafts children. During the second half of the fieldwork, Jennifer was not present at the sessions as she taught swimming, so new children would often 'sneak' in and beg me to let them play. I did not turn any children away from the gaming sessions. I welcomed new members and gave them consent forms, which they were asked to give back to me on their return to the gaming sessions the following week, once the forms had been signed by their parents. The parents of children who dropped in rather than joining the group formally thus only found out about the research after their children joined the games club. In order not to banish such children by excluding them, I decided to differentiate between participation in the games club (which was voluntary) and

participation in my research study (which required parental consent). Therefore, my largest ethical concern arose in relation to gaining access to children and obtaining informed consent from the children's parents.

Fieldsite	Number of boys who participated in the game sessions	Number of boys whose parents gave informed consent	Number of girls who participated in the game sessions	Number of girls whose parents gave informed consent
Arts and Crafts club at St Mary's co-ed school	8	5	12	6
Holiday club at Riverside Boys (December 2010–January 2011)	25	18	8	3
Holiday club at Riverside Boys (April 2011)	15	12	5	5

Table 4.3: A summary of the number of boys and girls who participated in the gaming sessions in the two settings, compared to the number of 'official' participants whose parents granted informed consent for their child to participate in the research study

The number of 'official' participants in each field site thus differs from the number of children who actually participated in the gaming sessions, for a number of reasons (see Table 4.3). Although the Arts and Crafts teacher and holiday club organisers assisted me in the process of collecting consent forms signed by parents, children would often play games before their parents had signed the consent form (see Appendix 3a&b). While my intention was not to exclude children, and to arrange consent forms later, this caused much unhappiness for one of the parents at the holiday club. When she realised her daughter had attended the session, she phoned me to complain and I agreed to not include her daughter's data in my study. She also e-mailed my supervisor (Appendix 4) who asked me to write a letter to the ethics committee (Appendix 5, names changed to reflect anonymity of persons and fieldsites used in this study), describing the situational factors which caused the problem, and the steps I had taken to ensure that I conducted ethical research. After discussing the incident, my supervisors and I came to the conclusion that I would be allowed to describe all the data in this study as a whole, but regarding individual cases I would only use data of the children whose parents' consent I had obtained.

There are ethical as well as methodological issues surrounding my choice to focus on certain kinds of data as units of analysis. For example, children's faces and bodies were not included in the frame because schools and parents are promised anonymity in research studies. Children's parents were asked to sign a consent form granting me permission to record their children at play using a video camera set up to record the game screen and the children's voices. Additionally, the identities of children, teachers, parents and schools in this study have all been protected through the use of pseudonyms to preserve anonymity. I have taken every measure to ensure that this thesis does not expose the identity of participants, as promised when gaining informed consent. Next I will discuss the fieldsites in more detail.

Pilot study: Riverside Boys Primary School

The pilot study took place in April 2010. Several classes (103 boys aged between 11 and 13 years) completed a questionnaire (see Appendix 1a), and the majority (N=95) also drew a screenshot of their favourite games (see Appendix 1b). The teacher conducted a follow-up lesson after my session, where the boys 'designed' a South African game (reported on in Walton & Pallitt, 2012). For boys in this school, computers and PlayStation consoles were the medium of choice for play within a primarily male peer group, which also extended online. Of the boys who completed the questionnaire, 80% reported playing games at home on the computer, 51% on a laptop (owner not specified), 76% reported playing games on the Internet, and 68% played on a PlayStation. Gaming was a predominantly masculine activity, taking place mostly within the peer group. The boys reported playing mostly with their school friends (81%), cousins (49%), brothers (43%), and other friends who did not attend the same school (58%). Several (20%) reported playing games with strangers on the Internet. While only 6% played with their mothers, 22% played games with their fathers.

The 'favourite' games they mentioned had distinctly masculine themes, such as sports games or, as a rebellious alternative, the gangster-themed *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* titles. PlayStation 3 owners were granted high status and deemed particularly lucky compared to the majority who played games on desktop computers or a PlayStation 2. One even claimed to have a 'PlayStation 4' in order to impress. Age-restricted games or new releases were more highly valued, and in questionnaire responses many listed *FIFA 10* (a new

release at the time) as their 'favourite' game. They were also likely to write down the full names of game titles, in order to distinguish a game from earlier releases or prequels with the same title. Others used full titles to distinguish between games with similar titles but different age ratings (see Appendix 6 for a list of favourite games reported by the boys according to age and grade). The pilot study proved valuable in that I was able to use the boys' lists of favourite games to identify popular game titles. This provided me with a good start to my games collection for the children in my two fieldwork sites. I will discuss these research settings in more detail below.

Jennifer's Arts and Crafts club at St Mary's Primary School

St Mary's Primary School is a multicultural co-ed school. It is well-resourced, with a computer lab, tuck-shop, extensive sports fields which surround the school buildings, and even has its own chapel. The school is very religious, but children of different faiths attend. St Mary's run 'mainstream' and Montessori[13] classes, as well as a wide variety of extra-mural activities. The school also accommodates working parents by letting children join the homework club after their extra-mural activities. Many of the children at this school only leave for home around four o'clock. The majority of the children come from very well-off families, but the school also has a scholarship programme, and mini-buses transport children to and from a nearby township. The Grade 4 teacher and Arts and Crafts club coordinator, Jennifer, informed me that the school is a popular favourite amongst local politicians who send their children to this school. There is a diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities and languages among children attending the school. As St Mary's is a former Model C school[14], school fees are higher than that of most government schools. Before 1976, it was a 'White', boys-only senior school. The school was pioneering during the apartheid era because it was one of the first educational

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[13] Montessori is an educational approach pioneered by Italian physician and educator Maria Montessori. It relies on a range of principles which differ greatly from mainstream educational systems, including grouping children into multi-age classrooms spanning three years to promote adult-child continuity and close peer relationships, direct instruction is absent and children have the freedom to choose activities and work independently (Edwards, 2002).

[14] In the South African context, this refers to the apartheid legacy of schools classified as 'whites only', which were subsequently opened to all. Parents pay relatively high fees to subsidise lower teacher: pupil ratios. These schools are comparatively well-resourced. Soudien and Sayed (2003) argue that the apartheid government bestowed inordinately generous resources and attention on its white schools and policed admission processes, turning these schools into objects of desire and dislike. They note that "symbolically, white schools came to represent the worst ideological excesses of the apartheid system and so were forced to bear the brunt of black people's anger" (2003, p. 30).

institutions to establish open schooling i.e. it resisted racialised admission processes that characterised the majority of schools during apartheid. Annual school fees for grade four to six learners at St Mary's are relatively high at R 32, 512 (\$ 3,756 dollars). Although the annual school fees of public schools in Cape Town differ, the relative costs of attending St Mary's are illustrated by the fact that schools in Cape Town townships include many no-fee schools. Those township schools which do charge fees seldom charge more than R250 (\$33) per annum (Walton & Pallitt, 2012).

Despite her interest in popular culture, Jennifer expressed a deep concern about children's television viewing and digital gameplay. She would make house-calls to parents if she overheard children speaking about movies or TV series they watched where she thought the content to be inappropriate. She shared some incidents with me which troubled her, such as finding out that a seven-year-old child watched *Californication*[15]. The parent of the child responded to Jennifer's enquiries by claiming that what goes on in their home was none of her business. Jennifer retorted that the parent was violating the Child Protection Act. The parent was upset by Jennifer's intrusion and Jennifer felt the parent did not understand that informing them about the child's age-inappropriate television viewing was an extension of her responsibility as their child's teacher. Jennifer had a similar concern about children playing games from the *Grand Theft Auto* series. Thus, although she was very 'in tune' with children's media cultures, she believed that she needed to 'draw the line' in relation to potentially 'harmful' content.

Jennifer's partner played PlayStation 3 games, and she was aware that many game titles had high age-ratings owing to their violent content. She did not believe that teen- and adult-rated 'violent' games had educational potential for children. She made a comparison between the games that children play at school (educational software) which she claimed are educational, and the commercial game titles that children reported playing at home. Jennifer trusted games 'sanctioned' by the school and computer teacher, or by myself as a researcher, but was wary of the 'violent' games 'out there' in many of the children's

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[15] This drama/comedy series is about a novelist called Hank Moody (David Duchovny) who moves to California. Hank suffers from writer's block which complicates his social relationships and he has constant troubles with sex, drugs and women. When the series is aired on television, advisory signs for strong language, nudity and sex are displayed.

homes. To Jennifer, the home was where 'violent', potentially harmful and non-educational games are to be found.

Overview of participants

Fieldwork at St Mary's Primary School took place between September and December 2010. In total, 21 children (12 girls and 9 boys, between 9 and 11 years old) were observed playing games during the gaming sessions. Owing to time constraints after school, the games sessions lasted between an hour, and an hour and a half. In total, the children had 15 game sessions over four months.

	Age 10	Age 11	Age 13	Total
Girls	5	7	0	12
Boys	4	4	1	9
Total	9	11	1	21

Table 4.4: Ages and number of boys and girls who attended the Arts and Crafts club at St Mary's

Jennifer's classroom as a gaming space

Jennifer's classroom was modern and celebrated children's leisurely reading and play. There was a television, and bookshelves contained a wealth of board games and popular children's magazines and books. The walls to the entrance and interior of the classroom were filled with children's drawings and projects. Above Jennifer's desk was a reading poster with all the Grade 4 children's names and the books they had read. The more books a child read, the more gold stars he or she achieved. Similar to Jewitt's (2005) work on visual classrooms, one may argue that Jennifer's classroom arrangements indicate how much she values both print literacy and play.

Although the Arts and Crafts club ran once and sometimes twice a week, I had to factor in school holidays, excursions, children being absent due to detention and so forth. I recorded between 15 and 20 hours of gameplay in this setting. I often used both a video camera, and the video camera on my mobile phone to record the screens as the children played at the PlayStation 3 and laptop. A fellow PhD student (Muya Koloko) assisted with fieldwork. We took turns recording the children's gameplay and asking them questions. The sessions were very informal. We would set up the equipment and the children would select the games they wanted to play. All the plugs were located in the front of the classroom (see

Figure 4.2), so we placed the PlayStation 3 with the television, and positioned the laptop on desks at the front of the class. When Jennifer changed her classroom around and put her table in front, the children played games on the laptop at Jennifer's table.

St Mary's also has a special-needs division, and supports special-needs children in playing with other children by letting them join in the extra-curricular activities. One special-needs boy, Joe* (13-years-old), was part of the Arts and Crafts club and also joined the games sessions. He loved the karaoke games and singing songs from his favourite Disney movies, like *High School Musical*, with his friends from the club. The children would cheer for him and motivate him, which made him feel very proud. I met both his mother and his carer, who saw this kind of social gaming as an extension of his education and a chance to interact socially with other children. Despite differing abilities, he connected with the other children around shared media cultures of Disney movies and pop stars, such as Miley Cyrus. The school culture of St. Mary's encouraged ethnic and linguistic diversity within a particular middle-class context. The all-boys school up the road of the same tree-lined suburb was exclusive by comparison, in that the school demographic was more homogeneous.

Figure 4.1: The contents of a girl's desk in Jennifer's Grade 4 class
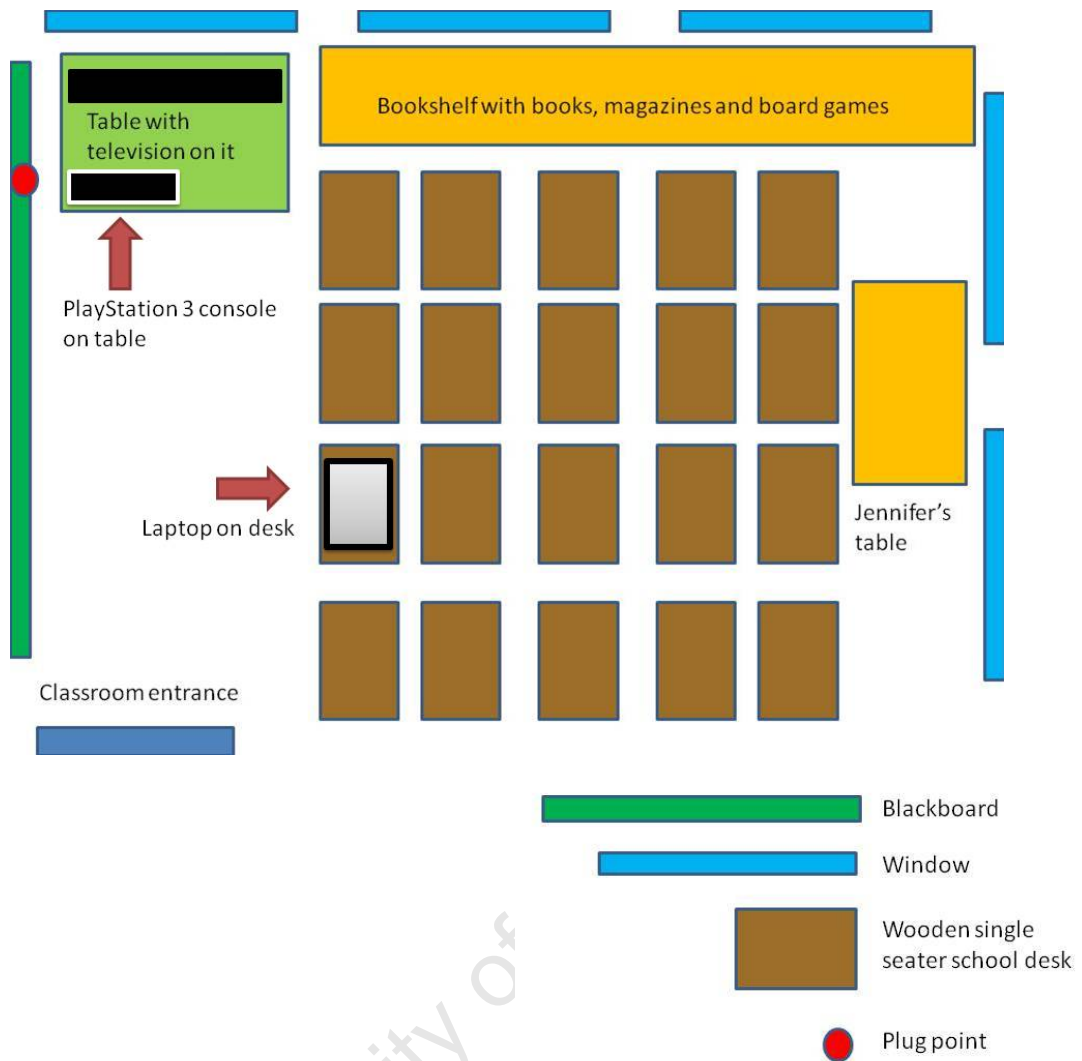
Figure 4.2: A floorplan of Jennifer's Grade 4 classroom

Figure 4.3: Desks moved to face the television and PlayStation 3

Sarah and Dorothy's holiday club at Riverside Boys

Riverside Boys is a public boys-only school. It is also one of the oldest schools in South Africa, dating back to the 19th century. Its historicity, coupled with old boys' events, means that it exudes an air of snobbery. Its top matric results make it a popular choice for parents. Since it is a public school which receives a small government subsidy, school fees at Riverside Boys (R24, 810 or $2, 866 per annum) are slightly lower than at St Mary's, despite their similar location and the way in which they are resourced. In comparison to the range of extra-murals on offer at St Mary's, the general ethos of Riverside Boys encourages a particular kind of masculinity through its strong emphasis on competitive sports.

Fieldwork at the holiday club took place during the end-of-year school holidays (December 2010 and January 2011) and the end of the first school-term holiday (April 2011). December 2010 was the fourth consecutive year that Sarah and Dorothy had run the holiday club and some of the children were regular members. The holiday club was hosted at Riverside Boys and attended by children from different schools. The majority of the children in attendance were boys from Riverside Boys. Sarah, who ran the club, was the swimming teacher at Riverside Boys. Working with her was her daughter Dorothy, a qualified swimming teacher who also teaches adults at a therapy centre, and other swimming teachers. Sarah and Dorothy rented the gym hall at Riverside Boys for the holiday club, and had access to the school pool to teach swimming lessons as part of the children's club fees. Additionally, Riverside Boys has extensive smoothly-paved grounds around the gym hall which the children enjoyed using for riding bicycles and scooters, skateboarding and rollerblading. There were also two wooden jungle-gyms in a grassy park and a basketball field. In sum, the Riverside Boys schoolyard supported a range of outdoor activities for the children at the holiday club.

Overview of participants

The holiday club was hosted in the gym hall of Riverside Boys during school holidays, and attended by children from various schools. During the December/January holiday, my fieldwork consisted of seven days over two weeks. In total, 32 hours of children's gameplay was observed and recorded. I observed 33 children (8 girls and 25 boys) between 6 and 12 years old during this holiday club (see Table 4.5). I spent a week at the

April holiday club (mostly attended by the same children as the December 2010/January 2011 holiday club, with a few new club-goers) and observed and recorded 19 hours of children's gameplay. This holiday club had fewer attendees, as I observed 20 children (5 girls and 15 boys) between 4 and 13 years old (see Table 4.6). I brought my own television to the club and set up the PlayStation 3 and laptop upon arrival. As with the Arts and Crafts club, the children selected the games they wished to play. Owing to the number of children at the holiday club, every fieldwork day involved writing up a play schedule by dividing the day into 30 minute play-turns. Children selected a partner, platform and game, and then the pairs and the game they wanted to play were noted on the schedule (these peer networks are illustrated as sociograms and discussed in Chapter 5).

	Age 6	Age 7	Age 8	Age 9	Age 10	Age 11	Age 12	Total
Girls	0	0	0	2	3	0	3	8
Boys	1	4	8	5	2	2	3	25
Total	1	4	8	7	5	2	6	33

Table 4.5: Ages and number of boys and girls (December 2010/January 2011 holiday club)

	Age 4	Age 7	Age 8	Age 9	Age 10	Age 11	Age 12	Age 13	Total
Girls	1	0	0	1	2	0	1	0	5
Boys	0	0	4	4	3	2	1	1	15
Total	1	0	4	5	5	2	2	1	20

Table 4.6: Ages and number of boys and girls (April 2011 holiday club)

The gym hall as a gaming space

The boys always outnumbered the girls at the holiday club, and assumed ownership of the console. Most of the time, the boys formed a large group in front of the television, whereas the girls preferred playing laptop games in the corner of the room. Occasionally the girls asked to play *Sing It Party Hits* on the PlayStation 3, but preferred to play the older *Sing It* game on the laptop, and they sang softly in the corner. The corner position of the laptop in the gym hall thus became a 'girls only' space. The girls would often chase the boys away, telling them "Girls ONLY!" When it came to playing *Sing It Party Hits* on the PlayStation 3, the girls often asked the organisers to take the boys for a swim or tell them to play outside, claiming they were too shy to sing in front of the boys. In this context, the PlayStation 3 and the laptop were used in noticeably gendered ways. Additionally,

particular game titles were also used in gendered ways (this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5).

Each day, every child would be allowed to play a digital game of their choice with a friend for 30 minutes. If they played a single-player game, they switched controllers every time someone's player character 'died' (in the game). I employed this strategy to accommodate the large number of children in this setting, and to ensure equally-timed playing turns. They thus did not play for long periods individually, and they would move between the games in the gym hall and outside play or swimming. The organisers reprimanded boys who stayed inside for too long watching their friends playing, telling them to play outside and that they would be allowed back when it was their turn to use the controller. The girls did not receive the same treatment, possibly due to a gender bias (i.e. girls play inside and boys play outside), as well as the fact that there were fewer girls and they were far less rowdy than the larger groups of boys. As swimming teachers, the organisers believed that sitting inside for most of the day in front of a television screen was not healthy for children. They felt that playing games and watching movies were activities which children could engage in at home, whereas the club allowed them to enjoy opportunities for safe, outdoor, social play and exercise. The more they watched the children playing the games, and when I told them about the different titles, the more they came to see the games as 'clever toys'. This shift in their attitude also came about because the games were most engaging for the younger boys, an age group that the organisers often found difficult. Consequently, the games and I came to be seen as wonderful 'babysitters' who managed to keep the younger boys entertained. The organisers often asked me to let the younger boys have their play turns early in the day, a time when they found them to be most demanding. This also resulted in the organisers not being 'nagged' about play turns for the rest of the day.
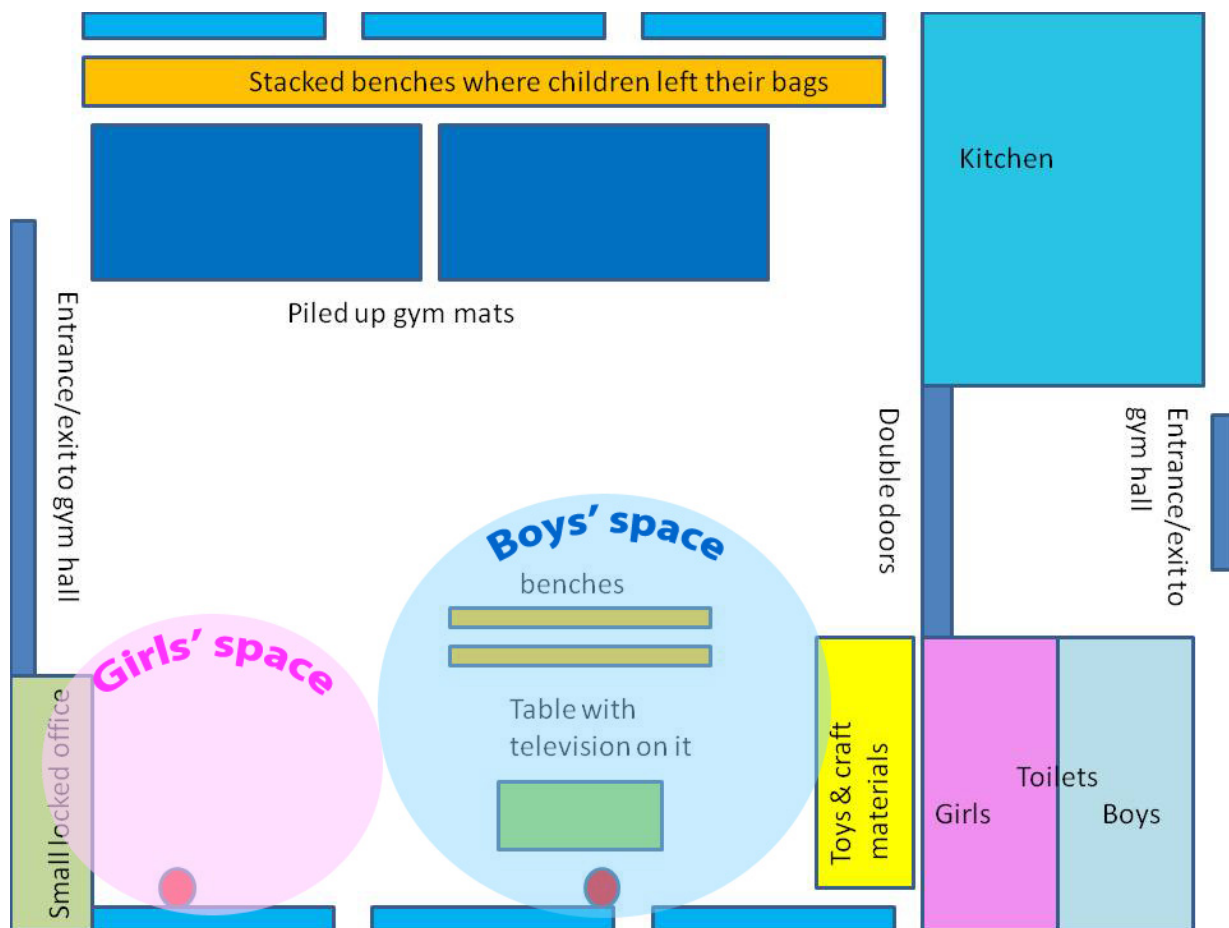
Figure 4.4: A floor plan of the gym hall at Riverside Boys' Holiday Club (the pink and blue circles highlight the spaces claimed by girls and boys respectively)

Methods of data collection

As a variety of reception analysis, the social play reported on in this study can be considered as a substitute for interviews or focus groups as a way to access children's perspectives on partaking in games. In this study, I tried to approach children as 'experts' and 'competent social actors', since the way in which a researcher perceives the status of children influences the choice of methods (Punch, 2002). Punch (2002) poses the question of why special 'child-friendly' methods are needed to communicate with children, seeing this as patronising compared to terms such as 'research-friendly'. Considering the communication skills and interests that children have at particular developmental stages, I found it most useful to use a variety of methods, depending on the children's age, as well as other factors. This helped to ensure that the data-collection process would be enjoyable for the children through varied interactions with and around the games.

I used various methods to improve the insights gleaned from the fieldwork, and also to make the research appealing for younger children. At the same time, I needed to acknowledge differential power relationships (as discussed earlier in this chapter) between myself as an adult, female researcher working with child participants of various ages.

My techniques for collecting data included questionnaires, interviews, informal focus group discussions, game demonstrations, children's recordings, participant observation and gameplay recordings. In my experience, I found questionnaires and interviews to be more appropriate for children aged ten and older, whereas informal focus group discussions, game demonstrations (where children who brought their hand-held gaming devices from home demonstrated how they play particular games) and participant observation and gameplay recordings suited all ages. I found that individual interviews were also intimidating for very young children unless I had built good rapport with the child. I found that younger children were more likely to share their opinions in a same-sex peer group than a cross-sex group at the holiday club. As a form of participatory research, I also requested that children record the laptop or television screen while their friends were playing, and ask their own questions. The method worked particularly well with older children and with the older girls in particular, who appeared to have more patience than their younger male peers. This study focuses more closely on gameplay as mediated on the screen than on embodied interaction. Hence, the primary video data consisted of video recordings of laptop and television screens. The audio tracks featured recordings of children's interactions as they played particular game titles. One of the limitations of this method is that I cannot make any detailed claims about embodied play and the borderwork involved in children's non-verbal communication. Thus, the data I report offers a highly selective account of children's digitally mediated rather than embodied peer interactions and play.

Questionnaire

While questionnaires are not the ideal method for researching the meanings children give to their games, the method has the advantage of providing factual information about large groups of children quite quickly. The questionnaire developed for this study (see Appendix 1a) was used for the pilot study, as well as at the Arts and Crafts club and the holiday club. I collaborated with a primary-school teacher to make sure that the language used in the

questions would be maximally understood by children, and that the questionnaire was not too long and did not demand too much written feedback. Ticking appropriate options was one of the dominant response modes. The children were required to write their names on the questionnaire, as the data was used as a 'gaming profile' of individual children, to find out about the gaming technologies they have access to at home and the game titles they prefer, as well as to inform follow-up group discussions. In the fieldsites, the questionnaire was referred to as a 'worksheet', because I felt that the term 'questionnaire' was a bit too formal and might intimidate children because of the connotation of answering questions (which often privilege 'correct' answers) in school settings. The questionnaire also included a second sheet where children were asked to draw a screenshot from their favourite game (see Appendix 1b).

As discussed previously, findings from the questionnaire helped me to identify the gaming preferences of girls and boys in the fieldsites (see Appendix 6 and 7 for lists of favourite games reported by the children in the three settings). It also helped me to acknowledge the site-specific nature of such preferences. The boys attending the all-boys school in the pilot study most often listed sports, horror, and teen- and adult-rated games as their favourites (also reported in Walton & Pallitt, 2012). The boys at St Mary's and the holiday club listed similar favourites, especially new games that were popular at the time. By contrast, girls in both settings exhibited more diverse and less-strongly-gendered preferences. The questionnaire findings assisted me in the process of adding to the games collection, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Interviews

During most sessions at the Arts and Crafts club, there were fewer than ten children in attendance, so it was possible to interview these children about the games they played at home, especially when a fellow PhD student (Muya Koloko) was present to record the gameplay of the other children. These individual interviews were unstructured and more akin to personal discussions, as I let the children set their own agendas about what they wanted to talk about in relation to games. They told me about the family members and friends they played games with, the games they owned, what they played at their friends' homes, rules at home about games, and fights with siblings over winning. In sum, these discussions functioned as verbal expansions of the questionnaire. The interviews also

assisted me in identifying how particular social networks formed around games, and how these involved different gendered play groups for different children.

Such personal discussions can only be used successfully with children once the researcher has established good rapport and trust. I only started using this method halfway into my fieldwork, once I knew the children well, and then only with particular children who attended regularly and who were thus more familiar with me (rather than children who only attended occasionally). Individual sessions for personal discussions at the holiday club were more difficult to arrange, owing to the large number of children in attendance. I used focus groups in this setting instead.

Informal focus group discussions

Since the holiday club had more children in attendance and there were stable groups of play partners, I found focus groups to be more valuable than personal interviews in this setting. The focus groups allowed children to share their stories about games at home. They told me which games they enjoyed or disliked, and the focus group discussions became a debating activity for the older boys, who discussed issues around violence in games and age-ratings (see Chapter 5 and 6). Mauthner (1997) argues that gender and age are important considerations in group discussions, and single-sex groups can be more successful than mixed ones. In mixed groups, boys often talk more or more loudly and determine the conversation topics, thus tending to overshadow girls. I found this to be quite true during my fieldwork experience. In addition, in single-sex groups particular personalities do tend to overpower others as well, and older children tend to overpower younger ones. I approached existing friendship groups rather than grouping children myself, which in my view was less interesting than exploring extant gaming relationships. While focus group discussions at the Arts and Crafts club were mostly mixed-gender, similar discussions at the holiday club primarily consisted of single-sex groups.

The group discussions were often spontaneous and triggered by a topic mentioned by the children. I did not plan the discussion topics in great detail and instead the children guided these conversations. This approach yielded varied discussions, such as a group of five boys' discussion of game ratings (Walton *et al.*, 2011), and girls and boys talking about how they modify the appearance of their Nintendo DSes to look 'cool', and how particular

stickers are 'girly'. These kinds of discussions revealed additional contextual meanings of games for children, which allowed me to gain valuable perspectives about how girls and boys 'do gender' with their gaming consoles.

Game demonstrations

Some of the children at the holiday club (primarily girls) started bringing their Nintendo DS hand-held consoles and games to the club. I would approach a girl while she was playing or showing a friend how to play, and ask her about her DS games, requesting a demonstration of how to play her favourite DS game while I recorded her console screen and our conversation. Compared to the gameplay observations and recordings that took place at the PlayStation 3 or laptop, this methodology was much more personal, and usually only involved one or two children. This technique played a vital role in developing my understanding of girls' gaming. In the groups that I studied, the holiday club girls were much more 'secretive' about their play than the boys and preferred privacy. The girls tended to play in smaller groups, often forming cliques and distancing themselves from children (mostly boys) they did not want to include (as suggested by their 'girls only' territory). I did not get the sense that the girls were actively trying to conceal their gameplay from me, but they were creating a certain amount of privacy from the boys at the club (most of whom were younger). The girls' play was more 'under the radar' than the boys, who embraced their gaming as a public display for one another, irrespective of age. Playing on her Nintendo DS and allowing certain girls a turn to play seemed to be a form of clique management for the girls who brought these devices to the club.

Children's recordings

Some of the children were very interested in the video camera as well as the camera on my mobile phone, often asking me if they could record. I let them record and told them to ask their friends questions if they did not understand what they were doing in the game. I also reminded them about the consent forms so they should not record their friends' faces, only the screen. This was hard to ensure as children often forgot about my instruction or got excited about recording something a friend was doing that they found amusing. A group of girls even recorded their own faces first, and announced that they were 'reporting on games at the holiday club'. All of the children understood that I was a university student conducting a project about how children play games, often telling that to other children

when they asked me what I was doing. The children often grew tired of recording after a little while, but I was keen to make them feel like they were contributing to the research process, even when they were not playing games. To an extent, some of the children really did contribute by bringing their own games and devices to the holiday club.

