

## **Dark Play in Digital Playscapes Special Issue: Editorial**

Play is typically conceptualised as a cornerstone of wellbeing in early childhood and as an intuitive means of fulfilling social, emotional and physical needs. As a result, the darker sides of play and playfulness can remain neglected, under-theorised and become invisibilised from debates (Griesharber & McArdle, 2010). Despite Sutton-Smith's (2009/1997) comments on the potentials for play to involve instances of negative affect, and more recent research on aggression and loss in the context of early childhood play and experience (Silin, 2013; Madrid, 2013), these are often pushed beyond the theoretical and discursive parameters of play and left unconsidered. In this way, presentations of play as only 'good' and 'healthy' contribute to the limiting, final vocabulary (Rorty, 1995; Hawkins, 2002) and mythic speech (Barthes, 1972; MacClure, 2011) that surrounds children and childhood, and further reinforces ideas about childhood innocence (Robinson, 2013). In this special issue, a rich collection of papers extends and expands theorisations of play to bring darker aspects to the fore. Collectively the papers examine children's use of play to explore negative affect and difficult circumstances and go on to question how and why children's play, particularly that which is in some sense dark, is often so deeply unsettling for adults. By attending to an exploration of digital playscapes the papers also address the ways in which children co-construct, interrogate, disrupt and appropriate darker elements of popular culture through play.

This issue of *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* responds to an urgent need to engage with the darker sides of play at a time when digital environments are opening up play experiences and territories that feel unfamiliar, and potentially even menacing, to adults. In this special issue, children's play is conceptualised as unfolding in online and offline spaces, in what Burnett et al. (2014) describe as a physical-digital network of material and immaterial components. Research by Marsh and Bishop (2013) has done much to elucidate how children engage with play in a digital era, as they move through online and offline spaces. More recently, Lafton (2015) deployed Deleuzian theories to offer conceptualisations of digital technologies as agentic non-human actors in the making of childhoods. This special issue contributes to this emergent field of enquiry by examining 'the dark' physical-digital networks of children's everyday play to challenge established ideas about how children do and should play, and expose a need for educators, parents (and the myriad others involved in

the creation of digital resources) to continue to grapple with our conceptions of the child and contemporary childhoods.

The issue begins with a paper from Bjartveit & Panayotidis in which the authors recount pedagogical attempts to playfully disrupt and transform early childhood educators' conceptions of children's 'dark play,' as provoked by contemporary popular culture. Embracing the imaginative potential of darkness and liminality the authors invited students to problematize and expand their thinking about what constitutes children's play scripts with a specific focus on fear, power, and violence. Recognising that many educators are reluctant, and some even refuse, to allow children opportunities to engage in play centred on troubling social issues, the educators were invited to co-author a fantastical tale, inspired by the Disney film, *Frozen*. This exercise was a core pedagogical device and incorporated course topics, classroom observations and personal childhood memories of 'dark play.' Paley's (2004) influential work about the relationship between storytelling and play, alongside Gadamer's (2004) notion of *speil*, provided the stimulus for the fictional narrative exercise whereupon the students entered self-made imaginary worlds. Here the authors make use of the digital on-line platform to foster a virtual pedagogical space framed by creative writing and fantasy in which theories about play and imagination were put to work through experiential and playful collaboration. The creation of an imaginary story, provoked by *Frozen*, enabled participants to access alternative understandings of the nature of play, and recognize the ways that popular culture can strengthen children's imaginative and abstract thinking, problem solving skills and emotional development. The narrative experience provides a persuasive case for 'dark play' in early childhood contexts to initiate new ways of engaging with children about the complexity of the worlds of which they form part.