This method worked particularly well when the holiday club girls played games such as *The Sims 2* on the laptop. Initially they used the camera as part of a role-play ('reporting mode'), but then they seemed to forget about the camera, which captured a lot of 'private' conversations, such as those around simulating romance and sex in the game (discussed in Chapter 6). This kind of data would never have been collected if I did not let them record their play with my phone camera, because a lot of the time I was moving between children, switching games, answering questions or having discussions with other children about their games.

Participant observation and gameplay recordings

Adler and Adler (1994) argue that one of the hallmarks of observation is the need for non-intrusiveness. As video recording can be intrusive, I decided to make use of one video camera, and the camera on my mobile phone. Once the children were familiar with me, the presence of the camera, and the gameplay recording process that I described to them, the camera became part of the gaming activities and the children no longer asked questions about it, even though they were aware of it. The camera also became less obtrusive as my relationship with the children strengthened. Some of the children nonetheless reminded others that their play was being recorded as a way to police their peers' use of language and behaviour.

The study involved three forms of observation as the research progressed in each fieldsite. Kelly (2006) argues that descriptive observation is where one has general questions, such as 'What is going on here?' This leads to a descriptive account where the observer describes what he/she has witnessed in detail. According to Kelly (2006), this phase of observation is for generating ideas before researchers know the kinds of focused questions most useful to be asking (focused observation). The third phase is selective observation, which involves "the selection of particular events that we have specific questions about" (Kelly, 2006, p. 310). For this study, selective observation most often occurred in relation

to observing cross-sex play episodes to investigate how children performed their gender identities as a form of borderwork (Thorne, 1993).

The recordings of the television or laptop screen while the children played and spoke about the games are an important focus of this study, as it captures how children play games together and perform particular identities in relation to their peers. While an emphasis on gender performativity is compatible with recording embodied interaction, this was not possible. Owing to the novelty of gaming in the after-school settings, and to my ethical commitments, I chose to use one camera. Fieldnotes documenting physical actions and play schedules of pairs or groups of children and the games they played were used to expand on these recordings for transcription. The following section discusses my approach to data analysis in more detail.

Methods of data analysis

In this study, 'gameplay events' or 'play episodes' provided the units of analysis. This was defined as when a pair or group of children played a game together for a certain amount of time. Sociograms of the play episodes in the two settings (discussed in Chapter 5) provided a visual summary of all the children's play sessions[16] and their regular patterns of interaction. This data was gained from the play schedules that I constructed, which listed the children's play partners and choice of games in each setting. Specific play episodes that are discussed qualitatively in forthcoming chapters were selected depending on informed consent and whether they provided interesting examples of children using game rules and representations to perform gender and other identities and peer relationships.

Coding

My approach to coding in my fieldnotes and the play schedules (which I used to produce the sociograms) enabled me to go beyond considering gaming as an interpretation of texts, towards a more holistic understanding of games as played. I coded play episodes as same-sex or cross-sex interactions, and recorded the relationship between players (eg. best friends, choir friends, siblings, same school, club friends, etc). Secondly, I coded my fieldnotes and the video recordings, and noted when children talked about games in terms of 'rules' and 'representations', as a way to focus on how they negotiated the ludic

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[16] A play session refers to an individual fieldwork day comprised of multiple play episodes.

dimensions of games. This was informed by theoretical perspectives, discussed in Chapter 2, about games as specific kinds of media texts that have ludic and representational dimensions (Buckingham & Burn, 2007; Carr, 2006). I also used Caillois' (1958, 2001) *ludus/paidia* framework for types of play and games (discussed in Chapter 2):

> ***Ludus:*** When play interactions were competitive or if the scoring system structured their play.
> ***Paidia:*** When children explored aspects of the games for enjoyment, not to necessarily advance within the game.

Using the *ludus-paidia* spectrum was helpful in coding as it showed how children's gameplay oscillated between these two kinds of play.

Sampling video data

According to Jewitt (2006), using video to collect data produces very rich data and often a lot of it. Because multimodal transcription and analysis are intensive, it is not feasible or necessary to analyse all the video of a lesson in detail. Thus, one needs to sample the video data to select instances or episodes for analysis. Jewitt (2006) suggests viewing video data in light of one's research question to generate criteria for sampling data. In this study, the sociograms of children's peer relations in the two fieldsites helped me to choose play episodes that characterised gaming in those particular settings, and to identify interactions that were unusual. I chose to transcribe play episodes when the cross- and same-sex interactions yielded insights into gaming practices in the fieldsites or when they revealed the performance of gendered identities in children's peer groups.

Transcription

Jewitt (2006) argues that transcripts are a representation of an event, and making a transcript marks what is important and unimportant to the transcriber: a transcript shapes analysis by making some aspects of interaction present and others absent. According to Jewitt (2006), the conventions and methods of multimodal transcription are less established, and there are different ways of organising multimodal transcripts. Although there is no right or wrong approach to multimodal transcribing, the 'right' method is a matter of what questions the transcript sets out to answer. In this study, I transcribed children's conversations, as illustrated in Figure 4.5, described what they were doing in the game, and provided screenshots of their gameplay. I also noted the date of the play episode

in the filename, what tape it was recorded on and gave each play episode a title. Here is an example from one of my transcripts of Allen, Joey and Heidi playing *Little Big Planet*:

(**Allen** and **Joey** are helping Allen's sister, **Heidi**, to customise her character) **Joey:** What is a skirt? What does it look like? (**Allen** selects a reddish hair colour and then a lion's mane) **Joey:** That's a boy hair! That's boy hair! (**Allen** then chooses a pink scarf with blonde hair) **Researcher:** That's pretty.	 **Allen** selects a different hair colour and then a lion's mane (something he often chooses for his own sackboy).

Figure 4.5: Example transcript: Allen, Joey and Heidi play *Little Big Planet* (Filename: 2011-04-06 17.53.47 5 April Tape 7, Episode: "Making Heidi look pretty")

My approach to recording and method of transcription foregrounded the verbal dimension of children's play, and the associated screenshots emphasise my focus on mediated rather than embodied play. This may be seen as a limitation of this study, as it does not provide the 'whole picture' of children's play episodes. A study focused on embodiment would require additional forms of consent, and the intrusiveness of multiple cameras would have influenced the research site in various ways.

SNA and the use of play schedules

Social Network Analysis (SNA) starts with the premise that social life is created through relations and the patterns formed by these relations (Marin & Wellman, 2009). Networks are seen as the building blocks of the social world, and such scholars therefore start their analyses from a different perspective than individualist social science (Marin & Wellman, 2009). Marin and Wellman (2009) argue that Social Network Analysis is best understood as a perspective within the social sciences, and not as a method or narrowly-defined theory. The use of Social Network Analysis to describe children's peer networks and patterns of play in this study is quite new. To my knowledge, this is the first study to employ this perspective to describe children's digital gameplay. Sociograms of play

relationships in the two settings help visualise social arrangements of the children and their gendered play patterns.

Schedules were kept of the children's choice of games and gaming partners in both settings. In the case of the holiday club children, such schedules helped to structure play-turns among large groups of children. During fieldwork I accorded great importance to observing actual gameplay, yet the play schedules became valuable data which I later used to construct the sociograms of children's play patterns (discussed in the following chapter). Often the play schedules were a quick hand-drawn table with columns for the time (rows of 30 minute play-turns divided each day at the holiday club), names of the children, the game they wanted to play and its platform. The children then scribbled in their names and the game they wanted to play.

As constructed from these schedules, the sociograms of the children's play in the two settings affords this study a quantitative dimension through its use of SNA metrics, a feature often lacking in Cultural Studies of children and games, as well as in Game Studies more generally. SNA metrics will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, along with the relationship between nodes and edges to explain the process of SNA. I used these metrics to identify dominant peer relationships in the two settings, as well as the most popular game titles among same- and cross-sex play groups. It was important to identify these dominant relationships for sampling in this study, as it enabled me to select play episodes that exemplified routinised play in the fieldsites. SNA allows calculations based on relations between connected nodes, known as vertice metrics. A common metric is centrality, which can help one to identify dominant relationships within groups of actors.

Friendships tend to involve a network of friends, a social group or clique. Cliques are important to this study, in that it allowed me to attend to homophily in children's peer relationships beyond same- and cross-sex play, such as noting clusters of children who played together because of similar ages, being in the same class or extra-mural such as choir practice, sharing the same ethnicity, home language, and so forth. Cliques refer to groups of children, with between three and ten members, who have strong relationships. Brown and Klute (2003) argue that cliques are, at times, difficult to study because they are hard to identify. They mention three major ways of defining and assessing cliques: a

researcher can gather information from informants about who interacts with who, use ethnographic methods, or SNA where one can "employ nominations of friends from all participants in a social context to identify the major clusters of individuals that comprise each friendship group" (2003, p. 339). I used a combination of SNA and observation.

Prell (2011) argues that the important distinction of a clique from a larger network structure is the sense of strong cohesiveness which goes hand-in-hand with the subgroup developing its own set of norms and rules, different from the larger network in which it is embedded. Such cliques are important reference points for individuals and their identities. However, the limitation of software metrics that help us to identify cliques numerically is the possibility of clique overlaps, and this is where observation and fieldnotes are useful. One is able to confirm or disagree with the accuracy of relations represented in the computer-generated diagram, based on a record of observed interactions.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a rationale for my chosen methods of data collection and analysis, and has explained how I went about identifying three sites, negotiating with gatekeepers and gaining access to children. I have outlined the experience of piloting the research in one site, building relationships in two additional fieldsites, and the observational and recording methods which I developed to document children's activities. This chapter has also offered a reflection on various methodologies used to study gameplay. I have presented a rationale for my chosen methods for studying children's gameplay and gaming relationships. The methods are shaped by my interest in how children use games in gendered ways during play, and how they develop gender identities. I have outlined my approach to analysis of the data and have discussed the ethical considerations that arose during different stages of research in this study.

This study combines traditional methods of researching children (participant observation, interviews, focus groups, video recording) with a novel approach to social network analyses of gaming relationships. In total, 53 children were observed playing games. Thus,

a substantial amount of observational data was collected, making this a relatively large-scale study in comparison to other research[17] on children and games.

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[17] For example, Giddings (2009) studied the gameplay of his two sons. Regarding scale, Walkerdine's (2007) study of 48 8–11-year-old children (24 girls and 24 boys) playing games in after-school clubs in Australia is probably the most similar to this study in its number of participants. To my knowledge, Walkerdine's (2007) is the only study of children and games with such a large number of children.

Chapter 5: 'Clique' to play – Ludic gendering and peer relationships in context

> In our play we reveal what kind of people we are.
> *— Ovid (Ars Amatoria, bk. 3, line 372)*

Introduction

Many studies of children's gendered play relationships with digital games perpetuate the 'two cultures' or 'separate worlds' view of children's gender socialisation and relations (Corsaro, 2005). As identified by Jenson and de Castell (2010), there has been a persistent attempt to identify sex-specific 'patterns' of play, and play preferences 'characteristic' of girls, to support and promote these in the name of 'gender equity', whether in women's involvement in the game industry as designers, in the development and marketing of 'games for girls', or the access and uses of digital games for education, training, and entertainment. I argue that bias in the way boys' and girls' gaming have been studied has led to children's play with digital games being inadequately addressed. I have noted the ideological motivations of past research. Nonetheless, this study still confirms many of Childhood Studies' findings regarding children's gendered play 'patterns'. It also investigates how the observed gendering of gameplay might relate to the commercially gendered game titles on offer.

Boys' and girls' gaming has also been studied in relation to gendered preferences for particular kinds of game genres and content (Funk & Buchman, 1996; Kafai, 1996). Bryce and Rutter (2003) note that the most popular argument concerning the gendered nature of computer gaming relates to the representation and consumption of game content, where textual analyses suggest that game content contains gendered, patriarchal and stereotypical representations of females, and a general dearth of female game characters (Carr, 2006; Dill & Thill, 2007; Ray, 2004). I suggest a relationship-centric approach to the study of gaming. This thesis offers a different perspective on gender and gaming because it focuses on relationships, rather than analysing boys' and girls' gendered preferences as individual players.

This chapter discusses gendered gaming in the two fieldsites in relation to children's choices of digital game titles and play partners. The games used in this study are gendered

artefacts, which seem to encourage particular relationships with young players who read gendered meanings of the games and incorporate them into their play. To account for this dynamic process of interpreting gender in games, I use the term *ludic gendering* (discussed in Chapter 2) which I define as a social process whereby games are interpreted as gendered based on their ludic and representational dimensions. I consider the gaming relationships that the children developed with peers and how these relate to gender tactics, and to the gendering constructed by the commercial marketing of games. Both same-sex and cross-sex relationships are mediated by children's gender tactics in relation to particular game titles. A social network analysis of play patterns in both settings demonstrates gendered play at work, as children selected and appropriated suitably-gendered games for their same-sex play with peers. Cross-sex play occurred mainly in relation to less-strongly-gendered game titles in both settings, possibly because these titles offer greater possibilities for gendering during borderwork. The children's play relationships were highly gendered in the one setting, and somewhat less so in the other.

Sociograms of play patterns allowed me to develop an overview of the children's gaming relationships in the two settings, and helped me to put particular examples of children's play into perspective. They also provided a broader understanding of how particular games and gaming technologies were used in gendered ways in the two settings. These sociograms assisted analysis in that I was able to notice how the games and gaming platforms were used in gendered ways in the two settings, and identify dominant and marginalised groups or cliques of children and games to report on as play episodes.

Both groups of children appropriated the games on offer and marked them as gendered during play. Particular game titles were also appropriated in the process of clique maintenance. While gendering in games encourages particular gendered relationships for play, game titles are also gendered in the process of play. Children perform gender and other identities through play with games and peers, and simultaneously the games acquire particular meanings in contexts of play. As Ang (1996) argues, gendered practices are shaped at the site of interaction with media technologies, and pre-articulated gender identities cannot be assumed.

Gendered play and cliques

Children's same-sex and cross-sex play, friendships, cliques and gendered use of playground space have been widely researched by Childhood Studies researchers using ethnographic methods. While cliques can form between three and ten friends, cliques are different to groups because they maintain stability throughout the term or school year. Cliques tend to remain exclusive, not changing members often, and tend to not dissolve if a member leaves the group (Brown & Klute, 2003). Until recently, cliques have been hard to study because they are difficult to identify:

> There are three major ways of defining and assessing cliques: social network analyses that employ nominations of friends from all participants in a social context to identify the major clusters of individuals that comprise each friendship group; information from selected informants about who interacts with whom; or systematic direct observations of adolescents in their natural context, using ethnographic methods. (Brown & Klute, 2003, p. 339)

Foot and Chapman (1995) note that 'cliquing' is rarely applied to children younger than nine years of age, although it is frequently applied to adolescent peer relations, and is biased towards girls. An exception is Fine (1979, 1987) who looked at preadolescent cliques for boys aged between 9 and 12 years. In addition to cliques, children's peer relationships are also often described in relation to gender differences. Aydt and Corsaro (2003) argue that gender segregation is negotiated in children's peer cultures, rather than being universal, which was also suggested by the work of Goodwin (1990) and Evaldsson (1993), with children from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Aydt and Corsaro (2003) caution that most studies of children and gendered play have looked at 'White', middle-class children (where same-sex groups reach their peak in elementary school), and that these findings therefore cannot be generalised to all children. Similarly, gendered play cannot be assumed to be taking place based on the presence of overtly masculine or feminine content in games. It is important to consider children's tendency to form gendered or cross-sex cliques as part of their gender tactics with digital games. I argue that this dynamic is worthy of more detailed study.

Different patterns of friendship and interaction between boys and girls have been documented amongst 'White' American middle-class children: boys have been found to play in large, competitive, athletically-oriented groups, whereas girls prefer small, intimate and nurturant groups (Adler & Adler, 1998; Lever, 1976). Girls are therefore more likely

to have a best friend or be part of a small clique, whereas boys play in bigger groups. This influences gendered use of playground space. Thomson (2005) argues that boys often dominate most of the play space and use large areas for sports, whereas girls tend to occupy walled and seating areas which give them a sense of privacy. The following section reflects on how the children constructed gaming spaces in the two after-school settings.

Spaces for gaming at the holiday club and St. Mary's

At the holiday club, children's gendered choices of game titles, gaming platform (laptop or PlayStation 3) and its location in the gym hall suggested an appropriation of existing play practices in relation to space. As discussed in Chapter 4, gaming at the holiday club happened in a school gym hall. The laptop and PlayStation 3 were set up at available plug-points along a wall, with the laptop occupying the corner of the room and the PlayStation 3 along the middle, making it more central. The boys claimed ownership of the console, whereas the girls preferred the laptop and the privacy engendered by the corner of the room.

By contrast, gaming at St. Mary's happened in a classroom used for Arts and Crafts. As this school was a co-educational, cross-sex play relationships were already established. It is important for researchers to consider how the space in the setting and positioning of gaming platforms communicate meaning in addition to ludic gendering in games.

Gendered games

Änggård (2005) argues that within popular culture, the market is divided so that different products are produced for girls and for boys. Drawing on the work of Kline (1993) and Seiter (1993), Änggård (2005) finds that toyshops have different departments for girls and boys: girls' shelves are dominated by pink and pastel colours, and Barbie dolls with attributes associated with female consumption, whereas boys' shelves contain male action figures and other heroes equipped with attributes like weapons and vehicles and a range of dark and drab colours.

Similarly, the commercial marketing of games foreground gender stereotyped colours, characters and conventionally gendered forms of play (ie. what players can expect to *do* in the game) on their covers to varying extents. Despite the complex and performative nature of gender discussed in previous chapters, gender binaries are imposed through the

marketing of games as consumer items with differential appeals for boys and girls. For the purpose of this chapter, I will be discussing the games used in this study as 'gender specific games for boys', 'gender specific games for girls' and 'less strongly gendered games' which pertains to games which are less obviously 'gender salient' i.e. games which do not employ hegemonic binaries or gender stereotypes as a prominent feature of their marketing or game design. However, I identify gender methodologically as relational in the way that children interact with these types of games in various peer group formations i.e. playing particular titles as part of same-sex or cross-sex gaming relationships. I will then provide an overview of the play episodes in the two fieldsites in the form of sociograms.

Following the marketing practices of the toy industry, particular digital game titles are marketed in ways which signify that they are masculine, feminine or appropriate for both sexes. Rommes *et al.* (2011) analysed the gender scripts of toys of Dutch companies, distinguishing between gender-specific and gender-stereotypical scripts. They categorised digital games as being gender-specific for girls, gender-specific for boys, gender neutral (having non-gender-specific characteristics, or where the characteristics of different dimensions balanced each other) or 'gender bending' (if persons in the game were shown in non-stereotypical positions, such as a female action hero). Rommes *et al.* (2011) draw on Harding's (1986) 'levels' of gender to describe how a game can signal being more masculine or more feminine: structural (the world addressed by the game – is it a world of war or of domestic chores?), symbolic (gender connotations conveyed by colour, etc.) and identity (the kind of ability or characteristic fostered for the player, such as being rewarded for aggressive behaviour).

The categorisation by Rommes *et al.* (2011) accounts for gendering as it is found in the representational dimension of games. As discussed in Chapter 2, gendering is also evident in the ludic dimension (Buckingham & Burn, 2007; Carr, 2006) or gameplay of digital games. Different types of gameplay, as categorised by Caillois' (1958, 2001) typology of games, enhances gendered meanings of game. For example, mimicry in *Resistance: Fall of Man* (a game one of the boys brought to the holiday club) involves hypermasculine soldiers on a mission to save the world from aliens, which when coupled with agonistic play, strengthens its status as a gender-specific game for boys. By contrast, less-strongly-

gendered games suggest more flexibility in the type of play and greater possibilities for gendering through the absence of hypermasculine and hyperfeminine game characters and diversity of gender roles on offer. According to my observations in both fieldsites, games marked as masculine in their representational dimension mainly involved agonistic play (although competitive play is often present in addition to illinx/vertigo and/or mimicry/simulation), whereas feminine gendered play relied more heavily on mimicry. Less-strongly-gendered games were mostly characterised by a combination of play types.

The following section discusses the game titles used in this study in more detail, analysing salient roles and relationships in relation to gender. This allows one to describe ludic gendering and peer relationships in context, demonstrating how children appropriate games using gender tactics, and thus signify gendered meanings of games along with gender and other identities. I have used the notion of gender-specific games from Rommes *et al.* (2011), but use the category 'less-strongly-gendered games' to describe games with more flexible ludic gendering, rather than their categories of 'gender neutral' and 'gender bending'.

Gender-specific games for boys

I consider the following games used in this study as masculine game titles because of their configuration of agonistic play and mimicry of masculine subject positions (criminal, police officer, football team, cyber hero, etc.). These games emphasise ludic and representational masculinity:

- *Need for Speed: Undercover* (Electronic Arts, 2008)
- *Need for Speed: Pro Street* (Electronic Arts, 2007)
- *Burnout Paradise* (Electronic Arts, 2007)
- *2010 FIFA World Cup South Africa* (Electronic Arts, 2010)
- *Ratchet and Clank: Tools of destruction* (Sony Computer Entertainment Europe, 2007)

The first three titles are single-player racing games. One of the stages whereby children develop gender stereotypes involves learning about what types of things are associated with each sex, such as boys playing with cars and girls playing with dolls (Witt, 2000). Cars can therefore be considered to be traditional male toys and symbolic objects of

masculinity. The 'world' of these games celebrates competition for speed, the spectacle of destruction (damage to one's car in these games is inevitable) and breaking the law (racing and not obeying road rules). In the case of the *Need for Speed* series, the spectacle is tied to a larger 'cops and robbers' narrative, where players get 'busted' or 'evade' the police. In *Undercover*, the player is a police officer who goes undercover into the criminal underground of Tri-City. Like most of the protagonists in the series, he is nameless and the player never sees his face, only his car. Players know the protagonist is male because other characters in the game address him as such. The game is marketed on the official website as follows:

> Fight off the cops and others as you take down your prey in high-speed, high stake multi-car chases. New and vastly improved AI mechanics mean more aggressive and intelligent cops focused on taking you out fast and by any means necessary.

> It will take all of your experience and every ounce of skill to outrun the law, take down the enemy, and unlock the truth that puts an end to this chase once and for all[18].

This teaser, along with the title of the game series, foregrounds speed as the most important characteristic of the game, and a requirement for players if they are to outrace the cops. The official website describes this game as "hard-hitting Hollywood racing action" and a "story of crime and betrayal". By contrast, the protagonist in *Need for Speed: Pro Street* has a name, but little is known about him. Ryan Cooper is a former street racer who competes against other racers to become the city's racing king. He is never seen without his helmet and his voice is never heard. In relation to Caillois' (1958, 2001) concepts, agonistic play is central to the design, celebrated through outracing cops and other racers. Other forms of play include ilinx (adrenaline felt as an effect of speeding) and mimicry (players are invited to take on masculine roles, such as that of an undercover police officer or street racer). Hegemonic masculinity is communicated through flashy cars and attractive female characters in the game, rather than through characteristics attributed to the player protagonists. The female characters are non-playable and thus function as 'eye-candy'. *Need for Speed: Undercover* casts Bond girl Maggie Q as a detective who assists the player in escaping from the police department, and singer Christina Millian, features as a friend of the player protagonist. These celebrities may be regarded as an additional spectacle to flashy cars, reinforcing masculine, heterosexual pleasures. By

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[18] http://www.needforspeed.com/undercover

contrast, cars and car crashes are the main spectacles in *Burnout Paradise*. This game does not feature any people other than the driver, who is represented by a car and a male voice broadcasting the location of races over the radio. The anonymity of player protagonists in these racing games may be regarded as offering some narrative flexibility for girls who may experience different forms of masculine identification with these games.

2010 FIFA World Cup South Africa also celebrates competition and agonistic play, as it involves the opposition of all-male football teams competing in the international FIFA World Cup. Football is gendered as a masculine sport, as it is mostly played by men, and high-profile competitions are for men's teams. Although female football leagues are gaining more exposure, they still do not receive as much media coverage as their male counterparts do, and have not yet been represented by the *FIFA* series or any other sports games. In addition to this representational masculinity, the gameplay is also masculine because of its emphasis on agonistic play, where two teams compete to win matches. In comparison to the open-world game worlds of racing games, winning in sports games is far more constrained: players are confined to moving their avatars on the field in accordance with the rules of football if they want to score goals and progress in the game.

Ratchet and Clank: Tools of destruction has a similar appeal to racing games in the sense that it celebrates destruction, such as breaking things and killing enemies, although with 'out-of-this-world' tools. It is primarily a shooter, action-adventure game involving exotic weapons and gadgets. Some of these gadgets are quite humorous, such as the Groovitron disco ball that causes enemies to dance and get distracted, and a gun that shoots blocks of green sludge that the player can use to jump on to reach higher places. The player controls Ratchet (a 'lombax' or cat-like alien, and sometimes his robot friend Clank) with the aim of completing missions and exploring different futuristic settings. Ratchet is an archetypal quest hero, similar to many 'off to save the world' protagonists of action-adventure games. In my observations, this game appealed primarily to pre-teen boys because of its animation style, anthropomorphism, humour and age-appropriate level of cartoon violence.

Gender-specific games for girls

The following games selected for this study are categorised as feminine game titles because of the play styles and roles on offer for players: *Bratz: Rock Angelz* (Mega Entertainment Inc, 2005) and *Littlest Pet Shop* (Electronic Arts Inc, 2008).

Bratz Rock Angelz (2005) is a licensed game, part of a range of media and merchandise created in 2001 by MGA Entertainment. The game is linked to a music CD, movie and dolls of the band members. The Bratz signature tagline is 'girls with a passion for fashion'. In the game, the player controls one of the Bratz girls, Jade, who is interning for a fashion magazine. When Jade gets fired, her friends suggest they start their own magazine. Not only do they launch their own magazine and fashion line, but they also form a rock band. Characters in the game use mobile phone texts to send messages between themselves. Blue coins known as 'blingz' are an in-game currency. Players can change their Bratz character's phone cover and ringtone, buy trendy clothes using 'blingz' and change their make-up. The game breaks from conventional 'pink games' (where pink is the marketing signifier for girls) with a red and black colour scheme. Nonetheless, the game is strongly-gendered as feminine through its exaggeration of all things 'girly': shopping, fashion and accessories, and even dream careers. Unlike Barbie, Bratz bodies emphasise the representation of younger girls, rather than hyperfeminine adult bodies. Like Barbie, it is similar in its emphasis on consumption and offering a choice of different styles. It draws on female teen aspirations (being a fashion journalist, fashion designer or rock star) and elements of girls' teen peer culture (trendy clothes, texting, make-up) to target younger girls. In relation to Caillois' (1958, 2001) typology, this game is about mimicry: mimicking the behaviour of older girls is part of the gameplay, and one may argue that dolls mimic certain aspects of the appearances and commodity culture of older women.

Littlest Pet Shop is also a licensed game, based on a toy franchise of 'cute' collectible pet figurines and playsets. The tagline for the brand is 'how big is your Littlest Pet Shop?' This emphasis on acquiring more pets is reinforced by the game, which revolves around collecting pets and Kibble Coins (earned in mini-games) to buy pets, playsets (contraptions with fun things for pets to do, such as swinging and skateboarding down slides) and other accessories (such as hats, collars and glasses). Ultimately, the game is about growing a collection of pets. The words 'how big' suggest an agonistic dimension where players may

compete for the biggest pet collection, but these competitive features co-exist with more central forms of gameplay which use 'Tamagotchi'[19] game mechanics to mimic maternal or traditionally feminine roles, such as caring and shopping. Different environments allow players to care for and play with the pets they have collected. The more they play, the more they can earn for their pet shop. Despite open-ended play, the experience of unlocking new pets and buying things emphasises consumerism.

Less-strongly-gendered games

The following games were less explicitly marked as either masculine or feminine through representation or gameplay:

- *The Sims 2* (Electronic Arts, 2004)
- *Disney Sing It* (Disney, 2009)
- *Disney Sing It: Party Hits* (Disney, 2010)
- *Folklore* (Sony Computer Entertainment Europe, 2007)
- *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (Electronic Arts, 2005)
- *Candy Capers Volume 1* (Cartoon Network, 2008)
- *Little Big Planet* (Sony Computer Entertainment Europe, 2008)
- *Create (*Electronic Arts, 2010)
- *Angry Birds (*Rovio, 2009)

The Sims 2 is a teen-rated life simulation game. Players control characters known as Sims to perform everyday activities and form relationships with other characters. Gameplay is open-ended and there are many options for character customisation (age, star sign, sex, clothes, etc.). Players can explore various neighbourhoods (Pleasantview, Strangetown or Veronaville) and select a lot to build a house on, or choose to play as an existing family. Gameplay mimics everyday Western middle-class life and social relationships by simulating the systems which are part of these practices i.e. a family network, basic needs such as eating, going to the bathroom, taking a shower, making friends, falling in love, etc. Default characters are less-strongly-gendered than gender-specific game titles, being neither hypermasculine, nor hyperfeminine. Players can create customised characters and homosexual relationships are permitted in the game. Thus, gender flexibility allows

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[19] Tamagotchi are Japanese-designed, virtual pets on a mini egg-shaped computer. When activating the toy, an egg hatches into a small pet which grows as its owner cares for it by feeding it, cleaning up after it, attending to its health, giving it attention, and so forth.

players to determine ludic gendering in terms of characters. Gameplay is also more open-end and there is no clear winning goal. Players lead a Sim or family of Sim characters through life, creating relationships with other Sims, building up skills and careers while attending to their Sims' wants and needs, such as eating and sleeping. According to Nielsenwire's (2009) video game tracking survey, *The Sims 2* kept gamers engaged through expansion packs, to the extent that 72% of female PC gamers and 64% of male PC gamers were aware of the then-latest release *The Sims 3*, and 43% of females were definitely or probably interested in buying it, compared to 28% of males. This cross-over appeal led me to categorise this game series as less-strongly-gendered.

Disney Sing It and *Disney Sing It: Party Hits* are karaoke-style games featuring songs from various Disney movie franchises (*High School Musical, Camp Rock, Hanna Montana, Wizards of Waverly Place*), Disney Channel programmes (*Cheetah Girls, Aly and AJ*) and Disney-affiliated music artists (Selena Gomez, Miley Cyrus, Demi Lovato, Ashley Tisdale, The Jonas Brothers) popular within a global 'tween' culture. Other artists include Justin Bieber, The Black Eyed Peas, One Republic, Owl City and Paramore. The games are essentially recycled music videos or movie scenes with a karaoke overlay. These games are 'played' using microphones. In multiplayer versions of the series, players can sing against one another in 'competition' mode, together in 'duet' mode, or alone in 'solo' mode. While the potential for agonistic play exists through the competition and scoring system, this game also qualifies as mimicry because, using the microphones, players mimic pop stars singing. Both male and female artists are included and although these games are generally more popular amongst girls (who in my experience have more interest in celebrities), there is little in the game design that marks this series as gender-specific or 'for girls'.

I included *Folklore* to the list to see how children responded to the large amount of written text in the game. Despite the age-rating of sixteen (the game is classified as 'dark fantasy'), I included it. As a female player, I found the game very inviting, and enjoyed the fantasy artwork and murder-mystery narrative. Having played through the game, I knew it did not contain inappropriate content, other than the fact that the game deals with death and the supernatural, such as seeing ghosts of dead people. The game starts with a lengthy cinematic about the characters. Ellen receives a letter from her dead mother telling her to meet her at the Cliff of Sidhe. Keats, a journalist for a supernatural-themed magazine,

receives a phonecall from a woman telling him to meet her in Doolin because 'faeries' want to kill her. The characters uncover a murder mystery by navigating the Irish village of Doolin, meeting strange creatures and travelling to the Netherworld to access the memories of the dead. When in the Netherworld, players can use captured 'folk' to perform attacks. This game offers a choice to play as a male or female character. Neither Ellen nor Keats have exaggerated physiques, and are thus not representationally hyperfeminine or hypermasculine. Because both genders engage in combat, the game may be seen as an example of a 'gender neutral' (Rommes *et al.*, 2011) game. This game is thus a fusion between agon and mimicry.

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire is based on the fourth novel in the series written by J.K. Rowling, and on the 2005 film adaptation. This is also an action-adventure game and, unlike previous games in the series, Harry, Hermione and Ron work together to cast magical spells. The PlayStation 3 version allows for cooperative play for up to three players. One can choose to play as any of the three characters. Players have to unlock levels by collecting Tri-wizard shields (Harry competes in the Triwizard Tournament at Hogwarts in the book and film). The ten levels, or 'lessons', according to the interface, are based on scenes from the movie and book: Defense Against the Dark Arts, Moody's Challenges, Hogwarts Exterior, Forbidden Forest, Triwizard Task 1: the Dragon, Prefect's Bathroom, Herbology, Triwizard Task 2: the Lake, Triwizard Task 3: the Maze, and Voldemort. As in the case of *Folklore*, this game also combines agon and mimicry, where players take up the role of a wizard-in-training. Gendering in the game is consistent with other media in the franchise. Harry and his friends are gendered in ways that suggest appropriate childhood gendering and school identities. The fact that players need to pass 'lessons' rather than levels reinforces the schoolish feel of this game.

Candy Capers is a collection of flash mini-games based on cartoons aired by Cartoon Network (*Powderpuff Girls, Ben 10, The Grim Adventures of Billy and Mandy*, etc.). They are similar to those one finds on the Cartoon Network website. These games are short and most involve gaining a high score, suggesting agonistic, arcade-style play. Regarding these games in representational terms and in relation to the cartoons, one can say that *Powderpuff Girls* is gender bending (female super heroes), *Ben 10* is gender-specific for boys and *The Grim Adventures of Billy and Mandy* is gender neutral. Gendering in the game is consistent with the cartoons. As in the case of Cartoon Network, the *Candy*

Capers games feature a variety of cartoon characters which demarcates the game pack as gender neutral overall.

Little Big Planet is a puzzle platformer for the PlayStation 3. Players customise and control their 'sack person', running, jumping and avoiding obstacles to complete a variety of themed levels. Players can dress their characters in ways to signify gender differences (i.e. playing with a 'sackboy' or 'sackgirl') or remix clothing options and accessories to create a more ambiguous character. Players can play alone or cooperatively, and collect stickers (which can be used as graffiti, stamped into the game environment) and new costumes along the way. Players can also create their own levels using the level creator. This has motivated a large community of players who create and share their levels online via the PlayStation Network. The sequel to this game allows players even more options for level creation and sharing, an option popular among older players. The game involves a mix of agon and mimicry. Nothing in the game design marks this game as explicitly masculine or feminine.

Create is a sandbox-style game based on creating scenes to make a game of interacting objects. There are ten themed stages with ten challenges, involving various game mechanics such as using objects to reach a goal, achieving a high score, and/or building contraptions. *Create* rewards agonistic play, although players are not confined to challenges, and can build their own scenes or challenges using various game objects, brush tools, environments and other tools for props and decoration to make their own creations. As in the case of *Little Big Planet*, players can upload their challenges on the PlayStation Network to be downloaded by other players. *Create* is marketed on the official website for the game as follows:

> Combining two of kids' favourite hobbies: art and video games, *Create* enables kids to express their artistic creativity through a medium they enjoy. The game is also a fun shared experience for families who want to play and create together.

Despite the creative potential of this game, I found it to be cumbersome for children for a number of reasons: it takes a long time to learn, and the instructions are barely readable when played on a regular-sized television set.

Angry Birds is a strategy puzzle game originally developed for mobile devices, although one can download versions for Windows or play the game online. It has also been released as an application that can be played within Facebook and Google+. The game has retained its single-player orientation for desktop play. Each level features a variety of birds with different abilities. The player launches the birds from a slingshot to 'kill' green pigs protected by obstacles on the right of the screen. The introduction to the game demonstrates that the birds are angry at the pigs for stealing their eggs. To pass a level, players have to kill all the pigs using the provided number of birds or shots. Levels get harder, with less birds and more pigs and obstacles as levels progress. The cartoon style of the characters and sound effects make this a very comical game. Gameplay revolves around achieving a high score and passing levels, demarcating it as a highly agonistic game. The game's anthropomorphism may appeal to boys and girls alike, and the fact that it is not strongly representationally masculine led me to categorise it as a less-strongly-gendered game.

Summary of game titles used in this study

The game platform also influenced play in the field sites. Girls at the holiday club showed a strong preference for the laptop games. The children in the two field sites did not only choose to play specific game titles in gendered ways, but also the platforms (PlayStation 3 console or laptop). Additional games (mentioned in Figure 5.3) include games that the holiday club children brought from home e.g. *Motor Storm*. Others mentioned in Figure 5.3 were rented with a PlayStation 2 (*Ben 10* and *Bakugan*). The gender-specific 'games for girls' were both PC games, whereas the PlayStation 3 games consisted of both gender-specific games for boys and less-strongly-gendered games. The PlayStation 3 platform carries very few games marketed specifically for girls. As an expensive, specialised console, PlayStation 3 markets masculine game titles targeted at teen and adult male gamers.

Gender specific games for boys:	Dominant play style	Platform:
Need for Speed: Undercover	Agon & ilinx & mimicry (masculine)	PC
Need for Speed: Pro Street	Agon & ilinx & mimicry (masculine)	PC
Burnout Paradise	Agon & ilinx & mimicry (masculine)	PS3
2010 FIFA World Cup South Africa	Agon & mimicry (masculine)	PS3
Ratchet and Clank: Tools of destruction	Agon & mimicry (masculine)	PS3
Gender specific games for girls:		
Bratz: Rock Angelz	Mimicry (feminine)	PC
Littlest Pet Shop	Mimicry (feminine)	PC
Less strongly gendered games:		
The Sims 2	Mimicry (non-specific)	PC
Disney Sing It	Agon & mimicry (non-specific)	PC
Disney Sing It: Party Hits	Agon & mimicry (non-specific)	PS3
Folklore	Agon & mimicry (equal)	PS3
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	Agon & mimicry (non-specific)	PC
Candy Capers Volume 1	Agon	PC
Little Big Planet	Agon & mimicry (non-specific)	PS3
Create	Agon	PS3
Angry Birds	Agon	PC

Table 5.1: Gender-specific and less-strongly-gendered games, according to dominant play style and gaming platform in the fieldsites

Children's gaming relationships

The children chose to play gender-specific and less-strongly-gendered games at St. Mary's and the Riverside holiday club in ways unique to these settings. This section discusses how the children configured their gaming relationships in relation to gender tactics. Children's gaming relationships at St. Mary's, a co-ed school, demonstrate cross-sex play and clique formation based on factors other than gender, such as a shared ethnicity and home language. Same-sex gaming at the holiday club highlights the influence of same-sex schooling. Friendships and cliques were formed according to different criteria in the two settings, and the children's public displays of gaming suggest different meanings of games, in relation to game titles and platforms on offer, for boys and girls in these contexts.

I wanted to adopt a context-sensitive and child-centred methodology that relied on observing children's everyday play practices. Many studies of players are carried out using only in-depth interviews or focus groups, which separate the gaming experience from the

data (Ribbens & Poels, 2009). Qualitative approaches used to study players are often broken down into observations and self-reports. These are two techniques which can be used complementarily, as I have done in this study. While observations enable researchers to examine the interaction between the user and the medium, self-reports allow for the study of subjective experiences (Ribbens & Poels, 2009). This study is less concerned with the gaming of individual children, and more focused on how the groups of children interacted with both the game and one another during play i.e. their gaming relationships. Ethnographic approaches, used by Childhood Studies researchers for studying children's non-digital play, informed my understanding about how children develop peer relationships and identities around particular digital games and play. These kinds of studies investigate "the same group(s) of children in a natural setting over a fairly long period of time using a variety of qualitative methods supplemented by background data and physical materials" (Boocock & Scott, 2005, p. 36-37)[20]. In addition to ethnographic methods, this study used Social Network Analysis (SNA) to construct sociograms of children's gaming relationships in the two settings. This enabled me to compare same-sex and cross-sex play and relate it to children's peer relationships and gender tactics. Since it allows for the methodical study of children's peer groups, SNA can be used by Childhood Studies researchers to study children's peer groups in a more systematic way. Such sociograms allow one to 'transcribe' or visualise routinised play arrangements over a lengthy period of time, as I did for both settings in this study.

Sociograms

Social Network Analysis (SNA) is a useful method for describing children's gaming relationships. Sociograms were one of the earliest techniques for formalising SNA, and the drawing thereof has remained a crucial means for illustrating social network concepts (Scott, 2000). The basic concepts[21] are networks, nodes (or vertices), and edges (or links). Networks consist of patterns of connections between people, as "social networks are created from any collection of connections among a group of people and things" (Hansen *et al.*, 2011, p. 4). Whereas a network is a collection of things and their relationships to one another, "the 'things' that are connected are called nodes, vertices, entities, and in some contexts people" (Hansen *et al.*, 2011, p. 31) and the "connections between the vertices are

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[20] The illusion of naturalism in ethnographic and Childhood Studies research on children's play is critiqued in Chapter 3.
[21] These originate from graph theory.

called edges, ties, and links" (Hansen *et al.*, 2011, p. 31). With regards to gaming, players are regarded as nodes that are part of a network, and they are connected by edges, lines used to represent something they share in common, such as playing a particular game together. Networks can be individual (ie. defined from a focal node or one person's perspective) or relational (focusing on relationships among nodes). According to Marin and Wellman (2009), social network analysts study patterns of relations, not just relations between pairs. This involves the understanding that, while relations exist between pairs of nodes, the effect and meaning of a tie between two nodes requires taking into account the broader patterns of ties within the network (Marin & Wellman, 2009).
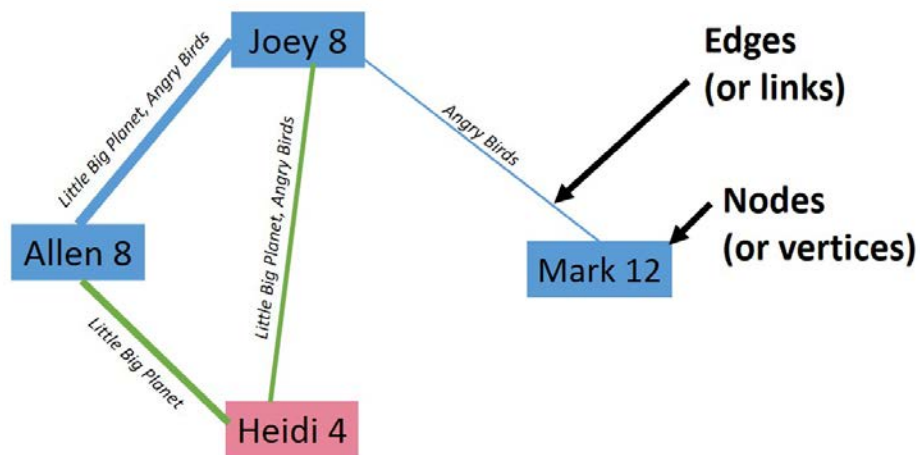
Figure 5.1: The relationship between nodes and edges in this study

I developed the following method of representing children's play relationships. The children are represented in the sociograms as nodes or vertices, and the games that connect them are labelled on different-coloured edges to show the connection between same-sex and cross-sex peer relationships and children's choice of games. Pink edges were used to represent same-sex female play, blue edges for same-sex male play, and green for cross-sex play. The edges were also labelled with the games that the children chose to play together. Edges that are bolder than others (edge weight) indicate strong relationships where a particular pair of children played together more often, while lighter edges suggest once-off play episodes. The strength of children's gaming relationships (how many times a pair of children played together as a pair or part of a group or clique) were included as edge weights.

Eigenvector centrality was chosen to identify the "influence scores" (Hansen *et al.*, 2011, p. 41) of particular children. Hansen *et al.* describe this metric as follows:

> Eigenvector centrality is a more sophisticated view of centrality: a person with few connections could have a very high eigenvector centrality if those few connections were themselves very well connected. Eigenvector centrality allows for connections to have a variable value, so that connecting to some vertices has more benefit than connecting to others. The PageRank algorithm used by Google's search engine is a variant of Eigenvector Centrality. (2011, p. 41)

I used NodeXL[22] to calculate this metric. Eigenvector centrality is used to draw the sociograms such that well-connected children (nodes) are drawn situated towards the middle of the graph. Those with fewer connections to others appear on the margins. This helped me to identify the most influential play relationships in each fieldsite. One of the limitations of SNA in this study is that edge weights were calculated based on how many times particular children played together, and do not represent these relationships in terms of time. Whether a pair of children played together for an hour or for five minutes as part of a larger group cannot be discerned from the sociograms.

Gaming relationships at St. Mary's

Girls outnumbered boys at St. Mary's (see Table 5.2.) and cross-sex play, represented by green edges in Figure 5.2, occurred more frequently than same-sex play (35 girl pairs, 12 boy pairs and 43 cross-sex play pairs). The most popular games were *Disney Sing It* and *Sing It Party Hits*. At St. Mary's, the children mostly played as a group, taking turns to 'solo' sing, using the single-player laptop. They sang in 'duet' and 'competition' mode for the multiplayer PlayStation 3 version of the game. The members of these groups suggest strong relationships and cliques between particular children. Some were more well-connected in the group than others. Strong relationships are represented by emboldened edges in Figure 5.2, which were calculated as edge weights based on how many times a pair of children played together, as a pair or as part of a larger group. Edge weight was calculated according to the number of times a particular pair of children played a game together. Thus, this weight was used to represent a proxy for the 'strength' of their relationship. As discussed in the previous section, a limitation of this approach is that it does not reflect duration. Figure 5.2 for example, does not take into account how long a

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[22] NodeXL is a free, open-source template for Microsoft Excel that can assist one in creating a variety of network graphs. For more details see http://nodexl.codeplex.com/

play pair played a particular game. Frequency of play is only one dimension of relationship strength.

	Age 10	Age 11	Total
Girls	5	7	12
Boys	4	4	8
Total	9	11	20

Table 5.2: Age distribution of boys and girls at St Mary's excluding Joe (13 years old)

Beyond gender, it is worth considering other factors which played a role in clique formation, such as race/ethnicity, language and shared interests. Individuals exhibit homophily[23], tending to associate with those similar to them; thus, "similarity breeds connection" (McPherson *et al.*, 2001, p. 415). According to McPherson *et al.*, "homophily in race and ethnicity creates the strongest divides in our personal environments, with age, religion, education, occupation, and gender following in roughly that order" (2001, p. 415). Homophily in ethnicity was also observed at St. Mary's. There was a 'Coloured' girls' clique, constituted by Casey, Fran, Amitah and Jessica who played the singing games, 'girl games' (*Bratz Rock Angelz*) and 'boy games' (*FIFA SA* and *Need for Speed*) together. An 'African' girls' clique consisted of Lolly, Ella, Babalwa, Samantha, Nana, Olga, Violet and Wendy who played *Sing It* together. While Jabu and Thando were marginal boys (i.e. situated on the outskirts of the sociogram because they did not join the gaming sessions often), Aaron, Danny, Joe and Lee were highly connected within the group. Aaron and Danny had a strong relationship, and played *Folklore*, *Need for Speed* and *Burnout Paradise* together. Aaron, Lee and Joe (a special-needs boy) often played with the girls (see emboldened lime-coloured edges in Figure 5.2). Lee, Jessica and Aaron had the strongest relationships, and were also among the children who were most connected to others within the group (i.e. centrality). They were in the same class and sang in the choir together. This cross-sex dyad may have had a ripple effect, encouraging more cross-sex play relationships. The boy with the highest number of cross-sex play relationships was Joe, as girls from both cliques included him when playing the singing games, and cheered for him when he sang. The girls often played the role of carers to this

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[23] Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954) coined the term homophily, which has a literal meaning of 'love for the same' (Baccara & Yariv, 2012).

special-needs boy. They took turns to fetch him for the gaming sessions and return him to the special-needs division if his official carer did not come to the classroom to collect him.

PlayStation 3 game	Boys	Girls
Sing It Party Hits	4	6
Burnout Paradise	4	4
Folklore	4	1
FIFA SA	1	4
Little Big Planet	3	2
Ratchet and Clank	1	1
Laptop game		
Sing It	3	11
Need for Speed	4	3
Bratz Rock Angels	0	4

Table 5.3: The number of girls and boys at St. Mary's who played various games

The presence of two highly-connected girl cliques (one composed of 'Coloured' girls and the other of 'African' girls) suggests that the girls were in control of the gaming space in this context, irrespective of whether gaming took place on the console or the laptop. The boys' same-sex play with the racing games may be seen as an attempt to communicate a form of masculinity that differed from the choir boys. Two of the boys (Steve and Danny) refused to join in the singing games, preferring racing games, perhaps to assert their difference from the choir boys. Despite their age differences, the 'African' girls' clique bonded in this setting, perhaps because most of them spoke isiXhosa as their home language. They also attended the choir together, a shared interest that motivated their preference for the singing games. They did not play any of the other games on offer. Because most cross-sex play took place with the singing games, these games may be considered as offering stronger opportunities for borderwork in this setting.
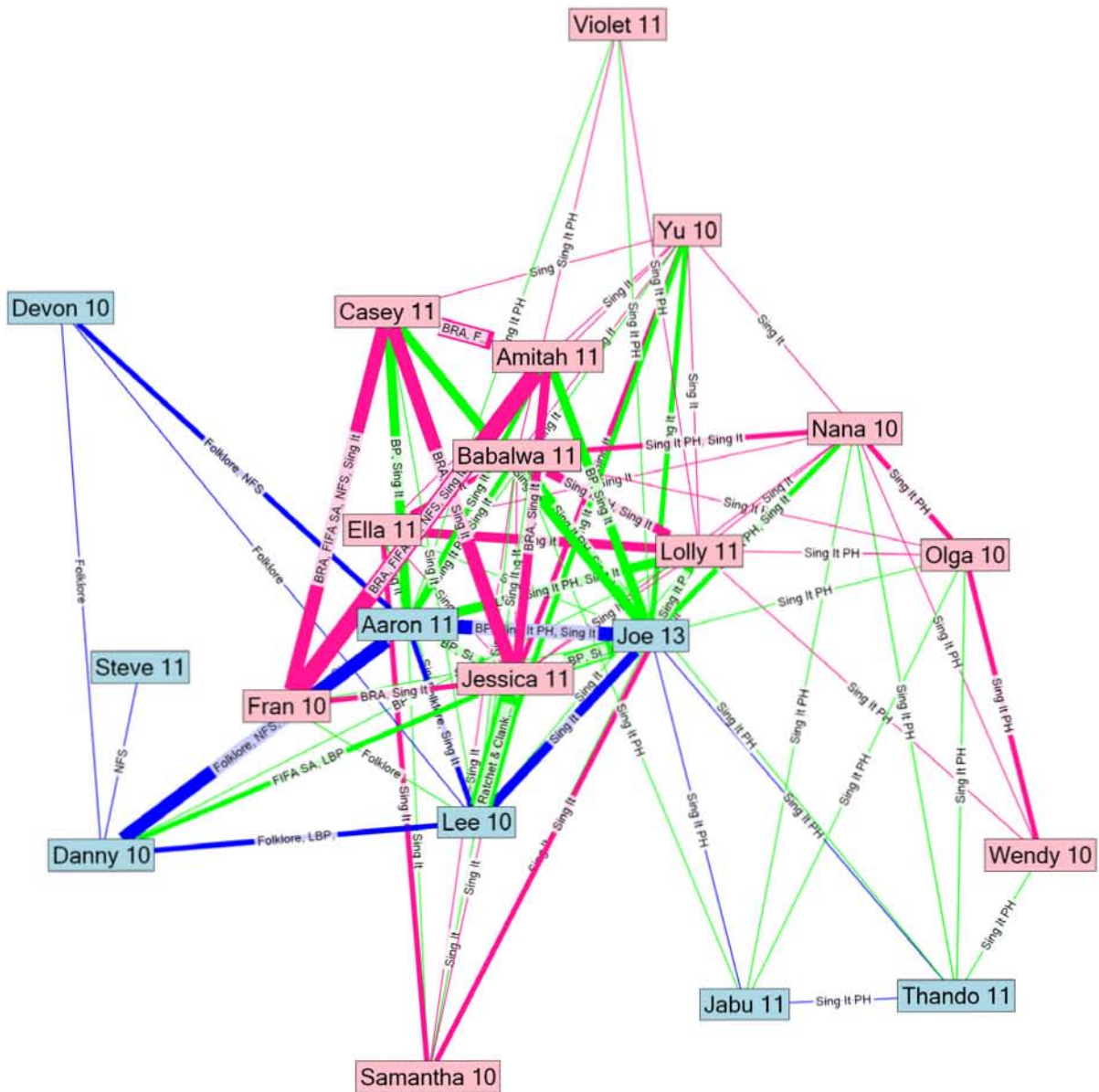
Figure 5.2: Gaming relationships and gendered play at St. Mary's

Jennifer (the Arts and Crafts and Grade 4 teacher at St Mary's) commented on gendered play and friendships during my first day of fieldwork, saying that, unlike other schools where she had worked before, it was quite common for children at St Mary's to have an opposite-sex friend as a best friend, much as Aaron and Jessica did. They were both 11-years-old, in the same class, and attended extra-murals such as Arts and Crafts, choir and drama together. Many of the boys at the Arts and Crafts club were also perhaps less inclined to be enthusiastic about sports and might have chosen the club in preference to playing a sport. This seemingly limited interest in sports, coupled with the fact that they shared other extra-curricular classes with the girls in this setting, may help to explain why cross-sex play was more pronounced at St. Mary's.

Joe's presence, as a special-needs child, also influenced the gaming relationships in this setting. Jennifer encouraged the other children to include him in their gaming. Because Joe could 'sing' rather than navigate a screen and press buttons, this encouraged the children to choose the karaoke games. These games featured songs from *High School Musical*, *Hanna Montana* and other Disney children's films and series, which all of the children enjoyed and reported having seen repeatedly. Many of the children owned these movies as DVDs, watched Disney series aired on satellite television, and owned associated merchandise e.g. Aaron was very proud of his *High School Musical* waffle maker. The children had also just participated in their school play during the previous term where they sang a song from *High School Musical*. Therefore, this series of singing games functioned as 'common ground' within this setting.

The St Mary's children played the singing games to articulate particular public displays of gaming in this setting. For most of the children, this involved singing and shared media interests, rather than gaming *per se*. The singers typed their names into the laptop after singing along with *Disney Sing It*, which then provided a ranked list of the top scores. Since most of the members of the Arts and Crafts club were also in the choir, this practice encouraged competition between the 'good singers'. In one instance, Lee did not know the words of a song and barely sang, which made him score even lower than Joe. His peers joked that he was a poor singer, since he was beaten by a special-needs child. In addition to proving their status as 'good singers', the children also connected around these games for its celebrity content. They discussed Disney programmes, actors, actresses, new music

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and celebrity gossip while choosing songs. Those who were able to participate in these lively conversations, or who had interesting stories to contribute, showed that they were 'up to speed' with the latest media.

Jennifer noted that St. Mary's parents often rewarded their children for good marks with expensive technological items such as games and cellphones. These items created peer currency for the owners, indicating that they are both affluent and up-to-date with technology. This kind of commodity display is related to a wider rhetoric of play as power, where certain mediatised forms of play, such as cellphones and games, are envied by peers, while others are frowned upon, such as Nana's mention of wanting a 'Baby Born' doll (a doll which can swim) during the children's conversations about what they wanted for Christmas. This was a cross-sex phenomenon that may have connected boys and girls in this setting. By contrast, the boys and girls at the holiday club were considerably less connected in this way. While cellphones and hand-held consoles were popular among the girls, they were less so with the boys at the holiday club (who attended same-sex schools).

Gaming relationships at Riverside holiday club

I spent two holidays with the children at the Riverside holiday club (December 2010 to January 2011, and April 2011). A larger portion of boys (80%) attended the Riverside holiday club, and thus it is not surprising that same-sex play was the norm and cross-sex play was considerably less frequent than at St Mary's. At Riverside, cross-sex play only took place between a relatively small number of individuals (represented by green edges in Figure 5.3). Other differences between the settings included the wider range of ages of the children, and the predominance of boys.

The number of boys always outnumbered girls in Riverside (see Tables 5.4 and 5.5). The majority of these boys attended the same all-boy school. Most of the girls knew one another from previous holiday clubs, and some attended the same co-ed, private schools. Thus, the boys and girls did not know one another from school, but regular holiday club attendees knew one another from the club. In contrast to St. Mary's, the holiday club boys controlled the space and took ownership of the PlayStation 3. The boys also routinely disrupted the girls' play with the laptop games. While the children at St. Mary's engaged in frequent and relaxed cross-sex interactions, same-sex play was very pronounced at the

holiday club. Borderwork, or the play forms and activities that activate gender boundaries such as kissing games (Thorne, 1993), were more prominent than at St. Mary's. The console and laptop were gendered as masculine and feminine respectively.

During the December/January holiday club, same-sex male play was dominant (22 girl pairs, 57 boy pairs and 24 cross-sex play pairs) and a similar, though less-pronounced pattern applied at the April holiday club (6 girl pairs, 34 boy pairs and 13 cross-sex play pairs).

	Age 7	Age 8	Age 9	Age 10	Age 11	Age 12	Total
Girls	0	0	2	3	0	3	8
Boys	4	8	5	2	2	3	24
Totals	4	8	7	5	2	6	32

Table 5.4: Age distribution of boys and girls (December 2010/January 2011 holiday club) excluding one boy's little brother, who was six-years-old

	Age 7	Age 8	Age 9	Age 10	Age 11	Age 12	Total
Girls	0	0	1	2	0	1	4
Boys	0	4	4	3	2	1	14
Totals	0	4	5	5	2	2	18

Table 5.5: Age distribution of boys and girls (April 2011 holiday club), excluding Allen's little sister, who was four-years-old, and Calvin who had turned 13

The strongest relationships (represented by bold edges between children in Figure 5.3) at the December/January holiday club were those between children who were also school friends, such as Dirk and Johan, Allen and Joey, and Maggie and Annabelle. Both nine-year-olds Dirk and Johan, and eight-year-olds Andy and Ray chose to play *Little Big Planet* and *Ratchet and Clank*. Allen and Joey (who were both seven-years-old during this holiday club, and who both turned eight before the April club) played these games too, and had also played *Burnout Paradise*. One eight-year-old boys' clique included Andy, Ray and Sam. Perhaps owing to the number of boys in this setting, cliques were quite rare, and the majority of the boys played with a variety of boys. By comparison, the girls at the holiday club formed a noticeable clique, organised around the 'girls' games' on the laptop and the singing games. The girls gendered the games they played as 'girls' games' to ward

off boys and mark the corner of the gym hall as a 'girls only' territory. These girls did not all play together equally often, but they still played together more often than the boys did. Kim, Nicole and Laura attended the holiday club less-regularly than the other girls did, but when they attended they formed part of the girls' clique. There were more cross-sex play pairs than same-sex girl play pairs in this setting. The girls allowed particular boys such as Brian (Kim's younger brother) and Mike (Maggie's older brother) to play games with them. Some of the boys, such as Dale, intruded to the point that the girls could not exclude them. The girls sometimes had 'conditions' for these boys to play the singing games with them, such as making them sing and mimic female music artists such as Ashley Tisdale's *Fabulous* from *High School Musical*, or Hanna Montana's theme song (discussed in the following chapter).

PlayStation 3 game	Boys	Girls
Burnout Paradise	15	0
Little Big Planet	13	2
Ratchet and Clank	12	1
Sing It Party Hits	6	6
Motor Storm	5	0
FIFA SA	2	0
Laptop game		
Need for Speed	9	0
Sing It	4	8
Bratz Rock Angels	1	6
Littlest Pet Shop	0	5
Cartoon Network mini-games	2	0
PlayStation 2 game		
Ben 10	7	0
Bakugan	6	0

Table 5.6: The number of girls and boys at the December/January holiday club who played various games
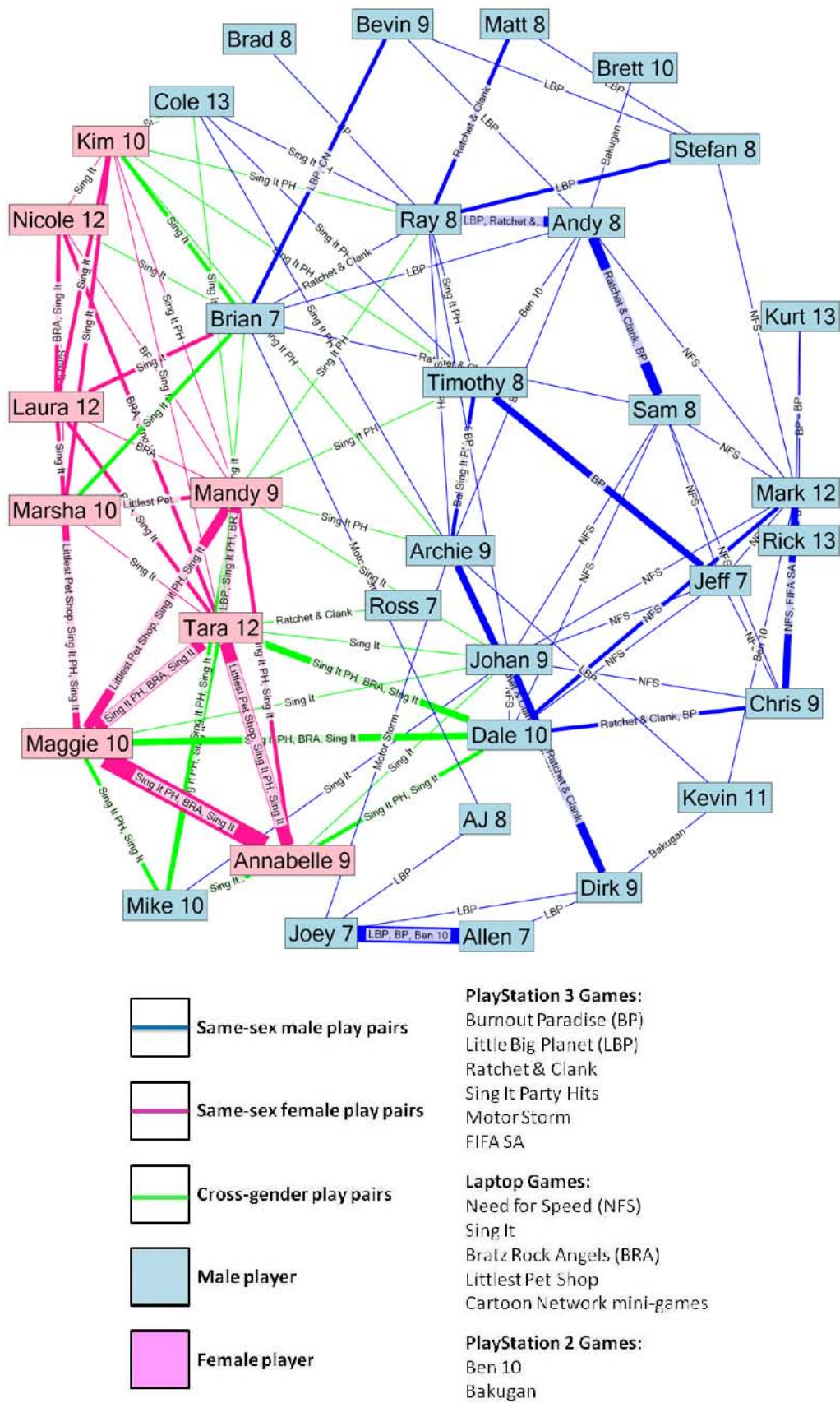
Figure 5.3: Gaming relationships and gendered play at the December/January holiday club

The play relationships at the April holiday club (see Figure 5.4) demonstrate the durability of friendships between Allen and Joey, and the girl clique (Tara, Maggie and Mandy). Again, the once-off cross-sex play sessions (represented by thin green edges between boys and girls) took place more frequently than same-sex female play.