Next, writing from the Norwegian context, Sadownik contextualizes the dark sides of play from a cultural-historical perspective (Hedegaard 2009) using Fraser's theory of social justice based upon concepts of recognition and redistribution. She offers a micro-ethnographic analysis of daily life in a kindergarten, paying specific attention to play situations between two five-year-old girls. The girls come from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, but both attend the same kindergarten located in a disadvantaged neighborhood in a large city in Norway. From a sociological perspective, the paper asks difficult questions about increasing economic and, thereby, digital inequalities in a geopolitical context that is readily assumed to be based upon egalitarian values and a classless demography. The author

then turns attention to the institutional context through which the Norwegian kindergarten pedagogy of recognition is troubled against children's motives to redistribute (digital) goods. Insights into play and daily routines within the kindergarten provides knowledge about institutional recognition practices that maintain existing inequalities as well children's motives that are anchored in the modus of redistribution.

The call for papers invited submissions in alternative genres, including literary artefacts, collaborative pieces and multimedia text. We were especially delighted to receive the submission from Jarod Rosello in response. In his submission, we are offered a series of metonymic moments, in the form of comics and writing which provide the means to revisit lived experiences between the author-artist and his young daughter. Throughout, moments are loosely grouped around zombies, but also include conceptually or aesthetically related moments. In rendering these moments in the form of comics, he revisits, re-enters and re-experiences them. Engaging in a multi-layered, interdisciplinary and affective project the submission refuses to function as representation, analysis, or interpretation of experiences, but rather operates as experiential and embodied sites. Through arts-based methods the corporeal and affective are activated and provide opportunities to consider and experience the moments in different ways. The comics and writing intermingle; the writing does not provide an explanation or contextualization of the comic, but exists as a separate entity in conversation with and moves within rather than following sequentially. Rosello describes his piece as 'a project in divergence, an experiment in dispersing, in weaving between and among, in navigating a fragmented landscape'. Through wandering he gathers found objects which provide a fresh, and generative means to consider young children's dark play in digital playscapes.

Rebecca Sinker, Mike Phillips and Victoria de Rijke undertake multidisciplinary analyses of *Pregnant Rapunzel Emergency* to expose the darkness lurking within, behind and through digital games specifically targeted at young children. *Pregnant Rapunzel Emergency* is one of a plethora of free on-line games specifically targeted at young girls. These games are densely populated with animated characters drawn from fairy tales, children's toys and popular media and typically invite the player to dress, preen and primp the characters. A subset of the games is preoccupied with pregnancy and shaped by a raft of cultural significations such as extreme makeover, losing weight, dealing with cravings, hospital pregnancy checks, birthing

(including Caesarean), post-natal ironing, washing and baby care. Taking the online game *Pregnant Rapunzel Emergency* as an exemplar of a current digital trend, the authors explore the workings of 'dark digital play'. They question what contemporary online games might tell us about the realities of dark play. Specifically, they seek to address the question: Is there dark play in the game itself, the observer or the player, in the maker or production? Working across three divergent perspectives: feminist-mother, computer scientist, and educationalist, the authors endeavour to offer interdisciplinary understandings of dark digital play.

Building on her previous work in this emergent field of interest, Huh writes from an ethnographic study of four three-year-old children and their families to explore spontaneity in digital game play in early childhood. The children were observed during their digital game activities, and their parents were interviewed about their child's game play. Field notes, photography, and videotaping were transcribed and analyzed using Bakhtinian interpretative analysis. The analysis exposes various examples of young children breaking game boundaries (e.g. rule breaking, using virtual space as sources of spontaneous play, navigating between virtual and physical space) in their digital game playing. Furthermore, the children created new forms of play by mixing their digital game play with other real life play. Huh argues that digital games do not entirely change or displace other practices in early childhood, but young children's digital game play is very closely related to their spontaneous play as it occurs in their everyday lives. The paper concludes by arguing that young children are agentic and capable users of digital technologies, incorporating the digital world for their own purposes. The study demonstrates that young children's play with media is a way of resisting the prevailing discourse that describes young children as weak and powerless. Through illustrative examples Huh argues against claims that game playing is creating a generation of "isolated, pale skinned, teenage boys" (Williams, 2005 p. 2). Such claims are overly simplistic and fail to acknowledge the ways in which (very young) children actively navigate between games and real worlds and use social relationships to achieve their own goals.