The strongest cross-sex relationships were between Allen, Joey and Allen's four-year-old sister, Heidi. They played *Little Big Planet* and *Angry Birds*, whereas the girl clique mostly played *The Sims 2* and the singing games. Other strong relationships between boys can be noted for Ray and Mark (*Little Big Planet*, *Angry Birds* and *Harry Potter*), Mark and Carl (*Little Big Planet*, *Create*, *Motor Storm*, *Ratchet and Clank*), and Dale and Johan (*Little Big Planet*, *Motor Storm* and *Harry Potter*). As with the December/January holiday club, boys' play relationships were mediated by masculine and less-strongly-gendered game titles, while girls' gaming mainly involved play with less-strongly-gendered games. Cross-sex play episodes were observed with *Little Big Planet* and *The Sims 2* (to be discussed in more detail in the following chapters).

PlayStation 3 game	Boys	Girls
Little Big Planet	13	4
Motor Storm	7	0
Burnout Paradise	4	0
Create	4	0
Sing It Party Hits	0	4
Folklore	2	1
Ratchet and Clank	2	0
Laptop game		
Angry Birds	8	1
Harry Potter	6	1
The Sims 2	1	4
Littlest Pet Shop	0	2

Table 5.7: The number of girls and boys at the April holiday club who played various games
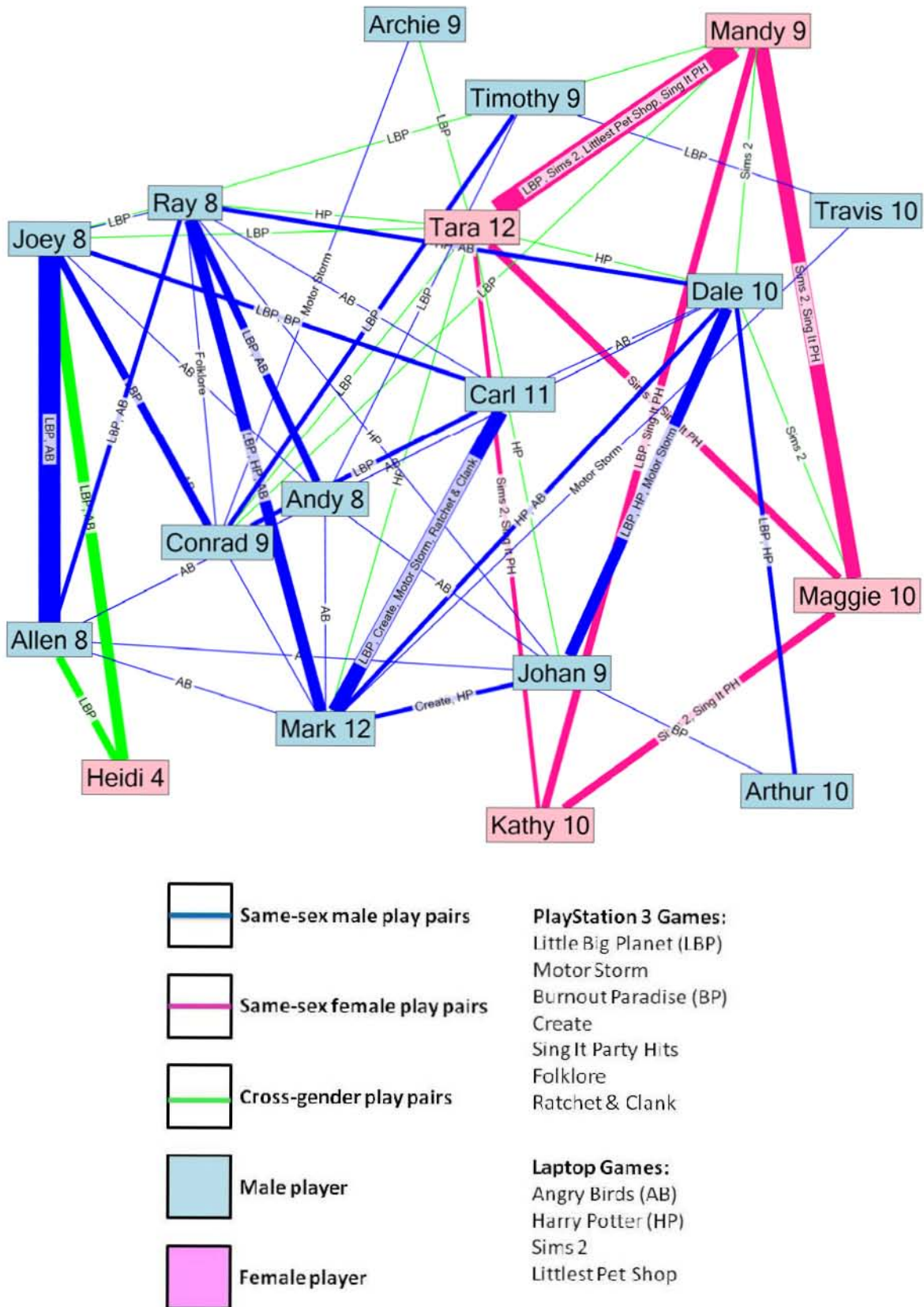
Figure 5.4: Gaming relationships and gendered play at the April holiday club

The April club may have had fewer same-sex girl play relationships because my laptop needed to be repaired, and was not at the club for a few days. This may also have encouraged the girls to bring their mobile phones and Nintendo DSes to the holiday club. This confirms that the laptop was the preferred gaming platform for the girls at the holiday club. The mobility of these devices also served the girls' desire for a private space away from the boys. This suggests that girls' gaming revolved around friendships where gaming was a somewhat secretive shared activity, rather than a way to compete publicly for status, as it was for the boys. Thus, girls and boys related differently to public displays of virtuosity.

The dominance of same-sex play patterns at both holiday clubs suggest different displays of gaming for girls and boys in this setting. For the boys, gaming was highly public. The boys appropriated the games for masculine display, claiming ownership of the PlayStation 3. The PlayStation 3 players sat on long benches in front of the television. There was always enough space for others to sit and watch them playing. The younger boys often wanted to play the same games as the older boys did, perhaps reading their games as signifiers of maturity. For the holiday club girls, gaming was much more private. They mostly played games on the laptop in the corner of the gym hall, and chased the boys away. The girls used this privacy to strengthen their relationships, marking their play as secretive, and perhaps also avoiding competition or criticism from the boys.

The girls' related practices with technology confirmed their desire for privacy. The girls loved their cellphones, and there were always cellphones charging in the kitchen. The majority of the boys did not own a cellphone, and one boy said, 'I don't have a phone – I don't even have a girlfriend yet!' For boys at the same-sex school, owning a cellphone was not an essential social currency, whereas knowing about the latest games was. Girls marked their friendships by allowing one another to look at the content on their cellphones. They signalled exclusion by not allowing another child the same level of access. By contrast, boys marked their friendship by allowing other boys to play the games they brought to the holiday club from home.

During fieldwork, I felt that the girls' play was harder to interpret than that of the boys. One of the boy's mothers reported to me that her son said, 'She understands us (the boys)',

and I feel that I did understand the boys, perhaps because their gaming was so public. The girls were less legible to me, because they played quietly and moved between the laptop and gaming on their personal devices. Their gaming presence was 'hidden' compared to the boys. I was surprised when Maggie begged me for my gmail address, and once I gave it to her, her friends (Annabelle and Mandy) also wanted it. After the holiday club, they chatted to me online and I was invited to their online chats via gmail chat (g-talk). Although I participated minimally to please them, I gained an insider perspective on the importance of feminine space and privacy by being part of their online chats. I developed a better sense of how girls communicate with, about and through technology. The girls used g-talk to discuss things that happened at their school camp, and to gossip about their teachers and classmates. For the holiday club girls, play was similarly secret. The private, muted, text mode of instant messaging assists them in this process. The more private it is, the more fun it is, and the stronger the friendship of the girls involved.

Conclusion

The focus on gendered gaming in the two fieldsites in relation to children's choice of games and play partners argues for several theoretical turns in research on children and games. Firstly, moving beyond the 'two cultures' or 'two worlds' view of gender and gaming and secondly, shifting an analytical lens beyond the analysis of game content as the main focus for understanding the gendered nature of gaming. The chapter also argues for the value of taking a 'relationship-centric approach' to studying children's gaming where discussions of 'cross-sex play' and 'borderwork' are useful for understanding children's gaming relationships i.e. how groups of children interact with both the game and one another during play. This is a novel contribution to the research lexicon in this area.

The methodological use of sociograms to explore the relationality of game playing in these particular contexts not only highlight the social nature of gameplay, but present an alternative approach for studying children's gaming in different settings. Organising the data as sociograms showed up differences in gameplay between the fieldsites suggesting that different forms of schooling (same-sex and co-ed) produce various forms of gender identity. Differences in same-sex and cross-sex play in these sites are deeply connected to the way children do gender work in schools. Thus, gameplay in the arts and crafts club and holiday club become sites where gender identifications from other contexts and domains

are 'played out' and negotiated during children's gameplay with peers in these settings. Future research is required to explore the relationship between schooling contexts and backgrounds on children's tastes for more or less 'gender salient' games. Habitus informs children's 'gender tactics' during play, whether digital or not.

Children in the two after-school settings negotiated meanings of gaming in these contexts, and demarcated particular game titles as more or less 'gender salient' through their same-sex and cross-sex play relationships. The children at the holiday club were divided by gender because of the large number of boys attending same-sex schools, as well as the lack of other shared interests. By contrast, gender differences assumed less significance at St. Mary's, since the majority of the children were united by attendance at a co-ed school and its cross-sex extra-murals, such as singing in the choir. Shared interests or belonging to a shared network may also be seen in relation to gender tactics. The St. Mary's boys and girls who were part of the choir bonded over the singing games, but the boys who were not part of the choir played on the margins of the group as a whole. The relationships between the choir children were not equal either, and there were cliques within this group who connected because of race, language, being in the same class, being best friends at school, and so forth. The chapter invokes Childhood Studies literature on gendered play and cliques to provide insights for considering children's gender tactics with digital games.

Existing gendered play relationships in these settings configured digital gameplay in particular ways. Friendships, cliques, ethnicity, home language and ludic gendering in games plays an important role in how children appropriate and mark digital games as more or less gender salient in contexts of play. Gendered identities are actively formed and constituted through instances of gameplay in particular contexts (Beavis, 2005). Children, and their existing gendered play relationships and playground practices, shaped the play context and gendering of the game titles on offer in the fieldsites. Thus, these relationships and practices formed part of how games were domesticated in these settings as gaming spaces. Future research on gender and games should pay closer attention to how research settings encourage particular forms of domestication which differ from children's gaming in other settings, such as the home.

This chapter argues for the continued relevance of Childhood Studies in theorising how children's friendships and cliques form around mediatised play. Although modern gaming technologies have entered the frame, this does not mean that older forms of play and relationships disappear. Gaming creates opportunities for borderwork (Thorne, 1993) in similar ways to more traditional playground games. Less gender salient games are more flexible and thus encourages children to activate their awareness of gender differences, which they mark, strengthen or challenge during play with peers. Researchers also need to pay attention to how children construct games and gaming platforms as gendered objects, and form same- or cross-sex relationships during play.

New methods of data analysis and description, such as Social Network Analysis, complement studies of gaming as relationships involving networks of friends or cliques. While SNA helped me to construct an overall 'big picture' of gendered play in the two settings, interviews and participant observation were vital in allowing me to investigate the micro-interaction of children's digital gameplay, and how they interpreted ludic gendering in games and performed gender identities (discussed in the following chapters). Social Network Analysis can be a productive starting point for thinking about gender and games in a new way, combined with theories of relational agency and identity. This may help researchers to study games as contextually appropriated technologies, and gaming as relationships, allowing for theories less focused on individual players.

Gaming mediates certain kinds of relationships and activates particular boundaries. In the case of children, borderwork (Thorne, 1993) which activates gender boundaries and allows children to perform gender identities is most prominent in cross-sex play relationships. The children selected less gender salient games for cross-sex play in both after-school settings, perhaps to avoid counter-hegemonic performances. This suggests that ludic gendering in games plays an important role in children's cross-sex play relationships and borderwork. This is explored in more detail in the following chapters.

Applying Caillois' (1958, 2001) typologies of games and play to the digital games in this study suggests that the interaction between different forms of play (agon, mimicry, ilinx) in a game is part of its ludic gendering and gender salience. Agon is present in both gender-specific and less-strongly-gendered games, and one cannot assume that competitive

play alone signifies masculinity in games. I will return to the notion of dominant play styles (especially mimicry) and Caillois's (1958, 2001) typology of games in the following chapters on how children transgress middle-class beliefs about childhood innocence and parody adult discourses for liminal pleasure (Chapter 6), and appropriate game rules to perform for peers (Chapter 7).

Chapter 6: Gender games – Children's gameplay as transgression, parody and liminal pleasure

In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior. In play it is as
though he were a head taller than himself.
— *Lev Vygotsky ('The Role of Play in Development' In Mind in Society, 1978).*

Children have never been very good at listening to adults but they have never failed to imitate
them.
— *James Baldwin (Nobody knows my name: More notes of a native son, 1961)*

Introduction

This chapter expands on children's responses to ludic gendering in digital games, showing
how gaming involves counter-discourses of adult discourses about childhood innocence
and gender norms. Children's play with peers involves public displays of gaming which
are not only gendered and unique to their specific peer groups, but confirm the broader
finding that children's counter-discourses respond to adult concerns (Buckingham &
Bragg, 2005). The examples in this chapter show how children signify particular gendered
interpretations of game ratings and represented violence, sex, relationships and nudity in
games. This challenges notions of childhood innocence (discussed in 'Discourses of
childhood' in Chapter 2) where children are seen as requiring protection from potentially
'harmful', or adult media content that they are assumed to be unable to deal with. This
chapter illustrates children's play with games, as well as how their talk becomes a place
for play with discourses and meanings of games, and wider societal debates around
gaming, such as the tension between representation and reality.

The play episodes discussed in this chapter may also be considered in terms of Caillois'
notion of mimicry:

> For children, the aim is to imitate adults. This explains the success of the toy
> weapons and miniatures which copy the tools, engines, arms, and machines used by
> adults. The little girl plays her mother's role as cook, laundress, and ironer. The
> boy makes believe he is a soldier, musketeer, policeman, pirate, cowboy, Martian,
> etc. (2001, p. 21)

Caillois' examples suggest that mimicry is gendered and plays a role in socialised gender.
He also claims that "acts of mimicry tend to cross the border between childhood and

adulthood" (2001, p. 21). Digital games encourage children to play character roles which may be masculine, feminine or customisable, modified from a set of available choices in a game's interface. As discussed, this forms part of ludic gendering in games. The previous chapter revealed that boys and girls at the holiday club played gender-specific games when playing in same-sex groups, and less-strongly-gendered games during cross-sex play. Children engage in role-play with the gender identities on offer in games. Through their gender performances, children may mimic some kinds of desirable masculine and feminine identities, which might transgress what is considered acceptable for childhood gendering. The examples discussed in this chapter highlight age-related pleasures, such as pre-teen boys' interest in and appreciation of artifice in horror genres (Buckingham, 1996; Burn, 2008).

Theories of mimicry which stress gender socialisation and the reproduction of gender stereotypes are too simplistic. Children can mimic adult behaviours and gender norms to perform their identities in ways that are playfully transgressive. This fulfils a self-reflexive purpose, because these engagements also illustrate children's awareness of their social position as children, whose identities may be thwarted by adults who maintain a certain version of childhood through regulations designed to 'protect'.

Transcripts of play

Children use games to communicate 'public and hidden transcripts' (Sutton-Smith, 1997) of play in their cliques and peer groups. Sutton-Smith (1997) distinguishes between the public and hidden transcripts of adults and children. He argues that the public transcript of adults is the rhetoric of progress (discussed in Chapter 1 and 2), and that their hidden transcript involves "disguising children's and adults' own irrationalities and sexuality" (1997, p. 116). He argues that for children, their public transcript is good behaviour and good grades in school, whereas their folklore reveals part of their hidden transcript. In some cases, hidden transcripts of play allow children to test boundaries of childhood and adult society by exploring themes deemed age-inappropriate by adults, such as sex and violence. Scott argues that the hidden transcript "presses against and tests the limits of what may be safely ventured in terms of a reply to a public transcript of deference and conformity" (1990, p. 157-158). Discussing primary-school boys and *Grand Theft Auto*, Walton and Pallitt (2012) show how boys' game designs demonstrate engagement with

South African politics and themes of race, class, sexuality and violence; and how these designs may be seen as attempts to engage with topics not endorsed by middle-class schooling, or which adults prefer to hide from them. This chapter considers how children may develop gendered transcripts of play to fulfil public or private functions as part of their gender tactics. e.g., to mark friendship, status or maturity. I will also discuss how gender tactics may involve both conformity and rebellion in relation to societal structures, such as gender norms, and other hegemonic forces in middle-class childhood, such as parental regulation and protectionism.

Play as transgression

This chapter discusses how children overstep gender boundaries, such as boys playing dress-up games with *The Sims 2*. The main focus is on how they transgress adult beliefs about childhood innocence in gendered ways, and parody adult behaviours as part of their gameplay or performance of maturity. These kinds of play may be seen as part of children's maturation and identity development. Unequal power relations between children and adults are implicit in this process. Unlike Huizinga's (1949) concept of the 'magic circle' (discussed in Chapter 2), where play is viewed as being separate from ordinary life, gaming is not a neutral activity devoid of the power relations that are part of players' everyday lives.

In discussing children's media production in schools, Buckingham, argues that such activities are recognised as traversing traditional classroom practice, and become play spaces where "unspeakable desires can be spoken and totalizing discourses transgressed and undermined" (2003b). Walton and Pallitt's (2012) examples of primary-school boys' game designs exemplify this finding. The boys' ideas for 'South African' games were highly afro-pessimistic, and parodied political figures in ways that transgressed the decorum of middle-class boyhood, by referring to rape, sexuality, corruption, and so forth. One may argue, as Buckingham (2003b) does, that children see such popular-culture-related activities as playful in comparison to more traditional classroom practices. He argues that media education invites forms of communicating playfully, where certain forms of expression are permitted because they are for play. i.e. not for assessment. These kinds of situations are difficult for teachers and researchers, as one is unsure of how seriously to take these kinds of expressions. I argue that children's playful communication

and transgression (whether in the classroom or when they are playing games with peers) should be appreciated as instances of children's self-reflexivity where they are commenting on society and their own social position as children, and that this is part of signifying their identities. Rather than seeing children's transgressive play as negative, it is useful to view such interactions in terms of identity performances and children's agency. However, not all forms of children's agency contribute to positive identity development. It is equally important not to sanitise children's play, as their play can involve bullying, racism and/or sexism.

Game Studies theorists have considered the notion of gameplay as transgression, but not in relation to child players. Drawing on Aarseth's (2007) notion of transgressive play, where players struggle against a game's ideal player, Sundén (2009) discusses sexuality as a resource for transgressive play in her ethnography of an LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) *World of Warcraft* guild. She writes about queer uses of game spaces that make visible and play with gender norms (straight, male) in online game communities. Sundén (2009) argues that the notion of transgressive play is often taken to mean opposition to the 'ideal' player of the game, and to playing the game in ways not anticipated by the game's design. Similar 'subversive instances of play' (Sundén, 2009) are also performed by the children who participated in my study, albeit in gendered ways, and can be viewed as part of children's hidden transcripts of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997), as discussed in the previous section. When considered in relation to Aarseth (2007) and Sundén's (2009) ideas of transgressive play, one realises that children who play teen- and adult-rated games are transgressive by default, since age ratings construct them as non-ideal players.

This chapter discusses how boys and girls draw on different resources for transgressive play, such as violence, sex, sexuality and parody, when playing age-appropriate, teen- and adult-rated games. Children's gameplay may be considered as transgressive when it crosses the boundary between childhood and adult society, and what is considered as acceptable transgressions for children of a particular age. For example, while themes of sex and sexuality may be considered 'normal' transgressions for pre-teen children, in that they play a role in their development, it is less acceptable for seven- or eight-year-olds. This may be seen as being the case in Western middle-class societies, rather than

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universally. The definition of a transgression is thus relative to the society in which such play takes place. Broadly speaking, such discussions challenge adult beliefs about childhood innocence.

The role of parody and mimicry in children's play

Some examples of children's gameplay discussed in this chapter involve humorous mocking and satirical imitations of adult behaviours and gender norms. While Caillois (1958, 2001) argues that children imitate adults as a form of gender socialisation, he does not see certain forms of mimicry as parodying adult authority. By contrast, Bakhtin (1981) sees parody as a type of double-voicing, where the voice of the other is used for comic effect. In relation to children, 'the other' is adults. Bakhtin (1981) also notes that parodies may be seen from one perspective as playful, and from another as insulting. For children, parody may be 'just for fun', whereas adults see such imitations as a cause for concern. Goffman sees playfulness as imitation, defining it as "the relatively brief intrusion of unserious mimicry during interaction between one individual and others or surrogates of others" (1974, p. 48). Play, imitation or mimicry, and parody thus go hand in hand, and some argue that there is an "interplay between parody and emulation of adults" (Marsh, 2008, p. 172). Child folklorists Opie and Opie's (1969) pioneering ethnographic research on children's lore, language and singing games in particular showcases the importance of mimicry and parody in children's play. They also looked at how children's games evolved over the years, and argue that the role of parody and mimicry in children's play changes in response to socio-historical developments, such as how children started to incorporate advertising jingles into their play at the time of radio.

Harrop-Allin's doctoral thesis on township children's musical games argues that such games "reflect their immediate environments and often parody adult behaviour" (2010, p. 161). Harrop-Allin is also interested in gender and games, arguing that

> ... the tenor of children's pair dancing and their performance of adult behaviour take the form of humorous imitation and mimicry – a common feature of children's games more generally (Bishop & Curtis, 2001). The paradoxical, ambiguous nature of games that parody adult behaviour are ways children attempt to work out cross-gender interactions and sexual roles. (2010, p. 109)

Just because modern and middle-class children are playing digital games, does not mean that parody and mimicry as modes of playfulness have disappeared from their play. Parody

and mimicry are strategies that children use to express their social position and perform their identities in relation to peers and adult society.

Gameplay, modality and subversive pleasures

In this study, children's language use and judgements about games often involved comments about the modality of representations of violence, sex and nudity in games. Modality concerns truth claims made by a text which affect how it is read (Willett, 2008). Children judge games as having a high or low modality according to particular criteria, such as whether violence is portrayed realistically through the depiction of blood. The examples in this chapter demonstrate some of their criteria in relation to representation, or how life-like something in a game looks, and narrative, such as whether actions in the game can happen in real life.

Bateson (1972) may be considered a forerunner in this debate as he argues that play is a paradox involving contradictions between reality and irreality. For Bateson, play grants meanings to actions but also communicates an attitude towards those actions, and this attitude is a type of communication about how the actions associated with play need to be understood (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Bateson offers the example of a nip and a bite: the nip has the double meaning of representing a bite, as well as what a bite is not, because the nip is playful. Thus, gameplay involves judgements about representations of reality and interpreting these as representations. This chapter seeks to explore such nuances arising from children's digital gameplay.

Bakhtin's (1984) notion of grotesque realism has been used by Game Studies scholars to describe military and first person shooter (FPS) games, as such games involve "an attitude that turns the vulgarity of excrement, orifice and bodily dismemberment into a joyful affirmation of the materiality of the body" (Klevjer, 2006). This may be interpreted as a particular kind of subversive pleasure, since children are positioned as innocent and in need of protection from these kinds of representations by adults. Such pleasures are also liminal, as they are awkwardly situated on the threshold between childhood and adulthood. In this chapter, I argue that, given the different trajectories towards achieving adult versions of masculinity and femininity, it is not surprising that children's liminal pleasures are also gendered.

'Eighteen violence': Game-ratings as aspirational masculinity

Archie (10-years-old) brought his PlayStation 3 games from home to play at the holiday club (June 2011). Instead of denying his request to play them with his friends, I decided to allow them to play, but also to take the boys aside for a focus group, and I asked them about the games' content and ratings. Archie's games were two first-person-shooter games: *Resistance: Fall of Man* (18V) and *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* (16V); and three racing games: *Motorstorm* (13 V), *Motorstorm Pacific Drift* (16) and *Split Second Velocity* (7+). I sat in a circle with Archie and his four male friends from the club, namely Calvin (nine-years-old), Ray (nine-years-old), Mark (twelve-years-old), and Travis (ten-years-old). I previously allowed Chris (who had attended the club the day before, and was a school friend of Archie's) and Archie to play *Resistance*, since both their parents allowed them to play the game at home, and they had completed the game together before during a play-date at Archie's house. All the boys in the focus group, except Ray, reported playing games with similar content and ratings to the games that Archie brought to the club. Generally, these were war games such as *Call of Duty,* and first-person-shooter (FPS) games such as *Time Splitters*.

Archie and his friends had quite a sophisticated understanding of game-ratings and mediated violence. Not only did they know what the consumer alert symbols meant, but they also compared games rated as violent according to well-motivated criteria. This contrasts with South African parents' difficulties in understanding the Film and Publications Board (FPB) ratings (Chetty & Basson, 2007). According to Chetty and Basson (2007), parents stated that they required more information in order to understand the consumer alert symbols. During the focus group, I was aware that these boys were also performing their maturity and media competence for one another, and to persuade me to let them play Archie's teen- and adult-rated games at the club. As Buckingham and Bragg note:

> Children are aware that they are positioned as innocent, as especially vulnerable, or as media-incompetent, both in the domain of public debate (and media regulation) and often in the family. Their response is to emphasise their knowingness, be it about sex or the media, and thereby to construct a (powerful) counter-position to the (powerless) one that is marked out for them. (2005, p. 74)

The boys at the club also emphasised their knowledge about the adult-rated games that their parents did not allow them to play (such as *God of War*) as a way to motivate playing Archie's 'less violent' games. I asked the boys if they had ever seen *God of War*:

> **Nicola:** And who's seen *God of War*?
> **Ray:** Oh me! (excited 'me!' from the other boys too)
> **Travis:** I don't like it, it sucks.
> **Archie:** I love it! But the sad thing is mom and dad won't let me because...
> **Mark:** It's more violent than that game (points at *Resistance*).
> **Calvin:** You see heads go off.
> **Nicola:** And yet God of War is also eighteen violence...
> **Mark:** It's not... that's (Resistance) way less.
> **Archie:** That's underrated, okay, I mean over...
> **Mark:** That's OVERrated! (points at *Resistance*)
> **Archie:** That's OVERRATED...
> **Mark:** But you can't really go over eighteen! If you're eighteen you're an adult and you can pick if you want.
> *(Transcript 1: Archie, Calvin, Ray, Mark and Chris discuss game-ratings at the holiday club, 11 July 2011)[24]*

My questions to the boys about whether they have 'seen', rather than played, *God of War* implies that I am assuming that they have not played it themselves. Their descriptions of the kind of represented violence in this game suggest that they have played it, seen others playing it ('heads go off'), or been exposed to game-related marketing material which showcases violent gameplay screenshots or videos. For these boys, being able to 'stomach' or enjoy adult-rated games ('eighteen violence') signifies a form of masculinity to which they aspire: 'you're an adult and you can pick if you want', rather than 'mom and dad won't let me'. Their public display of gaming involved displaying knowledge about violent games, while acknowledging their position as children whose gaming is highly regulated by parents and ratings authorities.

The boys spoke about all of Archie's games, but two games in particular dominated the discussion: *Resistance* and *Ghost Recon*. *Resistance* is rated '18V' and *Ghost Recon* '16V' by the FPB. *Resistance* is a science-fiction horror FPS game, where the player takes up the role of a sergeant who works with the human resistance forces to drive an alien invasion (the Chimera) out of Britain. He becomes infected by the virus. Unlike the other soldiers, he remains human, with added capabilities such as strength. The game includes futuristic

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[24] I returned to the holiday club with the games during the July 2011 school holiday at the request of the club organisers. Although I did not intend to do fieldwork, this discussion arose with the boys during this timeframe. These boys had participated in the study during the April 2011 holiday club.

weapons. In contrast, *Ghost Recon* is a series of military tactical shooter games. Archie also brought *Advanced Warfighter* (the third instalment in the series) to the club. The game's story takes place in 2013 and is set in Mexico City. The player is put in the shoes of a captain who commands the Ghost Recon team. The player and team have to protect US and Mexican presidents, recover stolen technology, battle rebellious Mexican forces, and prevent a nuclear attack. As these narratives suggest, both characters may be considered as a variety of hegemonic masculinity (as discussed in Chapter 2). Through role-playing as soldiers who engage in violent combat to defeat oppositional forces, players are invited to participate in hypermasculinity.

Archie described *Ghost Recon* as 'basically like *Resistance* except not aliens, you just shoot people'. According to the boys, it matters whether players are killing aliens or 'real' people, as killing 'real' people is more violent. When talking about *Resistance* they noted that the aliens are humans that have 'mutated'. The fact that they are killing aliens in the game overrides the concern that they were once 'real' people. The boys insisted that *Resistance* should be rated much lower. Archie argued that this is because 'it's incredibly fiction, the guns are fiction' and Mark reasoned that 'at our age, thirteen and about... you like know that it's fake'. Mark's overstating of the boys' ages suggests that he associates the ability to understand and make judgements about modality in games with teenagers, rather than younger children. Thus, Mark signals modality judgements as a form of age-related media competency.

The boys referred to *Resistance* as 'fake' and 'fiction', a general judgement which they equate with things that would never happen in real life. The boys applied a reality/fiction distinction in their talk, suggesting that modality is very important when comparing games in terms of violence. This is contrary to the fear that young children cannot distinguish between games and reality that has been presented by the FPB as one of its reasons for classifying games (Walton *et al.*, 2011). It is also similar to Sørensen and Jessen's (2000) findings wherein the children acknowledged that video games were different from reality, and had their own rules to be followed.

Despite enjoying tactical shooters and war games, this group of boys had a strong preference for horror games. Archie and his friends enjoyed dramatising the narrative of

how they gradually overcame their initial fears about *Resistance* and its four-eyed aliens. Archie provided the following narrative of his play-dates with Chris: 'we got better and better and then we'd just run through everything and say that's not real, that's not real, we just made jokes 'cause we don't want to see their faces, they're ugly, I mean look at it!'

Thus, Archie highlights the appeal of horror games for boys of his age, where being scared of things they know are not real is part of the enjoyment. *Resistance* has a degree of 'creepiness' that these boys found exhilarating: the cover depicts a skull with bugs crawling in its mouth, and aliens with four eyes and protruding cooling systems on their backs. Archie explained that 'there are little bugs that crawl into your mouth that make them mutate' while turning over the cover, and pointing at the skull depicting bugs in its mouth. The boys spoke about their enjoyment of hearing people screaming, and feeling an adrenaline rush from aliens 'popping out' in the game. On the one hand, the boys highlighted the 'gross' and unnatural representations in the game, which may be read in relation to Bakhtin's (1984) notion of grotesque realism, such as the four-eyed aliens and bugs that crawl into people's mouths and make them into aliens. These descriptions may have been for the benefit of myself or younger children who did not play these games. On the other hand, the boys' talk also suggested an awareness of game genre, particularly the differences between horror and realism.

For Archie and his friends, horror games signified a subversive pleasure, where the "affective charge of horror in social play" (Burn, 2010) is about overcoming fear together to mark maturity and masculinity, or, in Archie's words, not being a 'wuss'. In addition to recognising artifice, the boys' talk also demonstrated their awareness of the multimodal nature of horror, where the 'scary' depends on aural as well as visual senses. The boys understood that the role of sound in *Resistance* differed to that of *Ghost Recon*. Archie says *Resistance* is 'scary because you hear voices aaaaah (in an eerie drawn out whisper), you hear people screaming, whereas in Ghost Recon it's like "C'mon Ghost!" and you just hear, sometimes Mexican people (mimicking Spanish voices)'.

Pleasure in horror genres depends on the stimulation of fear (Burn, 2010), but controversies about the horrific aspects of games do not recognise that, perhaps for many older children, this fear may involve a sense of enjoyment rather than harm. Young gamers

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who enjoy horror genres have much in common with young viewers of horror films (Buckingham, 1996), where pleasure is derived from slipping between an intellectual awareness of artifice through the subversive pleasures of the 'gory' content, to the social rite of passage which involves gaining power over fear. Horror games and films allow access to "liminal adult pleasures" (Burn, 2008, p. 164). By cultivating such spectacular and transgressive popular tastes, older children and young teens are able to imagine and enact a departure from childish innocence and obedience, or the middle-class decorum associated with school and boyhood (Burn, 2008). The following example from St Mary's concerns children's popular tastes that are deemed to be more age-appropriate, but are nevertheless appropriated in gendered ways and involve a different kind of mimicry.

'Singing a character': playing with celebrities and borderwork

In comparison to the aspirational masculinity of boys from the same-sex school who attended the holiday club, the boys at St Mary's performed their masculinity quite differently during their gaming sessions. As discussed in Chapter 5, some of the boys distanced themselves from the children who were members of the choir. The boys who did not sing in the choir (Danny, Devon and Steve) played the racing games and *Folklore* together. While the choir boys (Aaron and Luke) sometimes joined them in playing the racing games, the non-choir boys did not participate in the karaoke games and only allowed specific girls to play the racing games with them (such as Jessica and Fran who were close friends with Aaron and Luke).

During one of the gaming sessions, I asked Danny why he did not like to play the karaoke games. He was playing *Burnout Paradise* alone, as most of the children had gone home. He said, 'I don't like that music – they don't have the songs that I like'. I asked him about his preferred taste in music and he said that his favourite artists were Chris Brown, Akon, Neo, Sean Kingston, Bob Marley and Michael Jackson. In terms of black masculinity, these artists occupy a number of different versions thereof. Danny proceeded to sing Marley's 'Three Little Birds' to me and asked if I knew the song:

> **Nicola:** Yes, I know that song. You sing so nicely, why don't you want to sing?
> **Danny:** I sing at home, I don't like to sing in front of others ma'am... And I like this famous rapper – he is adopting a rhino that was shot nine times.
> **Nicola:** Why is he adopting a rhino?
> **Danny:** Because they have something in common. The rhino got shot nine times and survived, the rapper got shot nine times and still survived.

> **Nicola:** What rapper is this?
> **Danny:** It's American rapper, best rapper.
> **Nicola:** What's his name?
> **Danny:** I don't know but he's American rapper.
> *(Transcript 2: Danny talks about music artists, St Marys, 12 November 2010)*

In karaoke games such as *Disney Sing It*, the player sings a character, even though the music artists in these games are not playable in the same way as other games, since these games consist of music videos and parts of movies with a karaoke overlay, as discussed in the previous chapter. The phrase 'singing a character' was well-established in the children's discourse, such as 'I'll sing Troy' or 'I'll sing Vanessa'. Danny resisted the characters on offer in the karaoke games because they were very different to his favourite artists who, for the most part, epitomise African-American adult masculinity. The 'American rapper' that Danny refers to, who 'got shot nine times and still survived', also shares common traits with the protagonists of the *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* series, where black masculinity has added connotations of criminality. The 'American rapper' that Danny referred to is 50 Cent. During 2010 there was a social media campaign where members of the public tried to pressure the artist to adopt a black rhino[25]. Danny's emphasis of 'American rapper, best rapper' is typical of the children's media consumption at St Mary's. i.e. idolising American music artists. In terms of hypermasculinity, 50 Cent and character-avatars in the *GTA* series are associated with a gangster identity, rather than other forms of hypermasculinity, such as soldiers. Danny resisted the karaoke games because of the masculinities on offer, which conflicted with the kinds of masculinities embodied by his preferred music artists.

When I asked the children about which South African artists they would like to see featured in the karaoke games, they had very little knowledge of local artists. American celebrities and media franchises, such as *Hanna Montana*, dominate children's playground culture, and are printed on school books, stationery, school backpacks, lunchboxes and so forth. These items and stars are also gendered. No boy owns anything related to Hanna Montana. By contrast, *High School Musical* and *Camp Rock* are perhaps perceived to be less gendered. When 'singing' characters from Disney media franchises, children incorporated their knowledge about these brands as part of their gender tactics when

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[25] http://news.discovery.com/animals/rap-artist-50-cent-pressured-to-adopt-rhino.html

singing these karaoke games with peers. The children mostly chose to sing songs with characters or pop stars they perceived as gender-appropriate to sing along to. Children's song choices, reaction to their peers' song choices, and therefore the celebrities they wanted to sing along to, may be seen in relation to borderwork, where children signal differences between boys and girls in their play.

During one of the gaming sessions *(St Marys, 17 September 2010)*, Aaron chose to sing a Hanna Montana song. After a short while he said, 'this is weird', and gave the microphone to Amitah. His teacher had just returned, and stood behind the children singing in front of the television. Aaron seemed embarrassed to be singing this song in front of her. He asked the girls whether he could choose another song, saying 'I want to sing Camp Rock', but opted for Corbin Bleu's song from *High School Musical*, 'Push it to the limit', instead. While the children did not make many remarks related to singing characters of a particular gender, their song choices revealed their beliefs about appropriate gendering and mimicry of music artists. Despite being a member of the choir, Aaron did not see all the songs or music artists as gender-neutral. Although he bragged about his *High School Musical* waffle-maker, he remarked that the male characters in the movie were 'all so gay', whereas 'Selena Gomez is sexy' *(St Marys, 23 October 2010)*. This suggests that judgements about heterosexuality also influenced children's song choices. Selena Gomez's song 'Magic', from *The Wizards of Waverly Place*, was a popular favourite among the boys and the girls, and Aaron sang this song without expressing embarrassment, unlike he did with the Hanna Montana song. The children all reported to have watched both the movie *The Wizards of Waverly Place*, and the series on the Disney channel.

Figure 6.1: Hanna Montana

Figure 6.2: Corbin Bleu

Figure 6.3: Sharpay (Ashley Tisdale) in *High School Musical*

In contrast to the choir boys, the St Mary's girls relished singing both male and female characters, suggesting that girls singing male characters were less stigmatized than boys singing female characters. One of the girls' favourites was Sharpay[26] (Ashley Tisdale's character in *High School Musical*) singing 'Fabulous'. In this song, Sharpay wears pink outfits and accessories, epitomising a 'girly', sexualised femininity (see Figure 5.3), and her mannerisms are highly exaggerated. It is also notable that, while the girls at St Mary's mimicked Sharpay's onscreen facial expressions and gestures, the boys did not do the same, even when singing male characters. Many of these girls were also part of the drama club, so their peers were impressed when their 'acting' matched that of Sharpay. As 'Coloured' and 'African' girls, they did not appear to struggle with the blonde princess femininity that Sharpay represents, and acting along to it. Despite the dominance of cross-

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[26] As a character, Sharpay can be described as the antagonist in *High School Musical*, because she has her eyes on Troy, the leading male role who is romantically paired with Gabriella. Sharpay is probably the most comedic of all the characters in this Disney movie, as all her mannerisms are highly exaggerated.

sex play at St Mary's, the boys in the drama club did not attempt this, but some of the boys at the holiday club did.

The girls at the holiday club also enjoyed *Fabulous*, and selected it or a Hanna Montana song as 'punishment' for boys who invaded their play and 'girls only' territory. The girls established the condition that boys had to endure singing a 'girly' song, or else they would be chased away. The girls thus exploited Sharpay's femininity for a different purpose. The boys were only allowed to watch them sing or play along if they sang 'Fabulous' or a Hanna Montana song. This happened on more than one occasion. The corner of the gym hall always resounded with hysterical laughter when the boys played along by singing in a high pitched 'girly' voice, and mimicking the onscreen actions of Sharpay or Hanna, as they had seen the girls doing. This kind of gender-bending is similar to cross-dressing and may be seen as a form of borderwork that relies on mimicking the opposite sex, and thereby poking fun at one's own sex. Initially, these instances appeared to be a form of cruelty or bullying exercised by the girls, but, for the boys, playing along with the girls in this way enabled them to be accepted as play partners in a space that the girls had marked as being off-limits to the boys. The girls were aware that this kind of play led other boys to questioning the boy's sexuality, since the boys considered these characters and songs as 'gay'. Thus, the boy seeking entry into the 'girls only' territory engaged in an exaggerated performance of femininity to make it clear that he was acting for the girls, and did not genuinely like singing games or Hanna Montana.

While the girls at the holiday club enjoyed mimicking age-appropriate Disney celebrities in their public singing games, their play with *The Sims 2* involved simulating sexual relationships in a private way, which may be regarded as comparatively controversial. The following section discusses how children's parodies of adult relationships can be seen in relation to hidden transcripts of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997) involving different forms of transgression, liminal pleasures and borderwork.

Representing relationships in games

The following play episodes from the holiday club concern children's representations of heterosexual adult relationships during gameplay. In the first example of cross-sex play with *Little Big Planet*, the children use the game as a stage to perform a mock heterosexual

marriage in accordance with gender norms. The second example, of same-sex girl play with *The Sims 2*, describes how the holiday club girls try to make their Sim characters have sex, using the game to explore their curiosities, and thereby communicate a different kind of transgressive play and liminal pleasure. While kissing games and playing with heterosexual courtship rituals are popular forms of Western cross-sex play (Thorne, 1993), and are seen as imitations of adult life that are part of childhood innocence, children playing at sex are regarded as deviant when such play oversteps the boundary between childhood and adulthood. Access to sexual knowledge is regarded as an important boundary marker between children and adults (Jackson & Scott, 1999). Mimicry is an acceptable part of childhood gendering, but becomes tricky when it crosses such highly charged boundaries. While the first example reported here may be regarded as cute and parodic, I think that the girls' play with *The Sims 2* is much more contentious.

A vampire wedding and a skateboard honeymoon

On a particular day at the holiday club, the children were quite interested in the wedding theme, owing to outside game events. The previous day, Tara (12-years-old) had been pinching the boys, and one of the club organisers reprimanded her. Tara said, 'Okay, I'll kiss them next time'. She started a kissing game with the boys, where she would play-kiss them if she caught them. On this day, the children decided to have a pretend wedding, where Tara and Mark (12-years-old) were going to get married. As they were about to pretend kiss, one of the boys threw a water balloon at Tara's face. Tara cried, and the 'wedding' was interrupted. Her initial decision to kiss the boys rather than pinch them may be read as an alternative form of aggression, and the boys responded according to their own criteria for aggressive behaviour by throwing a water balloon at her. The club organisers told me that, two years previously, they had brought pieces of material for crafts to the club. Tara had draped a white piece around herself and 'married' one of the boys. When she decided that she did not want to be married anymore, she draped herself in a piece of black material. At every holiday club, the children staged such a mock-wedding, and Tara 'married' one of the boys. This playground history and the day's events also made its way into the children's play with *Little Big Planet*.

Tara (12-years-old) and Archie (9-years-old) played *Little Big Planet* together. Mark (12-years-old) and Joey (8-years-old) 'watched' them, but contributed to the gameplay

throughout. Mark told Archie to choose the tuxedo for his sackman. Initially, Archie protested to this older boy and chose the white fairy dress as a joke. They all laughed, before Archie gave in and chose to dress his sack-person in the tuxedo. This prompted Joey's suggestion, for Archie and Tara's characters to get married while Tara and Archie navigated their costume menus:

> **Joey:** Guys – get married!
> **Mark:** Tara, go get dressed in that wedding thing.
> **Archie:** 'Cause I'm in a tux.
> **Mark:** (to Archie) Go get yourself a top hat.
> **Joey:** Get married! aah ah ah ha [makes a 'cutesy' sound effect]
> [Archie chooses a little black hat and Tara dresses her sack-person in the white fairy dress, but has also chosen a red cape]
> **Mark:** He has a thing (referring to the top hat), you must get yourself a wedding veil.
> **Tara:** Okay, I've got one.
> **Mark:** No, not a red one. Put a wedding veil on. Stop it! (to Joey, who is making irritating voices. He proceeds to show Tara where the veil is on the menu.)
> *(Transcript 3: 'Guys – get married!' Tara, Archie, Mark and Joey play Little Big Planet, 8 April 2011)*

Mark suggested that the red cape was unsuitable for a bride when he told Tara to find a wedding veil instead. The children's conversation shows them citing (in Butler's [1990, 1993] sense) gender norms and roles regarding gendered wedding clothing items that fit together, such as a black tuxedo and a black top hat, and a white wedding dress and a white veil. They did not 'mix and match' these items in a gender-bending way, despite some initial transgressive play, when Archie selected the fairy dress for his sack-person before he chose the tuxedo. The children settled into a more conventional arrangement. By customising the sack-people's costumes, they constructed an image imitating a heterosexual white wedding. Arguably, the fact that the game involves sack-people makes the children's dressing up of characters into a parody, which sends up romantic conventions.

After Mark helped Tara find a veil, he said, 'Now you must become a vampire – make your teeth vampires. And make yourselves happy – choose up arrow.' The children laughed at Tara and Archie's sack-bride and sack-groom as they played with changing their facial expressions. Archie's sack-groom wore a skeleton skin under his tuxedo. Joey found this combination disturbing and asked, 'How can a human marry a skeleton?' Mark

reminded him that they were actually vampires, saying that it was a 'vampire wedding'.

Mark tried to get Tara and Archie to make their bride and groom hold hands:

> **Mark:** Wait – you hold L2, now you hold R2 and like make yourselves look like you're holding hands. Just do it.
> [**Archie** hits **Tara's** sackgirl instead, the children laugh.]
> Just hold hands! I want to see what they look like. No, just do it – move your hands down. Stop it **Archie!**
> [**Archie** makes his sack-groom run around in the background, he does not want to hold hands with his sack-bride. **Joey** hums the wedding march. **Archie** gives in and comes closer and they try to make their hands touch. **Tara** hits **Archie's** sackboy and they all laugh.]
> Don't! I want to see what it looks like.
> **Archie:** I don't.
> **Mark:** Now go close, now do it.
> **Joey:** You may kiss the bride!
> **Mark:** Go a little further away. There we go. (But **Archie** runs away.) No, go in front of her, then she's not able to hit you.
> *(Transcript 4: Kiss or hit the bride? Tara, Archie, Mark and Joey play Little Big Planet, 8 April 2011)*

The vampire teeth and skeleton skin, together with Mark's attempts to persuade Tara and Archie to make their sack-people hold hands, assisted in making the play session parodic. In this extract, Mark was like a director, but Tara and Archie were not too keen on performing a romantic wedding scene for him. By suggesting this simulated romantic scene, he was also instigating an opportunity for borderwork, setting up gender relations through roles in the mock-wedding. Although Mark was trying to stage a scene where the sack-characters held hands and Joey suggested a simulated kiss, Tara and Archie were not comfortable with the romantic script, and defied Mark's directions by hitting one another's characters and running across the screen.

A little while later Joey said, 'Come on, let's go on holiday, I want to go on holiday.' Archie first gave his sack-person a moustache and Tara chose a white skin. Mark commented, 'Whoah she looks freaky!' Joey exclaimed excitedly, 'We're getting married on holiday!' Tara again selected the skateboard freefall level, which they had been playing for the past 20 minutes before dressing up. Joey said, 'And then we choose the next level and that's the holiday place.' Mark said, 'They're two vampires getting married!' The newly-wed vampire couple completed the 'Skateboard Freefall' challenge, and Tara's sack-bride won first place. Archie said jokingly, 'I don't like you bride, why did you win?'

Tara and Archie played the skateboard freefall level again. Mark said, 'They're going on their honeymoon!'
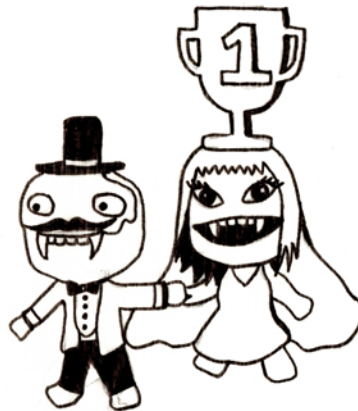
Figure 6.4: Sack-groom and Sack-bride

This episode illustrates the children's policing of, and parodic play regarding gendered performances and heteronormativity. Tara and Archie (with help from Mark) transformed their sack-people into a bride and a groom. The gender boundary was not crossed – Tara had to role-play the bride and Archie the groom. The vampire teeth may be seen as an attempt at making the wedding more playful by 'remixing' it with horror (which as previously discussed, was held in high esteem by the boys), in contrast to the formal Western wedding costumes. Tara and Archie hitting one another, instead of holding hands suggests that they were resisting Mark's attempt at representing romance, or his attempts to control the 'script' for the play. This episode may also be seen as a possible example of children's age-related discomfort with relationships between boys and girls in their own lives. Thus, borderwork enables them to play with these experiences.

When Tara received first place in the skateboard freefall level and Mark said, 'I don't like you bride, why did you win?' it seems that Tara has transgressed a gendered boundary: perhaps girls are supposed to do what male players tell them to do and not beat them in competitions, because boys are 'better' at games. Mark's comment may also be seen as a form of self-parody of competitive masculine play. This play episodes thus suggests sexual innocence and idealised adult imitation, where the gameplay centres on surface imagery and events. e.g. bride and groom costumes, the honeymoon. The play revolves around the children's discomfort with kissing and relationships in real life, and the game becomes a

space to perform this anxiety for the opposite sex. A different form of 'grotesque realism' operates here, which works through 'double-voicing' adult, heterosexual marriages (Bakhtin, 1984, 1981 respectively). Acting out holding hands or kissing is regarded as 'grotesque' because these actions activate real-world gender relations.

The following play episode illustrates girls' curiosity about adult relationships, rather than their discomfort.

'Make them woo-hoo': Girls playing *The Sims 2*

The girls at the holiday club bonded over *The Sims 2*. Their gameplay suggested a variety of gendered liminal pleasure and public display of gaming which contrasted to that of their male peers. Maggie (10-years-old), Tara (12-years-old) and Mandy (9-years-old) played *The Sims 2* together on the laptop in the corner of the gym hall at the holiday club. As discussed in the previous chapter, the girls at the holiday club were very secretive about their gameplay. Same-sex play was the norm for these girls, who were a minority at the club, and were always outnumbered by boys (see Table 5.4 and 5.5). When they did play the games on offer, they would mostly select the laptop games and play quietly in the corner of the room. As discussed in Chapter 4, the digital recorder on my cellphone became a very important tool, as the girls used it to record their play in my absence. As they played, they would use the zoom on the camera to focus on important details. Their zooming in on romantic interactions between Sims confirmed their voyeuristic agenda and interest in romantic relationships between characters. The girls derived pleasure from transforming the game into a puppet theatre where Sims characters imitated adult romantic relationships.

Figure 6.5: The variety of options for the type of kiss includes 'peck', 'make out', 'smooch', 'up arms', 'tender' and 'romantic'

The girls took turns recording their play using the video camera on my cellphone. Maggie became very excited about the male and female Sim characters, and exclaimed that 'they like each other!' *(Holiday club, The Sims 2, 7 April 2011)*. Mandy told Tara to make the Sim characters 'make out'. Tara was the Sims expert in the group, because she owned all *The Sims 2* expansion packs. She also had an older sister studying towards a computer science degree, and she often told me about things her sister taught her how to do in the Sims game. Tara clicked on the male Sim, selected 'kiss' and then 'smooch' from the options available ('peck', 'make out', 'smooch', 'up arms', 'tender' and 'romantic' – see Figure 6.5). The male Sim kissed the female Sim and Maggie said, 'That's smooch'. The girl holding the camera zoomed in on the kissing Sims. Tara selected 'make out' from the kiss options and the Sim couple performed the action. Again, the camera zoomed in on the kiss. Tara said, 'There, they're making out', and two pairs of lips appeared around the Sims' heads. Maggie said, 'Oh my word – that's so gross!' The girls giggled and commented, 'That's so weird' (Mandy) and 'Ew she's taking her leg' (Maggie noted the female Sim moving her leg up the male Sim's body). The girls enjoyed testing out the various options for romance and intimacy between the Sim characters. Their exclamations

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of 'gross', 'weird' and 'ew' reveal a variant on the 'grotesque realism' (Bakhtin, 1984) of the boys at the holiday club who played *Resistance*.

Mark (a 12-year-old boy who is Maggie's brother) approached the girls during the 'make out' session, saying 'Eeewww!', and asked Tara if she was able to make the male Sim sleep. Maggie protested and instead asked Tara to 'make them woo-hoo!' Mark said, 'You can't make them woo-hoo'. Tara answered that 'they'll both have to relax'. Tara selected the bath, and the male Sim undressed. The game displayed a pixilation over his groin area. Tara selected that the female Sim come over to his bath, and an animation played of her shocked reaction. The girls said 'Oooh!' in response to the female Sim seeing the male Sim in the bath. Tara used the game's snapshot function to take a picture of the male Sim in the bath. This action and the girls' 'Oooh!' gasps suggest their interest in this game as voyeurs, and perhaps as a trophy.

After his bath, Tara made the male Sim get into bed with the female Sim. Impatiently, Mandy exclaimed, 'Make them flippin woo-hoo!'. Instead, 'Z' signs played over the Sims' heads and Tara took a snapshot of the sleeping Sims. She said, 'See, they're sleeping together' in a sarcastic tone. Maggie suggested that Tara 'make them sleep in their underwear' and Tara replied, 'let's first see how far they can get'. This implied the girls' goal rule, where they saw achievement in the game as being able to get the Sim characters to have sex. Tara selected 'cuddle'. Mark noticed that 'a purple heart popped up' (the woo-hoo icon). Tara commented on the male Sim's needs displayed in the menu below, and announced that 'he wants to woo-hoo'. Tara added that the Sims did not 'know each other' too well, which was why the 'woo-hoo' instruction would not work.

The girls engaged with the game's manipulation rules for simulating romantic relations between their Sims characters to see 'how far they can get'. This may be considered as a stereotypically 'masculine' instrumental approach to relationships. The girls derived pleasure from the game's complex manipulation rules and their voyeuristic engagement. *The Sims 2* is a sandbox game driven by manipulation rules. There are many different ways to play the game, and there are no coded goal rules enforcing a particular win or lose situation. Goal rules are largely determined by players and how they choose to configure the game's manipulation rules. This play episode illustrates how goal rules are socially

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negotiated between players. This contrasts with Frasca's (2003a) definition which pertains to rules that game designers state as mandatory within the simulation. i.e. what the player must do in order to win. The oldest girl, Tara, was in control of the game and interpreted its manipulation rules for the other children, in the form of explanations for why the Sims cannot 'woo-hoo'. In this sequence, Tara decides the goal rules. Overall, the girls' play is mimetic, as they try to enact romantic relations between the Sims characters as if in control of puppets on a stage. Their play is transgressive in the sense that pre-teen children are assumed to be innocent, and are rarely regarded as sexual beings (Buckingham & Bragg, 2005).

Previous research on children's playground sexualities (Best, 1983; Renold, 2005) suggests that the girls' appropriation of *The Sims 2* in the laptop corner, may be seen as an exploration of sexual relations, and that this shares some commonalities with children's sexual cultures in school playgrounds. Although sexual relations between Sim characters differ from children exploring their own sexual relations among their peers, the spatiality of playground sexuality is a common theme which relates to children's hidden transcripts of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Best (1983) describes children's sexual learning as a hidden curriculum that takes place away from the watchful eyes of adults, arguing that children find ways to hide sexual activities from adult surveillance. Such forms of play include playing house, where girls and boys role-play mothers and fathers, dating games in later years, and private genital touching and watching games, such as 'look and see' and 'show and tell' (Renold, 2005). In the context of these kinds of Childhood Studies ethnographies of children's play, the girls' Sims play is neither new, nor shocking. What it does share in common with these studies, is the notion of children marking out a private space to explore their sexual curiosities, and test boundaries between childhood and adult society. Sexual learning is part of children's peer pedagogy and it is not surprising that this dynamic also manifests in children's digital gaming.

Tara often told the other girls to keep quiet, admonishing the younger ones in particular. The girls tried to hide their play from the younger boys at the club. Only Maggie's older brother, Mark, was allowed to view the 'make out' session. The girls played quietly, and covered the screen when the younger boys approached, and told them to go away. In this sense, one may argue that the girls were aware that they had transgressed the boundary of

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childhood innocence and being a 'good girl'. The game and corner position of the laptop provided them with an opportunity for mimicry, where they could perform and play out their curiosities around sex and relationships. This kind of gaming transgresses adult beliefs about childhood innocence, while strengthening friendship between the girls by virtue of keeping what they are doing a secret and out of sight of younger children and boys, aside from Mark (Maggie's older brother). Not only did they consider their play as inappropriate for younger children to see, but they may also have been worried that one of the youngsters would tell the club organisers about what they were doing. One can speculate that the fact that they recorded their play may suggest that they forgot about the video camera, or were comfortable with it being viewed by an adult female researcher, rather than the official club organisers who might have told their parents.

The children's default Sim couple in this episode was inter-racial. None of the children commented on this. During a previous session, where the girls were frustrated with the boys' interference in their play, they announced that they were going to make a 'lesbian family' *(Holiday club, 4 April 2011)*. As a researcher, one needs to be sensitive about talking about sexuality with children, because this may upset parents. I did not probe to find out what they meant. I would speculate that they interpreted the 'lesbian family' as an instance where they wanted to erase the boys from the game, perhaps because they were cross with the boys at the holiday club who were teasing them and invading their play. The 'lesbian family' did not develop further than dressing female Sims, so the girls did not play the same kind of romance game with these characters.

The 'lesbian family' idea, and the following play episode, show how girls and boys were both interested in sexuality when they played *The Sims*, but their interactions suggest different motivations. The girls were curious about relationships and simulating sex in the game in the interactions I observed, whereas the boys were more preoccupied with 'homosexual' representations and "homophobic male culture" (Buckingham & Bragg, 2005), rather than heterosexual relationships.

'These clothes are so gay': Boys playing dress-up

Maggie (10-years-old) controlled the mouse. Carl (11-years-old) sat on her left and Kathy (10-years-old) sat to her right, with Johan (9-years-old) next to her. Mark (12-years-old),

Maggie's brother, sat on a chair behind them. The boys had interrupted the girls' play turn. Such 'invasions' are forms of borderwork, and often occur where boys have been observed to invade girls' space (Thorne, 1993).

None of the boys ever publicly selected *The Sims 2*, but preferred to intrude on the girls' play turns with this game. I came over to them with my cellphone camera upon hearing hysterical laughter. They were customising a male Sim. Carl had *The Sims 2* game at home. His mother told one of the club organisers that his father was supposed to 'check' the game, but didn't. The next morning, Carl announced that he 'had sex' three times during the night, and his mother was shocked. He told me that he did not really like this game and that it was 'girly', but the following interactions demonstrate a level of counter-hegemonic enjoyment of this 'dress-up' part of the game among the boys. Literature on gender and gaming (Jenkins, 2003) marks 'dress up' and character customisation as feminine sensibilities, or activities mostly enjoyed by girls. The boys at the holiday club seemed to enjoy it just as much as the girls, albeit in a different way, whereby they performed their own sense of masculinity by ridiculing the (in their view) less-than-masculine male Sim character.

The boys commented on Maggie's selection of outfits for the male Sim (underwear, pyjamas, swimwear and sportswear) and made suggestions, for the purpose of humour and masculine display. The following interaction took place while Maggie navigated the underwear option:

> **Carl:** (laughing, points at the male Sim's bum in the mirror)
> **Nicola:** You laughing at the leopard print? (leopard print underwear)
> **Johan:** George of the Jungle[27] – go to George of the Jungle.
> (**Maggie** goes to the pyjamas and picks a red pair, ignoring **Johan's** request.)
> *(Transcript 5: Sim underwear options, Carl, Maggie and Johan, Holiday club, 7 April 2011)*

Before this episode took place, Karl remarked that one of the pairs of pants looked like skinny jeans, and that boys do not wear skinny jeans. He exclaimed, 'These clothes are so gay!' A short while later, Maggie was going through the swimwear options and this interaction took place:

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[27] Johan is referring to the comedy film *George of the Jungle*, which features a Tarzan-like character who wears a leopard print loin cloth. Brendan Fraser plays this lead character.

Carl: Swimwear! Speedos! Speedos! (he sees these as **Maggie** goes through the list of options. **Maggie** clicks on the green Speedo and the boys laugh. She then clicks on a blue pair, and then a blue and orange pair.)
Maggie: He looks like a nerd.
Carl: Look at his butt!
(**Maggie** chooses a black and orange pair, the boys laugh again. She clicks on a blue and black pair in the same style.)
Johan: Joh! Another g-string!
Maggie: It like makes it look like a (...)
(**Maggie** clicks on the red Speedo and turns the Sim around, the boys giggle at the Sim looking at himself. **Maggie** clicks on the red and orange shorts.)
Mark: Aw. (**Maggie** goes to the sportswear and clicks the different colour tracksuits quickly.)
(Transcript 6: Speedos and g-strings, Carl, Maggie, Johan and Mark, Holiday club, 7 April 2011)

Carl's direction for the other boys to look at the male Sim's 'butt', which Johan commented on as looking like a 'g-string', suggests that the boys were making fun of the character because of the represented nudity involved. Maggie seemed to be having fun with the boys' interest in this dress-up part of the game, lingering on certain options and clicking through others quite quickly. She clicked on the 'funny' options, and even rotated the Sim so that they could laugh at him. She policed masculinity by saying that the 'speedo' made the male Sim look 'like a nerd', possibly also to cover her own embarrassment about seeing a semi-nude (albeit animated) male body in the presence of boys.

It should also be noted that the game allows a greater variety of outfits for female Sims than for male Sims. Gender-bending through clothing options is not possible, because there are no dress options for male Sims in *The Sims 2*. Although Maggie controlled the mouse and selected different outfits, Carl's suggestion for the other boys to 'look at his butt!' signalled masculine display through ridiculing the male Sim's body. The boys protested against outfits they read as 'gay', such as skinny jeans, g-strings and speedos, which Maggie labelled as 'nerdy'. The boys' ridicule of the male Sim's body, and ostracising various clothing options as 'gay', may be seen as a way of dealing with their discomfort with looking at a semi-nude male body in the presence of other boys.
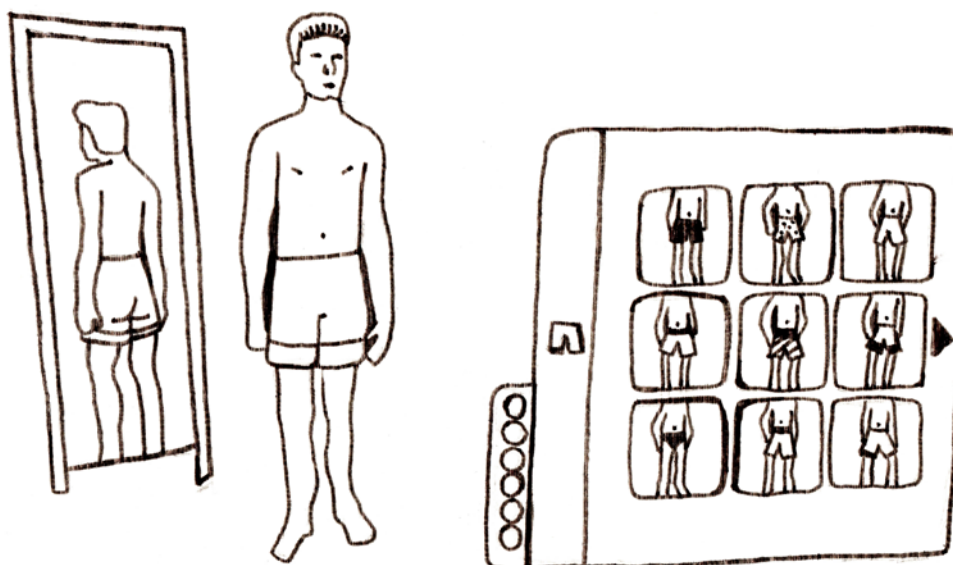
Figure 6.6: Step 5 in 'Create a Sim', depicting swimwear options for a male Sim

The Sims avatars resemble Ken dolls. This body type does not suggest the stereotypical masculinity depicted in most commercial games. As discussed in Chapter 2, Burn and Schott (2004) describe the male protagonist (Cloud) from *Final Fantasy 7* as a 'heavy hero', because he is "exaggeratedly attractive, good with his sword, and equipped with a mysterious myth of origin, combining ordinary mortal and supernatural forces, like Achilles" (2004, p. 7). The boys at the holiday club reported playing war games, such as *Call of Duty*, and other teen- and adult-rated titles, such as games from the *Grand Theft Auto* series. Male Sims are not soldiers or criminal anti-heroes, and given the hypermasculinities of these game characters, they may thus perhaps be considered, in Carl's words, 'gay' by comparison. The boys' gender performances suggest that the physical criteria may be more important than narrative ones when it comes to ludic gendering. Coupled with the domestic setting, boys are likely to view the Sims as less masculine than the protagonists of war and horror games.