The next paper reports on a Knowledge Exchange network project that aimed to inform the development of a videogame for hospitalised children. The project brought together hospital play specialists, academics (including the author, Yamada-Rice) and representatives from the digital games industry to coproduce knowledge to inform the future production of such a game. Despite the substantial body of research that underlines the benefits of play to assist children to make sense of what is happening to them in 'dark' times, there is much less

known about the sorts of games that could be designed to facilitate such play. The article describes a selection of the knowledge exchange activities framed by arts and design-based methods as a means of knowing through making. The paper underlines the significance of materiality, creativity and working across disciplinary boundaries to recognize the affective charges that can usefully inform the development of digital spaces to address dark aspects of childhood shaped by hospitalization and ill health. The methods generated knowledge about how to allow children to express emotions about illness and/or being in hospital; how to offer information about experiencing life in hospital, and how to develop a design that could cross physical and digital platforms with a space for open-ended child-directed play. As the overarching intention of the project was to generate knowledge across the stakeholders, the project concluded by materializing the core findings from the project into a paper prototype of a game on which a hypothetical digital-physical version could be based.

Attending to the cultural politics of emotion, Hackett and Proctor work with theories that foreground the agency of place and objects to analyse the entanglement of place, children and emotion (particularly fear) in play encounters. The authors argue that when children, objects and places come into play with each other, intensities and emotions emerge. Examples from two ethnographic studies in which play encounters between children and place seem to evoke fear are explored. They draw upon Ahmed's (2014) theorisations that stress that fear is bounded to place and experienced materially and bodily. Whilst fear is captured through digital recordings and observational fieldnotes, within this paper the authors resist a deep immersion in the digital and instead attend to a careful interrogation of the significance of place and objects that work to evoke dark emotions. They argue that fear becomes entangled in the materiality of place and bodies, and emotions work to characterise and categorise bodies (human and non-human), in ways that connect to anthropocentric and colonial meta-narratives. The authors consider the political implications of reconceptualising play encounters through new materialism and argue for a need to keep the micro and macro connected.

Destructing, ruining, destroying, decimating, demolishing – acts not generally encouraged in early childhood contexts. The darkness of destruction is considered by Sakr who explores what happens to children's paper-based and digital artwork. Drawing upon sociocultural accounts of children's art-making and social semiotic approaches to meaning-making she

argues that children's acts of destruction might be understood as meaningful and points to the significance of different semiotic resources in shaping the meaning-making involved in destruction. Two episodes of art-making are subjected to detailed analysis: firstly, child-parent art-making resulting in a drawing on paper being scribbled over with a black crayon; and secondly, a child using touch to cover over the drawing made on a classroom interactive whiteboard during free-flow. The episodes are compared to explore how digital and paper-based semiotic resources impact differently upon experiences of destruction and the affective and relational work that it can achieve. A social semiotic exploration of destruction such as that offered by the author, can move discussions of children's art-making beyond developmental preoccupations with individualism and intentionality towards a post-developmental account of the richness of children's experiences and actions.

Finally, the issue concludes with a paper by Coulson & Oskis which discusses the light and dark side of attachments and attachment style in physical and digital worlds. The authors contend that many games offer opportunities for the generation of new and meaningful attachments to both physical and digital others. Two 'Fundamental Attachment Errors' are discussed to illustrate how these can lead to both 'light' outcomes, in terms of opportunities to learn more secure attachment patterns, and 'dark' outcomes where existing dysfunctional behaviours become more pronounced. The authors argue that digital playscapes offer safer places where people can experiment with relationships. For example, avatars that children adopt online are taken up by the authors and highlighted for the important consequences in terms of psychosocial development which is mediated through the degree to which the real self is differentiated from the avatar. Our sense of self is no longer limited to the actions carried out by our physical body, as we adopt other bodies, ethnicities, sexes and species and our self changes as a function of what all these other bodies do. The authors propose that attachment is a key force in understanding play, and that studying its manifestations and effects in digital playscapes may contribute to our understanding of the effects of life online, and how insecure attachments may become secure. The authors conclude by arguing that attachment theory must become more malleable and that digital playscapes could assist in that project of malleability.