On the other hand, these boys may be 'othering' the male Sim character to affirm their own heterosexuality. Childhood Studies researchers, such as Epstein (1999) and Ingraham (1994), have theorised heterosexuality as a compulsory element in schools, and argue that boys identified as feminine are often the targets of homophobic harassment. The male Sim cannot fight back, nor can his feelings become hurt. Thus, the boys may be exploiting the game as an opportunity to engage in a form of group teasing. Frank *et al.* (2003) argue that

the language of homophobia is part of children's everyday lives, and the term 'gay' is often applied to boys who socialise with girls, and to anything (behaviour, clothing or other objects) classified as undesirable. The boys' comments about g-strings, speedos and skinny jeans fit this description.

This play episode may be contrasted with that of the girls, who on one occasion, proclaimed that they were going to make a family of lesbian Sim characters. Best (1983) suggests that pressures for gender conformity are much stronger on boys than on girls, noting that there is a wider range of options in girls' worlds than in boys', some of which show up in play and games. Best (1983) argues that girls sometimes choose to 'be' boys so that they can join in boys' sports and games, whereas this is much less likely in the case of boys. During play episodes where girls from the holiday club forced a boy to sing along to Ashley Tisdale or Hanna Montana, the boys mimicked these characters in a parodic way. The boys did not sing quietly in the corner, pretending to 'be' girls, but copied the female singers' high-pitched voices and mannerisms to such an exaggerated extent that it was clear to the other boys that they were acting out for the girls, rather than performing a masculine identity. Thus, gender-bending is allowed for the purpose of humour, similar to Archie's decision to dress his sack-person in a white fairy dress as a joke before selecting the formal suit. The boys' play with the dress-up part of *The Sims 2* may be sanctioned because the boys invaded the girls' play turn, rather than selecting to play this game themselves by writing down their names on the play schedule. The play episodes discussed in this chapter show heteronormativity to be an important structuring principle in children's play, which informs their performances of gender identities.

Conclusion

This chapter offers examples of how participants negotiated gendered gameplay together and provides insights into various tensions and complexities involved in exploring how children use gender tactics during gameplay to contest, challenge and negotiate the various gender positions available to them. I argue that the 'ludic gendering' of particular games was able to open up a space where the children were much more aware of the dominant positions and typical romantic scripts that mediate their understandings of gender. These play episodes activated children's age-related discomfort at the borderwork needed in such situations (such as in the 'vampire wedding' play episode).

This chapter exemplifies Beavis's (2005) argument that gendered identities are actively formed and constituted through instances of gameplay in particular contexts. I argue that they are also performed, negotiated, and to a certain extent, imposed by the dominance of heteronormativity and gender norms in children's peer cultures. The play episodes described also confirm the importance of conceptualising games as double articulations (Silverstone & Haddon, 1996), where gendered meanings of games are signified during interaction with peers, transcending the content of games. The examples of cross-sex play reported in this chapter suggest that familiar playground practices and borderwork (Thorne, 1993), which characterise children's non-digital play, are still very salient and cannot be ignored when discussing games in relation to children's public displays of gaming. Regarding same-sex play, the boys' fascination with horror games, and the girls' sexual Sim exploits, may be seen as transgressive in relation to adult discourses of childhood innocence. The other examples provided in this chapter (such as the karaoke sessions at St Marys) are less transgressive, and suggest more conformity with established gender roles, and confirm childhood anxieties that are both acceptable to and expected by adults.

The boys' performances of masculinity through their appropriation of game-ratings and horror games, and girls' play with sexual relationships in *The Sims 2*, challenge romantic views of childhood innocence. Both involve a form of mimicry that transgresses boundaries of what is considered as appropriate childhood gendering. In addition to borderwork, children also perform hidden transcripts of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997) through gaming. The following chapter attends to how children negotiated the meaning of game rules to perform for peers, and make games 'playable' within added constraints of gaming in after-school settings, where the domestication of games was partly shaped by research design.

Chapter 7: Meta-gaming – Game rules, peer relationships and identity

> (Talking about his first computer) Like all kids we not only fooled around with our toys, we changed them. If you've ever watched a child with a cardboard carton and a box of crayons create a spaceship with cool control panels, or listened to their improvised rules, such as "Red cars can jump all others," then you know that this impulse to make a toy do more is at the heart of innovative childhood play. It is also the essence of creativity.
> –Bill Gates ('A Revolution Begins' – The Road Ahead, 1995)

Introduction

This chapter explores how children configure their gameplay through the social negotiation of game rules. The discussion highlights different kinds of game rules (manipulation, goal or meta-rules) and play (*ludus*, *paidia*), narratives and representations in the process of play. Frasca's (2003a) typology of simulation rules consist of: goal rules (what players must do to win), manipulation rules (what players are able to do within a game) and meta-rules (when games allow players to change existing game rules by modifying or 'modding' source code, thereby changing the rules of the game). Gameplay involves more than playing by the rules established by game designers. As discussed in previous chapters, children appropriate games for social play in gendered ways, and negotiating the meaning of game rules is part of interpreting ludic gendering in games. The relationship between game rules and social play will help develop more nuanced understandings of gameplay for Game Studies.

I will discuss how children negotiate game rules during play to signify interests and identities in relation to particular game titles and peers. In the fieldsites, children's social goals led them to appropriate games and rules to maximise the playability of games for more than one player. Game-player-context interactions, include meta-game social collaborative elements (Young *et al.*, 2012). Salen and Zimmerman (2004) note that the term meta-game has been used to describe the game beyond the game or aspects of gameplay that derive from interplay with the surrounding context rather than from the rules of the game. Gee and Hayes (2011) also use this concept, arguing that the software that sets up gameplay is the game while the social practices that happen inside and/or outside the game is the meta-game and when these two are combined they become the 'Game' spelled with a capital 'G'. I argue that children's meta-gaming encourages them to

negotiate the meaning of game rules in ways that are both situated and gendered. My perspective differs from those of scholars such as Gee (2003) who sees game literacy as involving metalevel thinking. This entails "thinking about the game as a system and a designed space, and not just playing within the game moment by moment" (2003, p. 42). Rather than interpreting meta-gaming in cognitive terms, I explore it in terms of children's peer relationships and how their performances signify interpretations of game rules motivated by their social interests, gendered or otherwise.

As discussed in Chapter 2, all digital games are software with coded rules implicit in their design, regardless of genre – the existence of digital games without rules is not possible. Some rules are more explicit or communicated more strongly to the player who has the choice of whether or not to follow the designed rules. As discussed in the previous chapter, digital games are designed to allow players to perform actions using manipulation and goal rules or change the game by using meta-rules (Frasca, 2003a). I depart from Frasca's (2003a) formulation in that I argue that goal rules and meta-rules are not always coded in the game, but include children's social 'rules' that are part of their meta-gaming. This chapter will demonstrate how children sometimes go against game rules to play meta-games which have to do with developing particular peer relationships and identities (already discussed to some extent in Chapter 6). This resonates with de Certeau's (1984) notion of strategies and tactics, as children perform tactics to establish their goals in relation to the strategies (i.e. designed game rules) of games.

This chapter applies Frasca's (2003a) typology of game rules to children's play, discussing the role of rules in gameplay. It highlights some of the assumptions that typologies of game rules impose. I argue that Game Studies needs a more flexible, less rule-centric approach if it is to study and analyse gameplay and account for social interaction. Many of the children's play episodes are not described by current definitions of games (as discussed in Chapter 2) and this is problematic. This thesis argues for a return to Caillois' (1958, 2001) original conceptualisations of forms of play (*ludus*, *paidia*) and classification of games (*agôn*, *alea*, *mimicry* and *ilinx*) which are more inclusive in that they have the potential to incorporate both digital and non-digital play. As the examples in this chapter illustrate, children's gameplay cannot be separated from the social and power relationships that are deep-rooted in their play, digital or not. The chapter concludes with a discussion of

whether the play episodes discussed and forms of play reported qualify as 'game literacy', and argues for an expansion of games and learning perspectives (Gee, 2003) for understanding the role of gameplay in children's everyday lives.

Game Studies interpretations (Ang, 2006; Frasca, 2007) of Caillois' (1958, 2001) framework often imply that 'casual' and 'hardcore' games may be seen as *paidia* and *ludus* play respectively because of the complexity of rules and the agonistic play encouraged by *ludus*. *Paidia* does not necessarily denote games without rules or fixed goal rules which Frasca (2003a) argues. I argue that *ludus* and *paidia* involve different attitudes towards play: *ludus* is more serious, constrained and pleasure is derived from conforming to rules, whereas *paidia* occupies a position of freedom, but not complete freedom from rules, as it involves the awareness of rules and sometimes pleasure in rule-breaking. The relationship between rules and the kinds of pleasure derived from during gameplay makes *paidia* distinct from *ludus*. Children's gaming, and meta-gaming more specifically, suggests that these distinctions are not clear-cut, and that there is a need for game scholars to consider play on a *ludus-paidia* spectrum (as discussed in Chapter 2). This has implications for how game literacy is conceptualised, since it relates to varieties of play emerging from children's interpretations of the ludic and representational dimensions of games.

Meta-gaming and game literacy

The term meta-gaming has been used in different ways by scholars in various disciplines. Oblinger notes that "game theorists use the term meta-gaming to refer to the conversations about strategy which occur around the actual game play itself as players share what they know, ask questions of more expert players and put their heads together to resolve vexing challenges" (2003, online). This kind of critical engagement with the game can resemble what educational psychologists call meta-cognition, the process of reflecting on learning itself (Squire & Jenkins, 2003). Similarly, Gee (2003) argues that when people learn to play games, they are learning a new literacy, and he provides an inventory of 36 learning principles that people may be engaged in when playing games. One of these include meta-level thinking about games as semiotic domains and the ability to relate these to other domains of knowledge.

Buckingham and Burn (2007) argue that game literacy needs to be able to account for the fact that games are played (i.e. the ludic dimension of games) which makes them distinct forms of media texts, addresses elements that games have in common with other media (i.e. representational conventions), and needs to take account of the social dimensions of gaming. They argue that "this involves understanding how the social activity of play is defined and carried out, and how players are socially located; and this then leads into broader questions about how social relations and identities themselves are constructed" (2007, p. 328). Thus, meta-gaming may be considered as a part of game literacy, or one aspect of interrelated *game literacies*.

In writing about hacker culture, Jordan (2007) describes the term 'meta-game' in terms of freedom, and the ability to play with rules. He argues that commercial games exhibit a corruption of idealised free-play by eliminating the possibility to change game rules, a pursuit common among player-hackers. However, players do not necessarily have to change the meaning of a game by adapting coded rules. This kind of transformation can also happen when players share a particular interpretation of the game rules, unintended by game designers. Dietrich (2002) argues that game designers need to control for meta-gaming in their creations. He asserts that "meta-gaming occurs when players 'play the rules' instead of playing their roles" and that this "involves aspects of the gameplaying experience that usually are not designed as part of the main gameplay session, but that heavily influence the actual gameplay nonetheless" (2002, p. 89). Thus, while educationalists view meta-gaming positively, game designers see it as a side effect of poor design. Both see meta-gaming in terms of learning how to play games.

Meta-gaming is an inevitable process, despite game designers' attempts to control it. While it may involve learning, meta-gaming allows players to interpret games in unintended ways according to their interests, where gameplay becomes a playground for signifying various identities. Regarding the progress rhetoric (Sutton-Smith, 1997) in games and learning scholarship, the normative views of childhood game literacy implies (Walton & Pallitt, 20112), and it's current inability to describe the interrelations between digital and non-digital play, it may be helpful to talk about meta-gaming in relation to 'peer pedagogy' (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2004) as discussed in Chapter 2, which highlights the role of peers in shaping children's informal learning with games.

Angry Birds and agonistic boys

Angry Birds (Rovio 2009, discussed in Chapter 5) is a puzzle game that emphasises scoring and 'levelling up'. Players have to destroy all the pigs (manipulation rule) to clear individual levels (goal rule). Different colour birds have different abilities (manipulation rules): the red bird is the basic or default one, whereas the blue bird can become three smaller birds when the space around it is clicked after launch, the yellow bird can speed up while flying, the black bird explodes like a bomb and the white bird can drop explosive eggs. On starting a level, the number, types and order of birds are pre-determined and if all the pigs are destroyed by the time the last bird is used, the level is cleared and the next one unlocked. Points are scored for pigs destroyed, damage to structures and unused birds. Players can also replay unlocked levels for additional points and stars.

As discussed in Chapter 5, *Angry Birds* is largely played by single players on tablets or smartphones or as a flash game online. A single player is represented in the game interface (the saved score assumes single input by the same player, and the game has no multiplayer option). Handheld devices also lend an individualising quality to the game, suggesting that it is something casual, individual and often played 'on the go' on a mobile device.

During my fieldwork at the holiday club, some of the children reported that they had played *Angry Birds* before. Joey (7-years-old) played this game on his father's iPad, and Ray (8-years-old) played it on the Internet. Twelve-year-old Mark, whose father owns an iPhone (which has *Angry Birds* on it), told the other boys that this game was a bestseller on the iPhone app store in 2010. In spite of the global *Angry Birds* phenomenon, fewer than half of the children at the holiday club had played it before. The game was not as ubiquitous as I had imagined it might be among these middle-class children.

Some of the holiday club boys became frustrated waiting for their turn to play on the PlayStation 3. Their desire for quicker play turns among a larger group of boys motivated the following take-up of *Angry Birds* on the laptop, where quick single-player turns resembled an arcade-machine style of play. When seven-year-olds Allen and Joey played the game together, they would just move on to the next level if they failed (earlier passed levels were saved on the laptop which made this possible). This was generally how the younger boys played *Angry Birds*, not taking the scoring system too seriously. When an

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older boy, Mark (12-years-old), joined them, he regulated the arcade-machine style play of this game based on the boys' scores: if a boy passed a level, he played again and if he failed, it was the next boy's turn. Mark instructed the younger boys not to click on the next level if they failed 'because that's cheating'. Mark's expertise at the game such as telling the boys to aim higher or lower or to wait until the black bird blew itself up without being clicked (which he claimed was 'more effective'), influenced the younger boys to take the game and their play turns very seriously. The game was transformed from being a casual game into a competitive one after Mark's intervention.

Figure 7.1: A screenshot from *Angry Birds* (promotional image courtesy of digitaltrends.com)

The boys' appropriation of this game and their social rules became just as important in this setting. Although Mark did not play much himself, he managed the order of the four boys' play turns, changing players once they had used all their birds (as the levels get harder, players have fewer birds to aim at the pigs). The boys agreed that some of the levels were 'way hard' (nearly impossible to complete), but at the same time, some bragged that they had finished the level before. The boys who said a particular level was easy, but failed it, were put on the spot. This invited the collective response of 'if it is so easy why can't you do it?' Therefore, the boys preferred to play up the idea of levels being 'hard', which also resulted in a bigger success for the boy who managed to clear a 'hard' level.

The structured nature of the boys' *Angry Birds* play episodes and their emphasis on skill configured their play as *ludus*. It was also agonistic in the sense that they wanted to succeed in clearing levels by killing all the pigs. They competed against one another for status, establishing a pecking order among skilled players who could pass the 'hard' levels,

and thus earned longer turns than those who were less skilled. When Ray and Dale played the game together, they showed one another their favourite levels, also showing off their skills in particular levels where they had figured out how to kill all the pigs with a single bird. Thus, some of the boys used *Angry Birds* to signify their roles as expert players.

Game designers are unlikely to have intended for *Angry Birds* to be a multi-player game. Similarly, the children at St. Mary's play with the karaoke games also inverts the ideal player implicit in game design, and involves a different kind of agonistic play. The St. Mary's children signified their role in the choir, and used the game's scoring system to decide on the best singers, rather than identifying expert gamers.

Singing for status at St Mary's

While *Disney Sing It: Party Hits* allowed pairs of children to sing together (duet) or compete, *Disney Sing It* (the first game in the series) could only be played by a single player on the laptop because of the single pc microphone. The children seemed to prefer this version of the game because it had older songs that they were all familiar with. The children often sat around the laptop and sang along with the child whose turn it was to sing a song of their choice. When their turn ended, they (or another member of the group) typed in their name which was followed by a ranked score list of singers. Although the children did not make comments about poor singers in the group, they were invested in using the game to judge who the best singers were, as the majority of these karaoke game players were members of the school choir. The children cheered for one another irrespective of the number of stars they achieved, but made a big 'fuss' for Joe (the special needs boy in the Arts and Crafts class) and for children who achieved three stars or more. Players receive written feedback for the number of stars they achieve (e.g. two stars is coupled with 'Good job!') which resembles teacher feedback on children's schoolwork.

This extract (Transcript 7) provides a summary of a typical karaoke gaming session among the choir members and Joe at St Mary's. Seven of the choir girls (Jessica, Casey, Yu, Lolly, Nana, Fran and Babalwa) and one of the choir boys (Lee) participated in this particular gaming session:

> **Joe** sings 'Breaking Free' from *High School Musical*.
> **Lee** cheers for him before he starts 'You go **Joe**!"

Casey: "Wow – one!" (**Joe** achieved only one star, but other children join in and make cheering sounds for him)
Jessica types in **Joe's** name.
Casey: "I'm going to sing an awesome song now." (**Casey** selects "Fabulous" by Ashley Tisdale)
Joe: "Yay!"
(All the kids sing along with **Casey, Joe** dances in his desk)
Casey gets two stars, types in her name and then **Nana** sings "Start of something new" and scores two stars with "Good job" on the screen.
Casey: "You got the same as me **Nana**!"
Jessica types in **Nana's** name.
Yu sings the same song and gets three stars.
Lee: Wow **Yu!** Well done **Yu!** (The others cheer for her "whooo- hooo!")
(Transcript 7: Children cheer and score, Disney Sing It, St Mary's, 12 November 2010)

During songs, *paidia* play (singing along, dancing) dominated for all except the singer who paid close attention to the words on the screen, singing notes for the right amount of time. *Paidia* play can be identified through its improvisational and unregulated quality, whereas *ludus* is structured and rule-governed (see Chapter 2). A *ludus* attitude transforms the activity of singing into singing competitively, as the singers need to receive a high score to be considered as a good singer. As soon as the song ended, the children entered an agonistic mode where they checked where their names were positioned on the score list. Casey and Nana were both loud, competitive girls and they were surprised that Yu (who is a very quiet girl) achieved a higher score than them.

Later, Casey explained to me that she achieved 'full rock star' when playing the game at her cousin's house within hearing of her peers:

Casey: If you get full stars it will say your name permanently with full rock star and if you get it three times in a row then they like bring you in to full rock star shows.
Nicola: How do you know?
Casey: My cousin has it.
Lee: Did she make it?
Casey: I made it. Full rock star.
(Transcript 8: Casey the full rock star, Disney Sing It, St Mary's, 12 November 2010)

Casey bragged about her expertise to convince the other children that she was a better singer than Yu. Like the boys at the holiday club who liked displaying their skills at *Angry Birds*, Casey displayed her knowledge about *Disney Sing It* as a way to prove to her peers

that she achieved the status of 'full rock star', and was therefore the best singer in the group. By contrast, the boys' play with the racing games signified different kinds of identities, such as being a car expert or skilled racing games player.

Meta-gaming a racing game: Mechanics, maniacs and masters

This section explores how boys engaged with game rules in the racing game *Burnout Paradise* (EA 2007). The episodes discussed show the multitude of ways in which boys in the two fieldsites played this racing game, not always drawing on the complex rules and missions created by its game designers. This game is set in the fictional Paradise City which functions as an open world and features a variety of races, stunts and challenges. Records are kept on the player's in-game 'driver's license', such as the fastest time and biggest crash for every street in the game. One of the main aims is to score points through executing burnouts – this constitutes the game's goal rules. Additionally, cars cannot be 'tuned' or customised apart from colour changes to their paint jobs, although different models can be chosen on starting the game or found when visiting the junkyard. Previous games in the series had a crash mode which offered players scenarios in which to cause the biggest crashes. With this game, there are different types of crashes: if the car retains its wheels and the player is able to drive out of the crash and continue, it is called a 'driveaway', but if wheels are lost and the car undergoes too much impact it results in a 'wrecked' state and the player has to wait for the car to be reset. These actions would be regarded as part of the game's manipulation rules. In this section, I will discuss how boys use rules and representations in service of personal interest, creating spectacles or sharing their mastery of the game with peers. The following examples illustrate how different kinds of meta-gaming took place with the same game.

Danny the 'car expert': Burnout Paradise as a car collecting game

Nine-year-old Danny showed me his favourite flash game in the St. Mary's computer lab. His computer teacher had put a folder with assorted flash games on the computers for the children to play once they completed their lessons. Danny's favourite was *Create-a-ride* which allowed him to customise a car according to car height, wheels, wheel size, body kits, signals and headlights, window tints and other features by clicking through various customization options. In this game, the aim (as the title suggests), is to 'create a ride'. Danny was able to name all the car shapes (despite the absence of their names in the game

interface), and told me which car was a Ford, Volkswagen, Chrysler, Honda and so forth because 'I know so much cars ma'am, my mommy says I'm addicted to cars'. Out of school, Danny enjoyed watching the MTV show *Pimp my Ride* and read *Top Gear* magazine. His appreciation of the aesthetic appeal of cars and his broader personal interest in them largely motivated his gameplay with the racing games on offer at the games sessions. For Danny, *Burnout Paradise* formed part of his cross-media consumption, whereby he performed his identity as a car expert in relation to a range of media. His gaming may also be considered as crossing semiotic domains (Gee, 2003) because his television and magazine consumption shaped his interests when playing *Burnout Paradise*.

In Jennifer's classroom with the other Arts and Crafts children, Danny preferred to play the racing games. He was a year younger than most of the other children and he used this game to perform his identity as a 'car expert'. During one of the sessions, Danny played *Burnout Paradise* and commented that the car was too slow. He navigated his way towards the blue icon of the junkyard in Sunset Valley at the bottom right of the screen, explaining that 'when you get to the junkyard you can get a completely fast car'. After Danny achieved a burnout, the radio announcer explained, 'If you can earn enough boosts during a burnout, you can start another straight away, that's a burnout chain'. Danny did not comment on this, nor try it out. He did not really understand that burnouts were an achievement, stating that the game is called *Burnout Paradise* because 'you burn out your tyres'. He drove recklessly and crashed into cars on his way to the junkyard, saying 'what a damage!' Danny struggled to find the entrance to the junkyard and he became frustrated driving around the location of the icon saying 'where is it? It's not here'. He found it difficult to manoeuvre his car around intricate spaces using the PlayStation 3 controller. Danny's main aim was getting to a junkyard to 'pimp' his car. Unfortunately, the game session ended before Danny found the junkyard. Danny was more preoccupied with the manipulation rules of the game that allowed him to change cars than the goal rules. For Danny, the meta-game is about collecting cars and performing his identity as a car expert. As discussed in Chapter 5, Danny was a marginal player who only played the racing games. Danny used *Burnout Paradise* as a gambit for a particular kind of status and masculinity among his peers. This gambit which differed from the choir boys' displays of being 'good singers'. Danny's meta-gaming involved transforming *Burnout Paradise* into a collecting game. Collecting cars in *Burnout Paradise* may be considered a different

variety of *ludus* play because it involves conforming to rules. Danny had strict rules for collecting cars, as they had to be flashy, fitting the rules of aesthetics that he had learnt about cars from other media. Collecting was therefore not spontaneous (a strong feature of *paidia* play), but well-motivated by criteria. Navigating the map for junkyards became like an easter egg hunt, where the reward was finding a 'nicer' and 'faster' car. This kind of gaming differed from the kind of spectacle around car crashes and races that I had observed among other boys playing this game.

At a subsequent gaming session, Danny and Aaron took turns playing *Burnout Paradise*. Aaron said, 'I'm not doing a race, I'm just driving 'cause it's very fun'. Danny replied that 'you have to actually race because you need to get money' and that 'you need to work to get money, to get a new car'. He explained to Aaron that 'you can't customise, you need to get so much money that you can actually afford to customise' and 'you have to listen to the speaker' (referring to the car radio announcer in the game who announces the locations and details of races and other challenges). Danny mentioned the names of other games where players can customise their cars such as *Grand Theft Auto* and *Need for Speed: Underground* which he reported playing at his cousin's house but added that 'you must modify your cars at the beginning of the game, then you can also change what you modified, like my cousin, my cousin lets me modify any kind of car and then he, he's a nice cousin because he saves my cars for me, then when I play I have a nice car'.

Danny's gameplay suggests a limited engagement with the goal rules on offer in *Burnout Paradise* which involve achieving burnouts, smashing gates and billboards and performing stunts. He does not do races or challenges to win, but to get money so that he can play the part of the game which interests him the most: 'pimping' his car or achieving a 'nice car'. His preoccupation with the game's manipulation rules can be seen as engendering a different kind of play to that proposed by the goal rules of the game. Despite being a racing game, Danny does not play to win races, collect 'burnouts' and other reward points. He transforms the game into a collecting game where he can discover and play with 'nice cars'. At one of the gaming sessions, somebody forgot to save the game after playing and Danny's cars were not saved. At the next session he was frustrated that he could not select one of the cars that he found the previous time. This frustration confirmed his interest in building a collection of playable cars. Danny's display of knowledge about where the 'nice

cars' would be found allowed him to intrude on the other children's play turns. He would offer to find them 'nicer' or 'faster' cars and take up the controller. While the other children thought they were getting a more powerful or better-looking car, Danny was building up his collection. The next example demonstrates a very different kind of meta-game among two seven-year-old boys at the holiday club.

'Crash and drive like a maniac': Meta-gaming for destructive pleasure

Allen and Joey were 7-years-old when they first played *Burnout Paradise* together. They admired the older boys' ability to play this game, and decided to try it themselves. To manage turn-taking at the holiday club, I instituted a rule that when a pair of children played a single player game together, they had to switch turns upon 'dying', or in the case of *Burnout Paradise*, changing turns once a player had 'wrecked' the car. This resulted in an arcade-style adaptation of the gaming rules in this setting, much like the *Angry Birds* example discussed earlier where children organised short individual turns to enable gameplay in a large group.

Joey did not know how to start the game and Allen told him to press the 'X' button. Joey said, 'I wish I can read'. Despite being constrained by not being able to read all the verbal text in the game, Allen and Joey were still able to play the game to a certain degree, playing their own version of *Burnout Paradise* and developing a unique meta-game. This section discusses the kinds of rules and play that these boys engaged in before ten-year-old Dirk taught them about burnouts, thereby shifting their play closer to the preferred goal rules of the game. This provided a pivotal moment of informal learning for Allen and Joey.

At first, Allen and Joey saw crashing as part of the pleasure and outcome of the game. This raised confusion around playing turns where the aim was to stay alive or not 'wreck' the car in order to have a reasonably timed playing turn:

> **Joey:** You got it! Crash! Crash!
> **Allen:** I don't want to crash.
> **Joey:** Well then I can't have a turn...
> **Allen:** The point is don't crash, 'cause then you crash (...)
> **Joey:** Ja but, but that means I don't get to have a turn.
> *(Transcript 9: 'I don't want to crash', Allen and Joey, Burnout Paradise, Holiday club, 10 January 2011)*

The boys worked out the controls together, as well as switching turns after wreckages. They could not read the 'Wrecked!' feedback, as they did not repeat this word as the older boys I observed often did when playing this game, saying 'I'm wrecked' or 'you got wrecked'. Joey and Allen's initial preoccupation with crashing and 'wrecking' their cars can be considered as *paidia* play, where the car crash spectacle is a form of pleasure in itself. Caillois argues that *paidia* play can "become a taste for destruction and breaking things", a "primitive joy in destruction and upset" and that "for the child it is a question of expressing himself, of feeling he is the cause, of forcing others to pay attention to him" (2001, p. 28). This may be seen by Joey's exclamation of 'I broke the car!' It is not only the destructive act, but its slow-motion aftermath played out on the screen that they find spectacular and theatrical.

The boys made comments such as 'we want to kill our driver' and 'we want to see it (the car) get destroyed'. I asked them about this pleasurable destruction:

> **Nicola:** Do you think dying is fun?
> **Joey:** Yes! I like crashing cars.
> **Nicola:** Is it? It's like, you know...
> **Joey:** Well, you're supposed to crash into cars and your person doesn't want your car to crash. (to **Allen**) You're a better driver than me...you have long turns.
> **Allen and Joey:** Ooooooh! (**Allen** crashes)
> **Joey:** Man! That had to be scary!
> *(Transcript 10: Allen and Joey talk about crashing cars, Burnout Paradise, Holiday club, 10 January 2011)*

Since the boys compared their crashes, their play had an agonistic quality where they competed by showing off the most spectacular crash possible. For example, Allen said, 'I tipped that whole truck over' and Joey compared his crash, 'I crashed him right into the wall'. In this way, the boys evaluated and compared their crashes throughout their play session.

Allen and Joey continued to play like this. They became loud and excited when they crashed, followed by comments such as, 'that must've been awful!' After Allen crashed he told Joey, 'That guy was also driving like a maniac – did you see?' Allen started driving into lamp posts on purpose and Joey told him to 'go over the yellow line'. Joey warned Allen, 'Do not crash, do not crash, if you crash you're dead meat!' Although he enjoyed crashing when it was his turn, he did not want Allen to do so because he was the 'better'

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driver. Joey told Allen to drive nicely, but he had clearly decided that driving neatly was not fun, instead announcing that he was the 'new maniac in town'. This idea came from the DJ and Joey picked up on it, exclaiming, 'I'm a maniac – the guy on the news says there's a maniac in town!'

In sum, Allen and Joey's play was improvisatory because they did not understand the preferred goal rules of the game which involved an economy of burnouts and scoring points. Their play was not completely without rules, since crashing signified changing turns. However, they derived pleasure from freedom (*paidia*) rather than conformity to rules (*ludus*), such as the rules of the road. As a whole, they played the game by drawing on its manipulation rules, instead of playing according to the goal rules to score points. For them, the outcome was not a high score, but the theatrical pleasure of crashing and performing a 'maniac' role. This meta-game involved mimicry, as they enjoyed mimicking 'maniac' drivers who disobey the rules of the road and cause destruction.

Joey and Allen noticed the burnouts and boosts, but gave these visual signs their own names such as 'fire' and 'hyper-speed':

> (**Joey's** turn)
> **Joey:** Raaaaaaar! (scraping against a lamp post and knocking it to the ground.)
> **Allen:** No – (...) button and then fire will come out the back. (**Joey** crashes)
> (**Allen's** turn)
> **Joey:** Drive drive drive drive! (...) Come on – you must go hyper-speed! (but **Allen** is driving slower and neater)
> *(Transcript 11: Fire and hyper-speed, Allen and Joey, Burnout Paradise, Holiday club, 10 January 2011)*

One may argue that Allen and Joey's initial meta-game may be considered as an example of playing at playing the game, rather than playing the game according to its intended rules. Only with ten-year-old Dirk's help do they learn about the game's scoring system, and thereby, how to play the game according to its intended rules. This causes a shift in their gameplay from *paidia* and meta-game to *ludus*.

Master Dirk teaches the maniacs to score

Dirk reported playing *Burnout Paradise* with his mother at home, and told me, Allen and Joey how many of the 400 gates they had managed to smash in the game collectively. He was an expert player of this racing game. He noticed that Allen and Joey were struggling

with the controller and commented that they needed a wheel (an alternative steering wheel controller for the PlayStation 3). He watched Allen and Joey play and shared his knowledge about the game. Dirk said, 'You must win a race, then your driver's licence gets upgraded'. Dirk's mention of the licence, and thereby associated law-abiding behaviour sparked a comment by Allen, 'When I'm an adult, I'm going to be in jail ten times. When I'm an adult, I'm gonna be like this'. Joey asked, 'And crash into a car? Other people's cars?' Allen replied, 'I like this game because there are no police'. He said, 'It's fun because there are no... (Joey says 'rules') police' and the other boys watching them replied together, 'And there's no rules.' While the boys were drawing on their knowledge regarding the social 'laws' of driving in the real world, Dirk's suggestion showed his awareness of how the driver's licence functions in the game. Allen and Joey's *paidia* play depended on going against 'the rules of the road' that they had learnt about driving in reality. The game rules which Dirk introduces the boys to in the next example, transform their *paidia* play and mimicry (being a maniac) into *ludus* play. Their goals shift to scoring according to the game rules created by game designers. This progression in gameplay resonates with Caillois' theory of *paidia* and *ludus* being on a continuum and that *paidia* can be disciplined by *ludus*.

Dirk showed Allen and Joey how to hold in the 'X' button when boosting. His comments functioned as a form of positive feedback for Joey when he said, 'Yes! You performed a burnout!' Dirk explained that 'when you burnout you use all your boosts at one time without crashing'. Joey exclaimed, 'cool!' He became very interested in not crashing his car and tried to perform burnouts instead. Joey repeated what he had learnt to Allen:

> **Joey:** You must not crash...you must hold in 'X' till all your boost is gone... but now you can't. (because he used some boost earlier) It must be all the way.
> **Dirk:** See, the thing is about this car, it doesn't let you boost till it's all the way, other cars let you boost whenever.
> **Joey:** How do you choose another car?
> **Dirk:** You have to go to the junkyard.
> *(Transcript 12: Boosting, Allen, Joey and Dirk, Burnout Paradise, Holiday club, 10 January 2011)*

Dirk proceeded to find the boys another car, but their play turn ended before they got a chance to try it out. Dirk not only introduced them to the economy and vocabulary of the game (burnouts and boosts) but also showed them how to read the game's interface (see Figure 7.1.), measure when the boost bar was full or empty, and how to look for the

junkyard icon on the map. In sum, he taught them about the structure of the game, and engaged them in its designed rules. This also caused their desired outcome to change from crashing and being a 'maniac' to performing driving skills that relied on 'boosts' and 'burnouts'. This involved a shift in focus from manipulation to goal rules which changed their meta-gaming to agonistic play, highlighting the scoring system of the game. Dirk thus engaged Allen and Joey in a form of disciplined pleasure that required them to pay close attention to game rules.

Figure 7.2: In *Burnout Paradise*, the boost bar is on the bottom left corner of the screen and the map is on the right

Boys, girls and the 'beautiful game'

The following play episodes illustrate how children in both settings played the football game *FIFA 2010 South Africa*, and particularly how they negotiated the meaning of game rules with peers. Despite the fact that the Football World Cup had just taken place in SA, this game was not very popular among the children at the holiday club or at St Mary's. The two play sessions reported on in this section are not typical, in that they do not involve any of the games popular in both settings (discussed in Chapter 4). Nonetheless, they are worth discussion as interesting examples of rule negotiation with peers. This sports game was one of the most challenging for the children to play because it relied on their knowledge of football and their ability to press (and remember) different combinations of buttons for different actions. Similar to Allen and Joey's meta-gaming, this kind of play took place because the children did not fully understand the game rules or got bored with them.

Foul Play: Brazil versus Brazil at the holiday club

At the holiday club, Chris (9-years-old) and Mark (12-years-old) decided to play *FIFA 2010 South Africa* on the PlayStation 3. Chris announced, 'I want to see South Africa be beaten by other countries again'. They looked for Brazil among the menu of playable countries and sang along to the 'Waving Flag' song playing in the game as they navigated the different countries. Mark said, 'Brazil is the best because they won the World Cup like five times'. Despite Chris's unpatriotic intentions of replaying South Africa's losses, they both decided to select Brazil, and thus played Brazil versus Brazil. Neither were willing to play the role of the losing team.

While playing, they commented about soccer rules and disagreed with the commentator and feedback in the game:

> **Chris:** A yellow card? What did I do?
> **Mark:** You tackled another one of my players.
> (a bit later...)
> **Chris:** What was that for?
> **Mark:** I was offside and they didn't call him. Beautiful goal.
> *(Transcript 13: Yellow cards and offside, Chris and Mark, FIFA 2010 South Africa, Holiday club, 13 December 2010)*

When Brazil beat Brazil, the boys were confused as to whose Brazil won. Chris said, "That was a brilliant game hey! Brazil won – whooo hooo!" The competition was not really between the two boys and their teams, it was more about making sure Brazil was the winning team of the World Cup. The boys were not really competing for goals (i.e. agonistic play), but tried to recreate Brazil's triumph, using the soccer field as a stage. While the boys understood what a 'yellow card' was and what being 'offside' meant, their play was still agonistic in that their meta-game involved a winning player and scoring. They both wanted to represent the same team in the game and this stripped the match of having a clear winner and a loser. Their use of mimicry within this agonistic game therefore undermined competition.

Despite their love for Brazil, Mark suggested that 'there should be an injury'. He proposed a different kind of soccer: 'Let's not play about goals, let's make ... you can score as much as you want, we must see who gets the most cards and injuries'. The boys laughed, but decided to play this version of soccer anyway, trying to trip one another's players and

monitoring their yellow cards. Mark decided that 'the more red cards, the better' and they purposefully kicked the ball off the field. Mark said, 'I want a yellow card ... I don't want (the ball) ... come on other team – take it!' and 'I hurt you – come on red card!' Chris was excited when he kicked the ball off the field and exclaimed, 'Yes! I kicked it out!' At the end of the match they compared their yellow and red cards and injuries but could not decide on a winner, because they could not decide whether injuries or red or yellow cards were worth more 'points'. Their new scoring system and own *ludus* rules configured their play as against the established rules of soccer or the preferred rules of the game, but *ludus* nontheless. Their meta-game involved breaking the rules for pleasure. The following episode highlights a different kind of pleasure and meta-gaming for some of the girls at St Mary's.

Miss Manual: Gameplay as learning how to play the game

Fran, Casey and Amitah played *FIFA 2010 South Africa* during one of the gaming sessions at St Mary's. These three girls claimed that they had all played this game at the homes of family and friends. Their conversations suggested a limited understanding of football, but they struggled to execute the manipulation rules of the game. When picking a country to represent in the game, the girls discuss their favoured teams:

> **Fran:** I play whatever my cousin plays.
> **Casey:** No, I play England or America.
> **Amitah:** I play Portugal or Spain.
> *(Transcript 14: Fran, Casey and Amitah discuss soccer teams, FIFA 2010 South Africa, St Mary's, 15 September 2010)*

A little while into the game, the girls asked my male research assistant (Muya Koloko) for assistance, but he did not hear them, so they resorted to reading from the instruction booklet:

> **Amitah:** Sir, I don't know what I'm doing.
> **Fran:** Just kick **Amitah**. (Chanting **'Amitah!'**, raises her fists and claps) **Amitah** go yay! Go go go! Run run run!
> (a little while later)
> **Amitah:** I don't know how.
> **Casey:** I will help you. Simple attacking... (reads from the instruction booklet)
> **Amitah:** L1 and circle...(repeating **Casey's** instructions for tackle, but it doesn't work) How do you take the ball? Looks at the booklet again. Defending! (finding 'the answer')
> *(Transcript 15: FIFA instructions, Amitah, Fran and Casey, FIFA 2010 South Africa, St Mary's, 15 September 2010)*

The girls use of the game's instruction manual resembled a schooled engagement, where they navigated a written text for 'correct answers'. Fran cheered for Amitah as not to discourage her, but she lost confidence and Casey claimed the controller. Casey was better at moving the players and dribbling the ball in the right direction. Fran and Amitah read the booklet and discussed the configuration of buttons for particular actions while Casey played. She lost and the girls evaluate the scoreboard:

> **Casey:** Time's up – they won. You see, your players get upset now.
> **Amitah:** Three nil – how can we lose so bad?
> **Casey:** At least we got... we got more than them, we got eleven tackles.
> **Fran:** They didn't need to tackle.
> **Casey:** Injuries... no injuries.
> **Fran:** They didn't need to tackle Casey. We got more fouls and yellow cards than them.
> *(Transcript 16: Losing the beautiful game, Amitah, Fran and Casey, FIFA 2010 South Africa, St Mary's, 15 September 2010)*

The girls' comments suggest that they had a limited understanding of football and that Fran was most 'in tune' with the discourse of football in her explanations for why Casey's team lost. Their play was agonistic and they wanted to win by executing the correct actions. However, after they had each had a few play turns, they started to compete against one another:

> **Fran:** Go – **Casey** run with the ball man!
> **Casey:** Hey, I'm better than you.
> **Fran:** Go Miss Manual! Must I call you Miss Manual from now on? Go! Run! I'm not as bad as my cousin is – she's worse, I'm telling you now. Run!
> **Casey:** I'm running doofus!
> **Frank:** Well run faster! Go **Casey**! Go **Casey**!
> **Casey:** Wait, I'm doing my best – read the book to me.
> *(Transcript 17: Go Miss Manual! Amitah, Fran and Casey, FIFA 2010 South Africa, St Mary's, 15 September 2010)*

The girls saw the instruction manual as an essential part of their gameplay: one girl played, while the others read the instructions to her. Casey's claim to be a better player than Fran resulted in Fran insulting Casey by calling her 'Miss Manual' (implying that if she was such a good player, she knew the manual and did not need Fran to read the button combinations to her). When it was Fran's turn to play and Casey's turn to read, Casey mimicked an imagined robot voice and the girls laughed. While she turned Fran's insult into a joke, this also suggests that the girls were poking fun at the highly constrained

nature of the game rules. The girls' meta-game involved using the manual to work out the button combinations for defending, changing players and so forth. For these girls, their gameplay was about learning how to play the game and their 'teaching' of one another was mediated by the instruction manual. Despite their frustration and calling one another names, the girls became quite invested in working out the controls for this game. This play episode was a once-off occasion, as the girls did not play this game again and preferred to play the karaoke games in a repetitive way, as described in the previous chapter. The following example also involves a meta-game related to reading.

Love story: Playing with voice acting in Nintendo's Brain Age

Brain Age was inspired by the theories of neuroscientist, Dr. Kawashima, and Nintendo claims that their brain training games provide a "collection of simple daily exercises that help stimulate the brain and keep it young" (Nintendo online, 2010). This game came preinstalled on Annabelle's Nintendo DSi XL hand-held console along with *Brain Age Express: Math*. The girls at the holiday club preferred the *Arts and Letters* game which allowed them to read and record themselves reading. To read, the player has to hold the console like a book (see Figure 7.3) which then displays the sentences to be read on the left and a picture on the right. When I first met Annabelle (9-years-old), she boasted that she was in the top reading group in her class, performing her identity as a good and clever schoolgirl. The following play episode *(Holiday Club, Nintendo Brain Age Express: Arts and Letters, 30 June 2011)* of how a group of girls played *Brain Age* on Annabelle's Nintendo DS offers a contrast to that of the other girls' *Sims 2* gameplay discussed in the previous chapter.

Collette (11-years-old) played Annabelle's game, while Annabelle, Maggie (10-years-old), Kathy (10-years-old), Mark (12-years-old) and I watched her play. For these holiday club girls, this 'reading game' was about performing the role of a good reader and thereby, a good schoolgirl. This play episode shows how they went against the ideal player who obeys Dr. Kawashima's (figured in the game as an adult teacher-commentator) game rules and thereby, *ludus* play, to develop their own meta-game.

Collette selected the reading mini-game 'Lovestory' and theme 'Father refuses to give his approval'. She listened to herself reading, played through the DS as a theme recording:

Collette: [recording] Not a chance sunshine! You're not good enough for my daughter!
(she clicks 'next')
[commenting] 'That's so embarrassing.
(The theme of the next voice clip is 'The woman to her now ex-boyfriend')
[recording] Can't you take a hint? It's over between us.
(**Collette** and the girls sitting around her giggle. **Dr. Kawashima's** face appears with a speech bubble)
Dr. Kawashima: 'Why not get your friends and family to try theme training too?')
Kathy (to Collette): Do another one.
(**Collette** clicks on 'more')
Dr. Kawashima: I'm sure your Theme Album would look lovely with lots of entries. Keep up the good work! I hope to see you again soon.
(Transcript 18: Reading 'Love Story' part 1, Collette, Annabelle, Maggie, Kathy, Mark, Nintendo Brain Age Express: Arts and Letters, Holiday Club, 30 June 2011)

The positive feedback coupled with encouraging reading resembles educational software rather than most commercial games. Collette decided to read 'Love Story' again. The other children kept quiet while she read:

Collette: [reading] You've treated your girlfriend to dinner at a nice restaurant to celebrate your six-month anniversary' (she clicks 'next')
After dinner, as you gaze upon her heavenly face, a wave of emotion runs over you. A single tear runs down your cheek as you say, 'I want to see this face, every day, for the rest of my life'.
(**Collette** clicks 'record', repeats the sentence and then listens to it play.)
[reading] You still can't believe your precious daughter is old enough to be dating. Before you know it, she's even brought a young man home to meet (new page) you. Local gossip tells you he's a no-good, smooth talking ladies' man. As you go to shake his hand, he blurts out, 'I'd like to marry your daughter'.
[reading] you reply, (next page) 'Not a chance sunshine. You're not good enough for my daughter!'
(**Collette** selects 'start recording' and repeats the last sentence and adds 'ow!', with an 'in your face' attitude. She reads the next page.)
[reading] Sadly it turned out that your father's doubts were justified, and now you've broken up with your boyfriend of six months. (new page)
It hasn't exactly been a clear… clean
(**Collette** reads 'clear' and **Annabelle** corrects her)
break. Hardly a day goes by without a phone call or text from him. (new page)
And then out of the blue, you run into him when you're out in town. (new page)
He begs you to take him back, but you stay strong and say, (new page)
'Can't you take a hint? It's over between us!'
(Transcript 19: Reading 'Love Story' part 2, Collette, Annabelle, Maggie, Kathy, Mark, Nintendo Brain Age Express: Arts and Letters, Holiday Club, 30 June 2011)

Collette clicked on 'record', but instead of repeating the sentence she made up her own Simlish-sounding language (i.e. garble spoken by Sim characters in *The Sims 2*). The children giggled while listening to her recording. Annabelle remarked, 'That's funny' and Maggie said, 'It's so weird'. Collette continued and announced, 'I want to do it again, but all like weird things'. Mark encouraged her and told her to 'be silly the whole time...sound stupid the whole time'. Collette re-read the recording parts in funny voices and the children giggled when she played them back. She skipped the pages without recording options.

While the reading aloud interactions may be regarded as *ludus*, because Collette is playing the game according to the preferred rules of the game to show off her reading skills, the funny voice acting may be considered as *paidia* because of its improvisatory nature. This episode suggests that Collette became bored of playing by the rules and performing the role of the 'good reader'. She may therefore have tried making a new game of it. The love story narrative representing the father as an authority who is always right coupled with Dr. Kawashima's didacticism suggests that the game prioritises adult values. Collette may also be resisting the preferred voice acting rules to assert her own value of play being 'silly' rather than progressive and strict. Additionally, the girls may have interpreted the romantic narrative told from an adult point of view which places them in the role of the 'precious daughter' and the 'father' as boring. Either way, the meta-game which develops allows the girls to resist the 'good schoolgirl' and 'precious daughter' identities to laugh with friends through voices that make fun of adult authority.
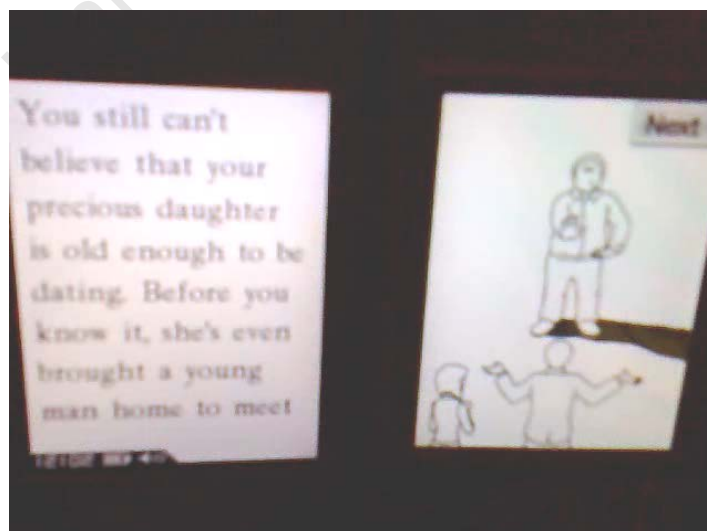

Figure 7.3: A 'page' from Love Story in *Brain Age Express: Arts and Letters*

Conclusion

This chapter responds to challenges identified within previous research and extends existing work, both in Game Studies and in work such as Gee (2003) which frames games as 'involving meta-level thinking' and good learning principles. I invoke a reworking of Frasca's typology and of Caillois' framework to offer a novel theoretical perspective to investigate examples of children's meta-gaming i.e. how children configure their gameplay through the social negotiation of game rules. Play episodes identified and discussed in this chapter highlight the individual and relational identity work performed by the children in the fieldsites. Such examples, as in previous chapters, highlight how participation in the gaming activities of the holiday and after-school clubs is a social activity and part of peer pedagogy, shaped by the context and relationships beyond the individual children's 'in-game' gameplay.

The children negotiated their meta-gameplay (or 'appropriation' of games) in a process that allowed them to mix and combine different attitudes towards play i.e. *ludus* and *paidia*, related to context and relationships. I conceptualise these gameplay attitudes and orientations as poles on a continuum. This chapter shows how the children in this study often engaged in *paidia* play and enjoyed mastering the manipulation rules of games or established their own goal rules. By contrast, many of them neglected *ludus* play or the goal-directed, rule-governed dimensions of the games they played. The distinction between *ludus* and *paidia* and the classification of games provided by Caillois (1958, 2001) can thus help scholars to attend to more open-ended play such as meta-gaming.

The play episodes discussed also highlight peculiar turns in the children's gameplay which suggest departures from the kinds of play and pleasures suggested by the goal rules of games. Rather than playing in accordance with the preferred rules of the game, the examples discussed demonstrate how children can use game rules to orchestrate their own social scripts in service of performing peer relationships and identities. Thus, the children's play suggests development of a different kind where peer relationships and gender and other identities are foregrounded during gameplay. Additionally, my regulation of the fieldsites as gaming spaces partly shaped the kind of play that ensued: meta-gaming may have emerged in response to the domestication of games in these settings where turn-taking and time constraints structured the children's play.

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Future research is required to consider the relationship between a knowledge or lack thereof of the rules of a game (manipulation, goal and meta rules) and children's choices involved in meta-gaming, whether *ludus* or *paidia*. For example, in the case of the 'maniac drivers', one wonders how much of their *paidia* play was a conscious choice to ignore or undermine the game designers' staging, and how much might be attributed to their ignorance of the larger narrative and rules of the game, which had a stronger shaping role for the older players. The notion of conscious choice during gameplay requires further study. Why do players deliberately or intentionally make a decision to 'break the rules' or script of a game for the play to be beyond/against the designers' intentions? Does this happen anyway, even if out of ignorance of the 'original intent' of the game? In relation to the example of Danny, one wonders whether he is playing *Burnout Paradise* in the same way that he plays *Need For Speed* because he does not yet understand that there is another way that he might play *Burnout Paradise*. Does it matter if Danny might not understand that the two game worlds are set up for different ends? These questions have a bearing on notions of 'gaming literacies' and in terms of what 'meta-gaming' might mean in terms of opening up critical encounters with gaming media for children and young people, both in school contexts where 'critical media literacies' and the like are explicit goals, and also beyond the school.

Burn (2009) argues that game literacy demands consideration of how children's interpretation of digital games involves an understanding of how the semiotic resources (which includes game rules) provided by media texts are understood, employed in the service of identity and social action, and reshaped into new texts by players. This chapter provides examples of how children negotiate game rules and representations to develop their peer relationships and identities through meta-gaming. Children's meta-gaming may qualify as game literacy, as well as peer pedagogy (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2004) and domestication (Silverstone, 1994).

I would question whether or not the forms of play reported in this chapter all qualify as 'literacy'. Theories of literacy and play are uneasy bedfellows, although discussions of multiliteracies and play resonate within what Sutton-Smith terms a 'rhetoric of progress' (1997, p. 11). As discussed in previous chapters, Sutton-Smith (1997) argues that this is

the dominant rhetoric used by adults when discussing children's games and tends to obscure other possible explanations of their activities, such as domestication. Walton and Pallitt (2012) argue that his research highlights other dimensions of play which are difficult to reconcile with rhetorics of progress – notably the frivolity of play, its obsessiveness and repetitiveness, its cruelties and compulsory nature and its role in group hierarchisation.

Future research needs to consider the relationship between game literacy, domestication, peer relationships and pedagogy. Game researchers need to consider the extent to which the play they observe is shaped by the research setting (i.e. domestication of games in fieldsites as gaming spaces), presence of peers or a combination of these factors, and in relation to what dynamics can one attribute 'literacy' or 'learning'. One may argue that domestication involves learning (I prefer this term as it is broader than 'literacy' and carries less ideological baggage), as children are learning how to play games with peers in particular spaces which differ from gaming with siblings or parents at home.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

It is really a puzzle that drives one to take one's work so devilishly seriously…
—*Albert Einstein (to Joseph Scharl, December 27, 1949)*

Children interpret ludic gendering and appropriate digital games in gendered ways depending on the play context and peer relations involved. While power and identity rhetorics of play (Sutton-Smith 1997) offer an alternative perspective for understanding the meaning of games in children's everyday lives, it is difficult to separate such rhetorics from other ways of understanding games discourses of progress or frivolity. As discussed in Chapter 7, some of the play episodes reported on in this study may suggest 'learning', such as those where children learnt how to play a particular game from an older peer or instruction manual. Some meta-games are comparatively frivolous, such as the voice acting. It could be argued that children are learning to amuse their peers or to send up authority through 'remix' strategies, and thus these kinds of learning may be considered as part of peer pedagogy (discussed in Chapter 2). Children's gameplay takes place along a *ludus-paidia* spectrum which includes diverse forms of gameplay. As discussed in Chapter 6, their gaming is coherent with playground practices, suggesting that the domestication of games in after-school settings involves drawing on these practices while appropriating digital games for peer play. The examples of borderwork with digital games discussed in Chapter 6 confirm this finding. Opportunities for borderwork with digital games also depends on ludic gendering, since children in both fieldsites selected less-strongly-gendered games for cross-sex play.

This chapter discusses the benefits and challenges of using a multi-methods research design for investigating children's gameplay and how new methods such as Social Network Analysis (SNA) can be used to strengthen traditional reception or ethnographic approaches. I highlight the importance of child-centred methods when studying children's appropriation of technologies and how Game Studies scholars in particular can benefit from incorporating these kinds of research perspectives when studying children's gaming. I also consider how my research design shaped the kinds of gaming I was able to observe.

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Theoretical contributions

The research builds on the insights of scholars who have studied Western children's peer relationships and gendered play patterns (Thorne 1993, Corsaro 2009). I also consider gameplay in relation to domestication theory (Silverstone & Hirsch, 1994) and extend these insights by highlighting the role of children's peer relationships in domestication processes. By suggesting the term 'gender tactics' I propose a way of incorporating Butler's (1990, 1993) notion of gender performances, de Certeau's (1984) distinction between strategies and tactics and Thorne's (1993) concept of 'borderwork' as it pertains to the tactics children use to activate gender boundaries. I use this term to describe how children perform their gender identities in tactical ways when playing games with peers, thereby communicating gendered interpretations of particular game titles, which are designed and marketed around gendered identities and further domesticated through gameplay. Games thus acquire gendered meanings through ludic gendering and children's gender tactics during play with peers. This is contingent upon children's shared identities as members of middle-class South African society. This study provides the emerging field of Game Studies with a perspective from the Global South where few studies of gaming exist, especially in relation to children. In addition, it contributes to Childhood Studies where studies of children's digital gaming (as opposed to non-digital play) are also new.

The concept of ludic gendering can assist game researchers in considering how children interpret gender in games, and signify gender identities when playing games with peers. Rules and representations offered through game design prefigure particular game titles as more- or less-strongly-gendered. This study finds that children selected less-strongly-gendered games for cross-sex play in both fieldsites. This may have been due to the gender relations and gendered play practices embedded in these settings. Playing games together may be considered as an additional opportunity for children to participate in borderwork (Thorne, 1993). Just because gender boundaries become activated in the process, this does not mean that gender distinctions are challenged. Digital gaming can also assist in affirming gender boundaries. Nonetheless, differences in children's gaming cannot only be attributed to gender differences between boys and girls. Epstein (1991) argues that 'deceptive distinctions' appear to be based on gender, but are actually based on something else, such as for example, shared interests or strategies of integration in middle-class schools. Further research is required to establish whether attending same-sex or co-ed

schools, or middle-class assimilationism (discussed in Chapter 1) encourages children to appropriate games in differently gendered ways. Children's gender tactics observed in my two fieldwork sites suggests that gendered gaming may be influenced by the kinds of gender relations children encounter in same-sex and co-ed schools. Thus, their school habitus shapes the kinds of peer play and pedagogy that emerges when gaming in after-school settings.

This finding supports Carr's (2005) claim that gaming preferences and tastes are site-specific and that players accumulate competencies according to the patterns of access and the peer culture they encounter. Walton and Pallitt's (2012) comparison of gaming preferences of township youth and middle-class suburban boys illustrates how inequalities in young people's consumer culture influence which games they are able to appropriate and how. The children in this study were all middle-class and one cannot generalise their play to children of other backgrounds. This would impose a normative perspective on childhood and children's gaming ecologies and to assume that play is enabled by middle-class consumption and constrained by societal strategies such as middle-class parenting and regulatory bodies.

The study focuses on gameplay as involving relationships rather than prioritising either games or players, thus adding to the social turn in Game Studies research. My choice of theoretical framework supports claims that sociological theories (such as Childhood Studies work on children's peer relationships, gendered play and interpretive reproduction) contribute to the analysis of gameplay by recognising the importance of wider social patterns (Crawford, 2012). I also consider the fieldwork sites as particular kinds of gaming spaces (albeit shaped by my research design) that contributed to how children configured their play with peers.

Game literacy versus peer pedagogy
The study also notes how children communicate their social relationships (i.e. being friends and negotiating status hierarchies in peer groups) through their gaming as well as reflecting on their gaming in ways that acknowledge intricate relationships with adult society and their comparatively disempowered position as children. This may be regarded as part of children's peer pedagogy. I prefer this term because it is broader than current

definitions of 'game literacy' in that it is not media specific and foregrounds the agency of children's peer relationships. The play episodes discussed in this thesis show how children often discuss and play with debates about gaming during gameplay, such as comparing games to 'real life'. The children I observed were very aware of the idea that games differ from everyday life. I found that children were performing their media competence for myself and their peers while playing, and that playing particular games meant playing on the border between child and adult, or boy and girl. In the play contexts I studied, the games became a stage for exercising media literacy during play in addition to performing gender and other identities and peer relationships.

Rules of play revisited

This study has discussed returning to Caillois' (1958, 2001) original formulation of the multi-faceted nature of play where different forms oscillate between *paidia* and *ludus*, or the pleasures of freedom and constraint. I argue that analysing gaming along a *ludus-paidia* spectrum can help game researchers to attend to diverse forms of gameplay and achieve a nuanced understanding of how players appropriate digital games. Game Studies has systematically prioritised *ludus* because it is the more socially respected form of play and most common among adults. Arguably this study suggests that Game Studies researchers are currently biased towards adult forms of play, particularly those which resonate with their own experiences. They may thus be blinded to the varieties of play found in children's gameplay.

Methodological contribution and reflection

My intervention shaped the kinds of play I was able to observe and thereby, findings about how children interpreted games as gendered media texts. Game titles were appropriated as 'casual' games in both fieldsites because of the turn-taking practices developed in those settings and the limited playing time available. Children did not enjoy the exclusive use of games some of them might have enjoyed at home. The intervention thus also shaped how children interpreted game rules (as discussed in Chapter 7). Children engaged in meta-gaming to make games playable in this particular context, to involve more children, to jockey for status, or to entertain their peers.

The study investigated children's responses to digital games during gameplay with peers in two after-school settings. Currently, there is no equivalent to gaming in reception studies

of other media. Rather than using surveys, interviews and/or focus groups exclusively (which are not the best methods for doing research with very young children as discussed in Chapter 3), I chose to focus on observations of children's gameplay as mediated interaction. Survey findings of children's reported game preferences (such as those listed in Appendix 6 and 7) are not able to capture the complex gender dynamics observed during actual gameplay. Thus, broadly ethnographic approaches to data collection were crucial to the success of the study. One of the limitations of this approach concerns my selection of texts or particular play episodes as units of analysis.

Sociograms (developed using Social Network Analysis) assisted me in not only constructing a visual representation of cross- and same-sex play, and what games children chose to play in the two settings, but also allowed me to view particular play episodes in relation to others, and compare gendered play patterns across the fieldsites.

One of the strengths of this approach is that it prioritises attention to the play contexts studied. Consequently I could understand the situated nature of gameplay in the two main fieldwork sites. This perspective frames play in terms of how they mediate or signify relationships rather than other possible interpretation of games, such as, for example, perspectives focused on rule systems. To understand gameplay, one needs to go beyond the textual level of theorising games based on their rules and representations to how they are played by particular people in specific gaming spaces. While this study of middle-class children's gameplay has limited generalisability because of the small sample of participants, it nonetheless provides a new way of thinking about the gender and games nexus.

My gameplay study was inspired by earlier Childhood Studies ethnographies of children's play. It endorses the perspective that it is important to use child-centred approaches while acknowledging one's adult ideological bias. There is also an inherited conundrum when one imports the use of ethnographic approaches. As discussed in Chapter 3, this suggests an illusion of natural play and that some forms of play and play spaces are more authentic that others.

Ambiguities of play in gameplay research

False dichotomies are unhelpful for understanding children's digital gameplay: non-digital and digital play, power and identity versus progress rhetorics of play, girls' and boys' separate peer cultures and gaming preferences, and oppositions between childhood and adult society. These binaries come together during instances of gameplay and are intricately interwoven. The domestication of digital games involves appropriating game titles, established play practices and identities in gaming spaces. Examples provided in this thesis include the following. Members of the choir used their singing abilities in karaoke games to mark their status as talented singers. The holiday club girls drew on school identities such as being a good reader when playing the Nintendo DS voice acting game. These findings challenge the idea of the 'magic circle' (Huizinga, 1949) where gameplay is assumed to occur within a bounded space free from the ordinariness of everyday life. I argue that it is the very interruption of other parts of children's lives into gaming activities that adds to the playfulness of their gameplay, making it transgressive, parodic and so forth.

Certain styles of gaming may be considered as hegemonic for girls and boys respectively and these norms are certainly reproduced in children's peer groups. Nonetheless, children are also able to transgress these forms of play during borderwork with peers. From a feminist perspective, I would argue that for the most part, the gender tactics with games reported in this study show children reproducing existing gender roles and beliefs through their play rather than subverting them. Despite instances of transgression, this study confirms the pervasiveness of hypermasculinity and heteronormativity in children's digital gameplay. Boys often enjoyed violent games and competitive play, and girls often preferred cooperation, nurturing and games with domestic settings. Thus many play episodes reported in this thesis may be seen to support claims about gendered play with games. Nonetheless this was only part of the story. Children appropriate games in ways that are consistent with the interpretive reproduction in their peer groups. Nonetheless games are also spaces of possibility for gendering. There are also examples of gameplay that contradict earlier findings about boys' and girls' gaming preferences (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Graner Ray, 2004). These include girls playing sports games (Chapter 7), or boys playing dress-up and even singing along to Hanna Montana (Chapter 6). This study supports the notion of games research 'moving away from universalistic, stereotyped

accounts of gender and gameplay' (Jenson & de Castell, 2010). Games may thus be considered as spaces of possibility for gendering, where children negotiate gender roles and stereotypes, repertoires and discourses, and thereby, "what can be played" (Foucault, 1997, p. 140).