The nine contributions that comprise this issue offer rich and varied insights into children's play by engaging with two under-theorised and interrelated aspects of play: the dark and the digital, and by bringing these facets of experience together. The issue gathers together a wide

range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives including digital informatics, new sociologies of childhood, psychoanalysis, social semiotics and new materialist feminism and posthumanism. This collection bears testament to the many possibilities that are available to theorise and reach new understandings about the significance of new technologies and their manifestations in forms of hidden, taboo and monstrous play.

Guest Editors: Jayne Osgood, Mona Sakr & Victoria de Rijke

## References

- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. (A. Lavers, Trans.). New York: Hill & Wang. (Original work published 1957).
- Burnett, C., Merchant, G., Pahl, K., & Rowsell, J. (2014). The (im) materiality of literacy: the significance of subjectivity to new literacies research. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 35(1), 90-103.
- Grieshaber, S. and McArdle, F. (2010) *The Trouble with Play*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Hawkins, B. (2002). Children's drawing, self expression, identity and the imagination. *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, 21(3), 209-219.
- Lafton, T. (2015). Digital literacy practices and pedagogical moments: Human and non-human intertwining in early childhood education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 16(2), 142-152.
- Madrid, S. (2013). Playing Aggression: the social construction of the 'sassy girl' in a peer culture play routine. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 14(3), 241-254.
- Marsh, J., & Bishop, J. (2013). *Changing Play: Play, Media And Commercial Culture From The 1950s To The Present Day: Play, media and commercial culture from the 1950s to the present day*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- McClure, M. (2011). Child as totem: Redressing the myth of inherent creativity in early childhood. *Studies in Art Education*, 52(2), 127.
- Robinson, K.H. (2013). *Innocence, Knowledge and the Construction of Childhood*. London: Routledge.
- Rorty, R. (1995) Ironists and Metaphysicians. In T. Anderson (Ed.) *The Truth about Truth*. Tarcher Putnam.

Silin, J. (2013). At a Loss: scared and excited. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 14(1), 16-23.

Sutton-Smith, B. (2009). *The ambiguity of play*. Harvard University Press.



## **Additional Biographies**

Jarod Rosello is Assistant Professor at University of South Florida, College of Arts & Sciences. He is a Cuban-American teacher, cartoonist, and writer, born and raised in Miami, Florida. He holds an MFA in creative writing and a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction from Pennsylvania State University. He teaches in the creative writing program at University of South Florida. Jarod's comics, fiction, and arts-based educational research have appeared in numerous journals and magazines. His debut graphic novel, *The Well-Dressed Bear Will (Never) Be Found*, was published August 2015 by Publishing Genius Press. His ongoing, serialized webcomic, *Those Bears*, can be read online at Hobart. He has an illustrated novel, *How We Endure*, forthcoming from Jellyfish Highway Press.

[jrosello@usf.edu](mailto:jrosello@usf.edu)

Dr Jayne Osgood is Professor of Education at the Centre for Education Research & Scholarship at Middlesex University. Her present research methodologies and research practices are framed by new material feminism and posthumanism. She is developing transdisciplinary theoretical approaches that maintain a concern with issues of social justice, and which critically engage with policy, curricular frameworks and pedagogical approaches. Through her work she seeks to reconfigure understandings of the workforce, families and 'the child' and 'childhood' in early years contexts.