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Ludography

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Appendices

Children and digital games in South Africa

My Games

Activity 1: Fill in your gaming profile below. All the questions are about digital games (games that use electricity or batteries).

Name:_____   Age:_____   Suburb where you live: _____

1. At HOME, I play games on a…
(tick the things that you play games on at HOME – you can choose more than one answer)
□ a computer
□ a laptop
□ the Internet
□ a cellphone
□ a PlayStation
□ an Xbox
□ a PSP
□ a Nintendo Wii
□ a GameCube or GameBoy
□ Other: _____
□ None: (explain why you don't play at home) _____

2. When I am with FRIENDS, I have played games on a…
□ a computer
□ a laptop
□ the Internet
□ a cellphone
□ a PlayStation
□ an Xbox
□ a PSP
□ a Nintendo Wii
□ a GameCube or GameBoy
□ Other: _____
□ None: (explain why you don't play at the homes of family and friends)
_____

3.   Do you ever play games at places such as a games arcade or the Spur? If yes, where do you play?
_____

4.   Do you usually play games alone or with others?
□ Alone   □ With others   □ Alone AND with others   □ I don't play games

5.   Who do you play games with MOST OFTEN?
□ Mom
□ Dad
□ Other caregiver (e.g. stepdad, babysitter, au pair)
□ Brothers
□ Sisters
□ Cousins
□ Uncles or aunties
□ Grandparents
□ School friends
□ Neighbours
□ Other friends
□ Strangers on the Internet

1

6. Who pays for the games you buy?

_____

7. Where do you get your games from? (You can tick more than one answer)

□ Buy from a shop (such as Musica or Toys R Us)
□ Lend from a friend or relative
□ Copy from a friend or relative
□ Download from the Internet
□ Download on a cellphone
□ I don't play games
□ I only play other people's games

8. Think of the latest game you played… What made you decide to play it?

_____
_____

9. My favourite games are (write the names of your favourite games):

_____
_____
_____

10. I own these games (write some of the names of games that you own):

_____
_____
_____
_____

11. What do your parents think about your games?

_____

12. What do your teachers think about your games?

_____
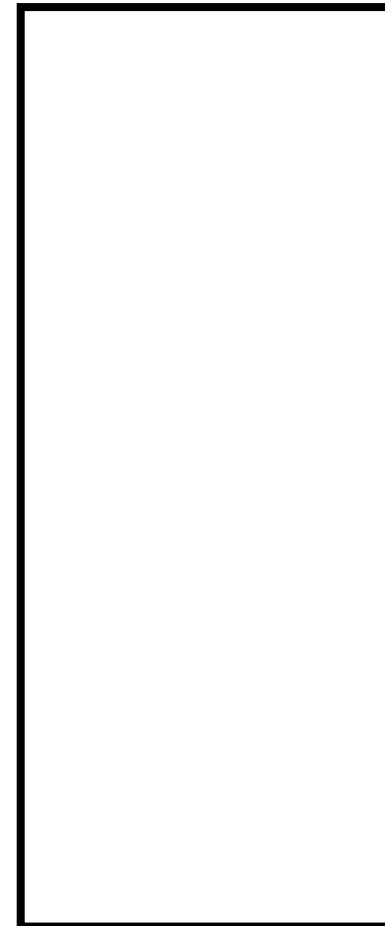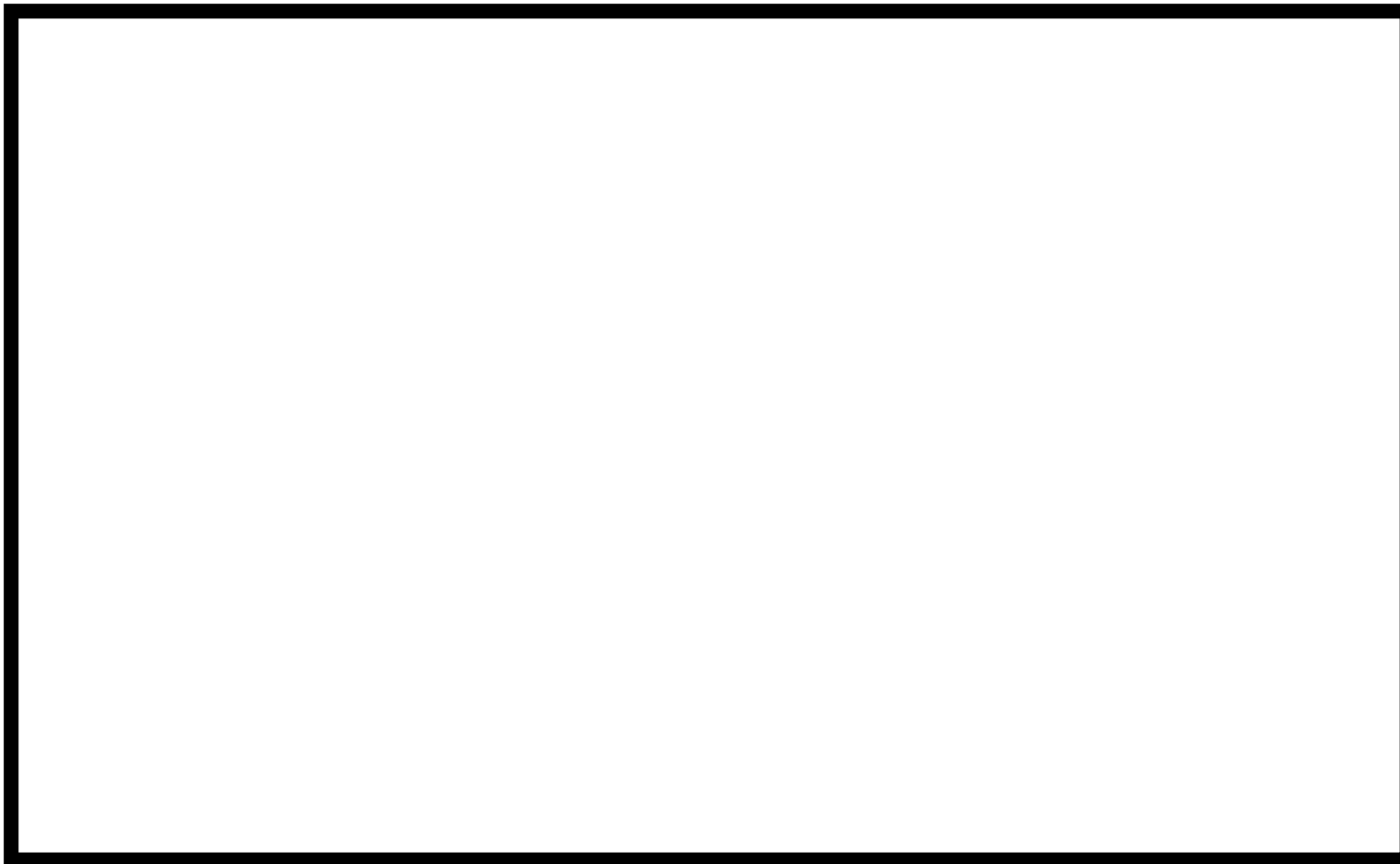
Activity 2: Draw a picture of your favourite game in the big space above. Label things in the drawing in the smaller space on the right.

My favourite game is_____   **The game is about**_____

In this game, the player has to_____

Explain what is happening in the picture:

_____

_____

Describe the music and sound effects in this part of your favourite game:

_____

_____

1

Appendix 1b: Games worksheet - drawing

Navrae Enquiries IMibuzo	**Dr A.T Wyngaard**
Telefoon Telephone IFoni	**021 467 9272**
Faks Fax IFeksi	**(021) 425-7445**

Wes-Kaap Onderwysdepartement

Western Cape Education Department

ISebe leMfundo leNtshona Koloni

| Verwysing Reference ISalathiso | **20100428-0006** |

Miss Nicola Pallitt
2 Rustenburg Mews
Rondebosch Main Road
Rondebosch
7700

Dear Miss Nicola Pallitt

RESEARCH PROPOSAL: "PLAYING IN MY WORLD: EXPLORING CHILDREN'S PLAY AND REPRESENTATIONS OF DIGITAL GAMES AT PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN CAPE TOWN"

Your application to conduct the above-mentioned research in schools in the Western Cape has been approved subject to the following conditions:

1. Principals, educators and learners are under no obligation to assist you in your investigation.
2. Principals, educators, learners and schools should not be identifiable in any way from the results of the investigation.
3. You make all the arrangements concerning your investigation.
4. Educators' programmes are not to be interrupted.
5. The Study is to be conducted from **20 April 2010 to 30 September 2010** .
6. No research can be conducted during the fourth term as schools are preparing and finalizing syllabi for examinations (October to December).
7. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey, please contact Dr A.T Wyngaard at the contact numbers above quoting the reference number.
8. A photocopy of this letter is submitted to the principal where the intended research is to be conducted.
9. Your research will be limited to the list of schools as forwarded to the Western Cape Education Department.
10. A brief summary of the content, findings and recommendations is provided to the Director: Research Services.
11. The Department receives a copy of the completed report/dissertation/thesis addressed to:
    The Director: Research Services
    Western Cape Education Department
    Private Bag X9114
    CAPE TOWN
    8000

We wish you success in your research.

Kind regards.
Signed: Audrey T Wyngaard
for: **HEAD: EDUCATION**
DATE: 28 April 2010

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UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

Faculty of Humanities

Consent Form

Title of research project: "Playing in *my* world: Exploring children's play and representations of digital games at two primary schools in Cape Town"

Names of principal researcher(s): Nicola Pallitt and Marion Walton (supervisor)

Department/research group address: Centre for Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town (UCT), Private Bag, Rondebosch, 7700.

Telephone: Nicola Pallitt – 073 818 0089

Email: Nicola Pallitt – mz.pallitt@gmail.com

Name of Participant:

Nature of the Research: Learners will be required to complete a questionnaire regarding their access to games and gaming technologies as well as their game play experiences. Learners playing age-appropriate games will be observed at the school. Game play and learner's comments will be recorded using a video camera, but footage will be of the TV or laptop screen. There will be no video footage taken of the learners or teachers. Individual children and parents can also volunteer as family case studies by emailing the primary researcher. This research is for a PhD thesis in Media Studies.

Participant's Involvement:

1. <u>What's involved</u>: **1.) Get your parent's consent. 2.) Complete the questionnaire. 3.) Play games at school and participate in activities (drawings, discussion groups)** - Observer/researcher at the school will be taking field notes and using a video camera to record game play. **AND/OR 4.) Play at Home** - participants who would like to participate in the project at home can arrange with the researcher to have her come to their house. Communication with parents is vital for confirming permission to participate in the study and to arrange an appropriate observation time. **NOTE:** Players who consent to participate in the study at school are not obligated to participate in the study from his/her home, but he/she can participate in this setting as well if they wish to and have parental consent.

2. <u>Risks</u>: Transcription of data will maintain anonymity: identities of learners, school staff members and others involved (e.g. parents, teachers, etc.) will not be apparent from transcriptions or the final research project. Transcribed data will be in text format and digitally archived (video tapes will not be archived).

3. <u>Benefits</u>: A better understanding of young people's gaming practices in a South African context, how digital games form part of consumer culture in a developing country and potential sites for informal learning.

- I agree to participate in this research project.
- I have read this consent form and the information it contains and had the opportunity to ask questions about it.
- I agree to my responses being used for research on condition that my privacy is respected, subject to the following:
    - o Will be used in aggregate form only (only as part of collected data), so that I will not be personally identifiable (identity anonymous in research project and archived transcriptions of data).
- I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in this project.
- I understand that I have the right to withdraw from this project at any stage.

Signature of participant: _____

Signature of Parent/Guardian (if participant is under 18 years of

age):_____

Name of Parent/Guardian:_____

Please choose from the options below and tick the boxes which you are providing consent

to:

☐ **I allow my child to complete the questionnaire for research purposes. I acknowledge that information given by my child will be used for research only.**

☐ **I allow my child to be observed and recorded at school while he/she is playing games and interviewed afterwards with others who played with him/her. I acknowledge that these recordings are for research purposes only.**

☐ **I allow my child to be observed and interviewed at our home. (If you consent to this option, please provide your contact details next to your signature below.)**

Signature of person giving consent: _____

Signature of person(s) who sought consent:_____

Name of person(s) who sought consent: Nicola Pallitt

Date:_____

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

Faculty of Humanities

Consent Form

Title of research project: "Playing in *my* world: Exploring children's play and meanings of digital games in two sites in Cape Town"

Names of principal researcher(s): Nicola Pallitt and Marion Walton (supervisor)

Department/research group address: Centre for Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town (UCT), Private Bag, Rondebosch, 7700.

Telephone: Nicola Pallitt – 073 818 0089

Email: Nicola Pallitt – mz.pallitt@gmail.com

Name of Participant:

Nature of the Research: Children will be required to complete a short questionnaire regarding their access to games and game play experiences. Children will observed playing age-appropriate games. Game play and children's comments will be recorded using a video camera, but footage will be of the TV or laptop screen. None of the footage will be put online and will only be viewed by the principal researcher, her research assistant and supervisor. This research is for a PhD thesis in Media Studies. The thesis is NOT an effects study and is therefore not looking at the effects that games have on children, but rather their gaming as a form of social play and informal peer learning, associated gender differences, meaning-making (interpreting game rules and storytelling), how games fit into other aspects of children's consumer culture (such as movies, music and toys) and how children customize games in relation to their interests.

Participant's Involvement:

1. <u>What's involved:</u> **1.) Get your parent's consent. 2.) Complete the questionnaire. 3.) Play games and participate in activities (drawings, discussions about games) 4) HAVE FUN:)** Researcher will be taking field notes and using a video camera to record game play.

2. <u>Risks:</u> Transcription of data will maintain anonymity: identities of children, parents, teachers and holiday club organizers will not be apparent from transcriptions or the final research project. Transcribed data will be in text format and digitally archived (video tapes will not be archived).

3. <u>Benefits:</u> A better understanding of children's gaming practices in a South African context, how digital games form part of consumer culture and children's peer networks in a developing country and potential sites for informal learning through social play.

- I agree to participate in this research project.
- I have read this consent form and the information it contains and had the opportunity to ask questions about it.
- I agree to my responses being used for research on condition that my privacy is respected, subject to the following:
    - Will be used in aggregate form only (only as part of collected data), so that I will not be personally identifiable (identity anonymous in research project and archived transcriptions of data).
- I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in this project.
- I understand that I have the right to withdraw from this project at any stage.

Signature of participant: _____

Signature of Parent/Guardian (if participant is under 18 years of

age):_____

Name of Parent/Guardian:_____

Please choose from the options below and tick the boxes which you are providing consent to:

☐ **I allow my child to complete the questionnaire for research purposes. I acknowledge that information given by my child will be used for research only.**

☐ **I allow my child to be observed and recorded at school while he/she is playing games and interviewed afterwards with others who played with him/her. I acknowledge that these recordings are for research purposes only.**

Signature of person giving consent: _____

Signature of person(s) who sought consent:_____

Name of person(s) who sought consent: Nicola Pallitt

Date:_____

NB: For updates and further communication:

Parent's email address:_____

Parent's cellphone number:_____

Dear Dr Walton

I am writing to you as I am somewhat concerned about the ethical processes that your Phd student followed when gathering data for her study on children's video game use.

I tried calling you this morning to chat about it but did not find you in, so am writing this mail.

Your PhD student, Nicki, approached Y at Riverside* Boys School holiday programme during the December/January vacation and asked her to communicate to parents that she will play video games with them. I am relaying to you exactly (as a parent) what I was told by Y. I was told that the children will play video games for some of the time and that was fine with me. Until the second last day of the holiday programme, when I received a consent letter for my child to participate in the research, I was not aware of the fact that this was research that was being conducted and that this process had been recorded without my initial permission. In terms of most ethics committees' rules, this is a huge contravention of procedure.

I phoned Nicki (and I hope she mentioned this to you) and asked her about my own consent and my 9 year old daughters assent. (As you may know, a consent and assent form are usually required when minors are involved in research). She had one form which just addressed consent but also asked my daughter questions. The other issue that I found problematic (which I did not even mention to her) was the fact that the initial study outline on the form suggested that the data would be gathered at two schools. If this was the intention, then the holiday programme was not really one or two schools as the children who go there, are drawn from a number of schools (at least 4 or 5). My daughter attends Y.

I asked Nicki to withdraw data gathered from my daughter, Z, from the study as she did not have permission to include her in the study in the first place. I wonder how many other parents provided initial consent.

As you may understand, I was very annoyed when I received that letter and it has taken me a while to write to you. I felt like one of the many participants whose data is captured (and sometimes used) without their consent – an issue about research that still continues to rage on despite the repeated caution expressed about this practice.

I thought that it is important that you, as her supervisor, are aware of this process, especially as a doctoral degree is involved. I also thought it important to inform you of this experience, so that you are able to guide her appropriately and to ensure that my child's data is not used.

Kind regards,
X

Dear UCT ethics committee members,

I am currently in the third year of my PhD in Media Studies. My proposal was approved and last year (2010) and this year January I was doing my fieldwork. My thesis is about primary school children and digital games. I got permission to run a games workshop from the principal, Mrs V, and Grade 4 teacher, Ms Oz, at St. Mary's. It formed part of the children's extra-curricular activities, namely Arts and Crafts. The children were given consent forms to take home for their parents to sign. The teacher assisted me in keeping tabs on the children whose parents hadn't signed and wrote reminders in their homework books. Overall, this was a good experience. Also, the games workshops took place after school once a week over a period of two months. Looking back, I realise I had a lot more preparation time which is a contributing factor as to why my fieldwork there ran so smoothly.

However, access to children at other schools was difficult, having quite a few schools turn me away because they did not see games as educational. Riverside Boys' were among the more willing schools, although they could not accommodate me with fieldwork during the term, so Mr G (the Senior Deputy Headmaster) put me in touch with Sarah Frank*, the school's swimming teacher, who runs a holiday club at the school (i.e. the school hosts the holiday club). The principal was happy with this research at the school as long as it formed part of the holiday club and not term time. It was during my time at the holiday club that an incident with one of the children's mothers, Mrs X, occurred.

I have attached a document with all the emails between myself, the holiday club organizer / swimming teacher and parents. Together, Sarah*, her daughter Dorothy* (who is also a swimming teacher) and I were very prepared regarding my consent forms that the parents needed to sign. However, before I became part of the club setting I did not know that I would be encountering additional children to the ones that had signed up for the club initially. I received 12 consent forms from parents whose children were attending the first week of the holiday club and I only had 3 children whose parents did not submit these. It was a great experience for myself and the children – they would often sit outside and wait for me to arrive with the games and told their parents and the organisers that it was the best holiday club ever, because they could play games. The club is in its 6th year and many of the children are regular members whose parents bring them every holiday. Initially I thought this to be the rule rather than the exception, but I later realised that this was not the case, as new parents (i.e. not regulars) brought their children to join the club.

I ran the games workshop during the first week of the holiday club in December, from Monday 13th to Wednesday 15th of December 2010. I did not run the games workshop during the second week of the club, which was the week before Christmas, as I went home for the holiday. As can be seen from the attached emails and my description so far, all the necessary ethical preparations were in place. The holiday club commenced again on the 3rd of January but I only ran the games workshop again during the second week of the January holiday club (10, 11, 13, 14 January). When I returned, I encountered many new children. I am not sure about the extent to which the club organisers told the new parents about my fieldwork. However, I admit that this was not fully their responsibility. I received 4 consent forms back from the new children's parents, with 10 forms outstanding. Many of the parents only received the forms on the Thursday, which was the second last day of the club after I provided the organisers with more consent forms. In retrospect, I should have considered the possibility of new children and instructed the organisers to have parents go through and sign the consent forms in the morning when they dropped off their children at the holiday club. I also thought of having a parents' meeting where I could tell them about my study, answer questions they may have and have them sign the consent forms then. However, I realise that this may not have been effective due to the busy festive season. In retrospect, I realise that the consent form process was sloppy given new members and parents receiving the forms during or after the fieldwork rather than in advance. I let the children who did not have consent forms yet play the games and thought I would rather get the forms from the parents later, as I did not want to exclude the children from the games activities. They were so excited

to play the games and I did not have the heart to say no. I decided that I would not use the data where they were involved if I did not receive consent forms from their parents soon afterwards.

At the club I recorded the TV and laptop screens with a video camera as the children were playing games. Basically, my data consists of a screen with children talking about games while they are playing them. The children were aware that they were playing as part of a study, often asking me questions and I would tell them about what I had observed with children so far and what they thought about it. I spoke to quite a few of the parents when they picked up their children and also emailed them after the holiday club (see attached emails for a copy of this exchange). Only one parent emailed me back. It is fair to say that overall these are very busy, working parents which is why they sent their children to the holiday club.

Mrs. X phoned me on the Thursday night after the holiday club. I had met her face to face at the club and either introduced myself or had been introduced to her by the club organisers. Either way, I recall the introduction and telling her that I was doing a study on children and games. She had the opportunity to speak to me about the study then, but did not. She phoned me and said she was concerned about the ethical process of my study. She wanted to know why I didn't need her daughter to sign an assent form. Apparently this is routine practice at X's University where she works as a lecturer in Educational Psychology. I told her that my Department and Faculty only require permission from schools, teachers and parents and that children are not required to sign anything. I confirmed this with my supervisor, Marion Walton, and Mastin Prinsloo who said that children signing could be used for the wrong reasons which is why it is not good practice because they don't fully understand what they are assenting to. Mrs X said she was upset that she only received the consent form while the fieldwork was already taking place and I apologised and told her about my challenges – my sudden realisation that there were many new children at the club in addition to the regular members, having to get the games set up and arrange turns amongst the children and wanting the children to have a fun experience and not feel excluded. She told me she would think about signing the consent form, but that for now she'd prefer I not use any data involving her daughter. I told her that she was perfectly within her right to withdraw her child from the study and that I would not use recordings of the screen that her daughter was playing on as data nor what her daughter said about games in conversations between her, myself and other children at the club. I impressed upon her that I respected her wishes. However, she recently emailed my supervisor Marion Walton (her name, cellphone number and email address appears on my consent form to parents) and again raised the issue of the consent form and told Marion to make sure I did not use data involving her daughter. I would like to note that none of the other parents phoned me, nor complained.

Mrs X's email did highlight some important points. My initial consent form was set up for St Mary's and the description of the study on the form still mentions the study being conducted at two schools in Cape Town, when in fact the holiday club is hosted by Riverside Boys but is attended by children from various schools in the surrounding area. I did not know this before I sent the consent forms to the club organisers. Secondly, I admit that I did not give the new parents enough info about the study and during January, the parents did not receive the consent form in advance as was the case with the December group. This was unintentional, due to the challenges already mentioned. I do not think that the club organisers sent the email mentioning the games study to the new parents. I also did not have access to the new parents emails or cellphone numbers as the organisers did not share these indemnity forms with me. In retrospect, I should have insisted for these details and communicated more with the new parents and not have assumed that the first group of December children would be the only children throughout the holidays. Additionally, I think timing was also a factor, since I was at the school from 10:00 to 16:30 each day, which was not early enough to speak to parents when they dropped off their children at 8 o'clock in the morning and some parents fetched their children after 16:30.

I apologized for this in my email to the parents and acknowledge my mistakes once again. Ethical mistakes were not intentional and I admit that the holiday club presented additional challenges in comparison to a school environment. Schools have been my main field site thus far. My Masters thesis was about primary school children's use of educational software in a computer lab at an underprivileged school. I passed with a distinction. The games workshops at St Mary's, although presented as an extra-curricular after school time, still took place in a more educational environment – a Grade 4 classroom. I decided to give consent forms to parents because the games workshop was an extra-curricular and I would be recording game play and asking the children about the games they play at home. Usually research at school does not require parental consent. In a week's time I will be working as a research assistant for youth marketeers who conduct the annual Generation Next study commissioned by the *Sunday Times* on the media and technology consumption of young people. The children's parents most certainly do not sign consent forms as part of this large-scale national survey – the permissions rest with the school principal and teachers. Additionally, these surveys take place during school time. In retrospect, the holiday club is quite an ambiguous site. Personally, I believe that if the study is conducted at a school, but concerns a home-based or out-of-school practice (as is often the case in literacy research) then parental permission is advisable in addition to the normal permissions obtained from the WCED, principal and teachers concerned.

I am happy to share my learning experience with fellow postgraduate students, as I think the context plays a decisive role in the ethical process of a researcher. Clearly, the holiday club was a new context for me, not being a classroom with a set group or grade of children. This presented me with new challenges and I admit to making unintentional ethical mistakes.

Yours sincerely,
Nicola Pallitt

Grade	Age	Favourite Games
6 B	13	Speed on net
	11	Fifa 10 Brothers in Arms
	11	Fifa 10 Guitar Hero
	11	Fifa Street Fifa 10 Medal of Honour
	11	The Sims 2 & 3, Dizzy Wood
	11	COD, Resistance, Spore
	-	Pokemon, DBZ, Simpsons
	11	Smackdown VS Raw, Fifa 10, Plants vs Zombies, NFS, GTA
	12	GTA, NFS
	12	Pokemon, Spectrobes
	11	GTA, Grand Turismo
	11	Fifa 10 & 09, Ashes
	12	Rachard Glade, Star Wars Battlefront
	11	Spore, Star Wars, Harry Potter
	12	Fifa 10, Burnout, COD, Sims 3, Star Wars Force Unleashed
	12	Rollercoaster Tycoon, GTA, Fifa 10, Cricket 07
	11	Star Wars, Secret Agent Clank, Raze
	11	Sport, racing, 'free rome'
	12	NFS
	12	Motorbikes & Quadbike, Guitar Hero, Ratchet & Clank
	11	Age of Empires, Smackdown vs Raw, Zelda, Sims
	11	Crash Bandicoot, Fifa 10, DragonBall Z, GTA
	12	Fifa 10, God of War, COD, Guitar Hero
	11	Fifa 09, Guitar Hero
7A	12	COD, Mario 64, Pokemon Platinum
	13	Rainbow Six Vegas
	13	COD, GTA, Juiced 2
	13	COD
	12	Rainbow Six Vegas, Gost Recon, Splintercell
	12	Star Wars Battlefront, NFS
	13	Transformers, Happy Farm, Restuarant City
	12	Fifa 10, GTA, Teken
	12	Halo, Fifa 10, GTA, Virtua Tennis, Rainbow 6
	12	CounterStrike, Core, GTA, MarioKart, Spore
	12	Fifa 10, Midnight club, GTA
	12	Fifa 10, COD, Lego, Batman Arkham, WOW
	12	-
	12	Fifa 10, ATV Offroad Pro, Rugby 05
	13	Assasins Creed, Warcraft, Rome Total War
	12	WWE, GTA, Burnout
	12	GTA 4, Prince of Persia, Lego Star Wars, WOW
7B	13	Assasins Creed, MXit, Killzone, Maden 2010
	13	WOW, Sims 3, COD
	12	Maden 09, Ghost Recon, Star Wars Force Unleashed, Halo
	13	Maden 10, Wrestling, Infamous, MXit
	12	Farcry2, COD, GTA
	12	Fifa 10, Smackdown VS Raw, Assasins Creed 2
	12	Smackdown vs Raw 2010, Darksiders, Dantes Inferno

	12	Fifa 10, COD
	12	Star Wars, NFS, GTA San Andreas
	13	Tiger Woods PGA Tour 10, Fifa 10, Forza3
	13	Spore, COD, Fifa 10
	12	The Sims, YouVille, DizzyWood
	12	GTA, NFS, Dungeon Siege
	13	GTA San Andreas
	12	Pokemon, Starcraft 2, Basketball King
	12	GTA NFS COD
	12	God of War, Black, Prince of Persia
	12	Smackdown vs Raw 2010
	-	-
	12	NFS, Rugby
	12	Assasins Creed, LOTR, NFS, Star Wars, Evony
	12	Fifa 09, Quantum of Solace, LOTR
7C	12	Fifa, PES, GTA
	12	Star Wars Clone Wars, Battlefield 4
	12	GTA
	12	Fifa 10, Smackdown 2010, GTA, Cricket 07
	12	Fallout 3, COD, GTA
	13	Fallout 3, Fifa 10, Star Wars
	13	GTA
	12	Worms Mayhen, COD, Borderlands, Tony Hawk
	13	PES 2010, GTA, Warcraft, Fifa 10, COD
	12	Cricket 07, Transformers, Sims Castaway, Fifa 10
	14	Fifa 09, Cricket 10, NFS
	12	Wolverine Origins, Spore
	12	Fifa, Cricket 10, Xmen origins, NFS
	13	MXit, FaceBook, Twitter, Skype
	13	MXit, FaceBook, Twitter, Skype
	12	Sports Games, 007
	12	Fifa 10, God of War, WWE Raw 09, True Crime
	12	Rugby 08, Ratchet & Clank, Lake Masters (fishing)
	12	GTA, SSX on Tour, Rally
	12	Ashes, Fifa 10, COD
	12	NFS, Burnout, GTA
7D	12	Black, Sims 2 Castaway
	12	Virtua Tennis, Narnia, Transformers, Spiderman
	13	Fifa 08, Blazing Angels, Ratchet & Clank
	12	Fifa 10, NFS, Fire Emblem the sacred stones
	12	Fifa 10, Assasins Creed, NFS, GTA
	13	Wolverine, The Punisher, GTA
	12	Assasins Creed, Titan Quest, Immortal Thrne, Rome Total War
	(12-13)	COD, Fifa 10, Sokom2
	12	Fifa 10, PES 10, Rugby 08
	U13	COD, Rainbow 6 Vegas, Sims 2, Worms, PES 10
	12	CounterStrike souce, COD, Killzone
	12	Rise of Nations, COD, CounterStrike
	12	Wii Sports, Worms 4 Mayhem, Mario
	12	Fifa 10, Rugby 08, GTA 4, NFS Shift
	13	Assasins Creed, COD, Infamous

Appendix 7: St Mary's and Riverside holiday club – favourite games

Field site	Number of boys who completed the survey	Number of girls who completed the survey	Favourite games of boys	Favourite games of girls
Arts and Crafts club at St Mary's co-ed school	5	5	Godfather Boiling Point Grand Theft Auto FIFA 2010 Spyro Teken 5 Mario, Super Mario Wii, Mariokart Yu-gi-ho chess Pokémon Wii Tennis Ben 10: Alien Force Need for Speed The Sims 2 & 3, My Sims Wii Sports Command & Conquer 3 Harry Potter The Incredibles Sonic Gems collection PES 2010 Rayman Revolution Lego Batman Tiger Woods 2010	Pac-man Bubble Club Penguin 'Plant game' 'Make-up game' Crash Speed Zombies versus Aliens God of War Prison Break Sing Star Buzz Grand Turismo 4 Need for Speed: Underground 2 Ben 10 Kung-fu Panda
Holiday club at Riverside Boys	12	4	Pokémon Super Mario Brothers, Mariokart Spore Red Faction Guerrilla Need for Speed Resistance Indiana Jones Burnout Legends Everybody's Golf Sim City Goo Balls Pinball Wii Sports& Fit 'Brick game' (Tetris) FIFA 2010 Call of Duty Lego Batman, Lego Star Wars Spiderman Burnout Paradise God of War Transformers 2	Super Mario, Super Mario Galaxy 2 Nintendogs Pac-man Nintendo chat room The Sims 2 Moshy Monsters Spore Sing-a-long Raving Rabids Alice in Wonderland Sims 2 Pets WWE Smackdown VS Raw Extreme Snowboarding