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**RESEARCH**

# Playing the Game, or Not: Reframing Understandings of Children's Digital Play

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Everybody seems to have an opinion about the value, risks and opportunities of children playing digital games. Popular media conveys messages to parents and the public alike of addicted, violent, desensitised, and anti-social children and of the privacy risk of back end data collection. Educationalists waver between seeing digital games as hindering more positive educational, social and physical activity, or as being a new way to engage students and improve learning outcomes. Parents are in fear of the 'dangers' of gaming and screen time yet enticed by the educational promise and the entertainment value of keeping their children occupied. Game developers see opportunities for data collection, surveillance and for nudging children's behaviour and purchases. Many of these fears, hopes, and hype are replaying older tropes that circulate around any new technology, media forms and associated changes in practices, but are amplified further by having children as their central focus. Indeed, all of these stakeholders in children's futures have particular understandings of what is good for children and what an ideal child should be. Yet children are not docile bodies who simply have things happen to them: they subvert, appropriate and innovate. This paper is a call for an exploration of what and how children's digital gaming looks like from a child's perspective and for a reframing of understanding children's digital play as a result.

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Children's digital gaming has been the subject of many (and often opposing) discourses. In popular media, children's gaming is predominantly framed within the discussion of the social or moral deficits of gaming surrounding exposure to violence, video game addiction and the risk of data or financial loss through unapproved microtransactions. Within educational discourse, the discussion vacillates between representing games as frivolous leisure activities that may be replacing more 'productive' or serious learning activities, or considering games as a potential new method for engaging children in learning. Parents, as the ultimate custodians of their children's development, are pulled in multiple directions being mindful of the need for their children to develop digital literacies, and to enjoy themselves whilst simultaneously being bombarded with media and health, education, and community messages about the dangers of game addiction, and social and developmental impact of screen time (Willett 2015). All of these positionings relate to the management of children's game play activities derived from various stakeholders with vested interests in children's development now and into the future (Marsh 2010). Elsewhere, one of the authors has detailed some of these vested interests in her discussion of the shaping of an ideal child (Willson 2019). These interests all relate to controlling, persuading, influencing and acting upon the child through the mechanism of controlled digital game play.

Although there is an emerging field of literature that looks beyond these binaries of good or evil, beneficial or detrimental, there is still little research in the children-digital games literature that addresses the agency of the child within these power relations. Discussion emphasises the role of the producer or the game itself as the actor, not on the lived experience and capabilities of the child. The emerging literature that addresses this gap focuses on how children can subvert the intended purpose of the game put forth by producers, which in turn, may reify an understanding of a binary relationship between producer and

consumer. What is not taken into account here is that the power relations that construct children's play are much broader, and that children are not docile bodies situated within these relations. Instead children do have some level of agency that they can enact in multiple ways. We employ the notion of subversive play to indicate the tactics of children's play: play that is engaged in ways that the various stakeholders in children's play activity may not have envisaged or intended. This will be explained in more detail below.

In this paper, therefore, we want to move away from the idea that subversive play is only about activity undertaken disrupting boundaries between producer and consumer and to instead examine other stakeholders concerned with how children play games including parents, institutions such as the education system and the media, and the broader structures of gender, race, class and ability that influence children's digital play. This paper will use and extend upon Michel de Certeau's (2005) conceptualising of the interaction between strategies and tactics in troubling a linear power flow, and it will look more broadly at the network of power relations (and stakeholders) involved in children's video games. This network includes regulations set by parents, the 'intended' function set by the author/producers of the game, and more broadly at how the context of video games is situated in terms of gender, race and class. We will address how children may enact 'playful subversion' (Fróes and Tosca 2018) and in doing so many not only blur the boundaries between producer and consumer, but the forces that construct a child in a particular way. We propose a 'reframing' of children's digital gaming to emphasise that children have agency and are not docile bodies who have things happen to them: they subvert, appropriate and innovate.

This purpose of this paper is to highlight a gap in dominant popular and academic discourses concerning children's digital play and to call for further research in this space. To trigger this research, we begin to develop a theoretical framework of study that addresses this dearth, rather than discussing the results of a particular qualitative study and what they state about children's gaming. Throughout this paper, we intentionally refrain from prescribing specific methodologies or subjects of study and instead seek to demonstrate the limitations of preconceived frameworks that construct children's gaming in ways that reaffirm dominant power relations and gesture towards ways these frames can be nuanced or broadened. The literature review below is separated into two general themes that represent discourses we have found to be prevalent in this discussion: *motivations and behaviours in gaming* and *cognitive strategies of game practice*. The first two categories – *motivations and behaviours* – address what kinds of games children consume and how they behave in the games – what kinds of practices they do and do not participate in, which is often linked in the literature to types of performance of gender roles. The latter category – *cognitive strategies* – explores how children manage the rules of a game and where these methods of management come from. Through this review, we highlight what is missing from these themes. In the second section of this paper, we theorise subversive play through the notions of strategies and tactics understood as situated within a network of practices, stakeholders and forces affecting children's digital gaming. Finally, we suggest possible areas of established research into adult gaming practices that may be useful in rethinking children's gaming.

## The ideal child

Central to this argument is the notion that digital technology functions are employed to shape children into the 'ideal child' (Willson 2019), but also that children can and do resist this imposition. Willson argues that 'The environment into which the contemporary child is conceived and raised increasingly draws upon technologies that variously surveil, interrogate, manipulate and anticipate activities and outcomes' (2019: 620). The descriptor of the ideal child is used to denote how the various discourses (e.g. Arising out of the spheres of education, health, the state, society, the commercial system) envisage what a successful child should be, how they should behave, and how they should be raised from the various disciplinary perspectives. These perspectives are informed by the outcome the particular stakeholders desire. To illustrate, consider the state wishes for children to be good citizens, the commercial sector wants them to become/be desiring consumers, the health sector has particular ideas as to what a healthy normal child should be and do. Increasingly, technological mechanisms are employed to assist with this shaping of the child's pathways and opportunities. This paper situates discussion of technologically facilitated shaping of the child in the form of digital game mechanics and content alongside the various discourses about what is desirable or otherwise for children to do and what the desirable outcomes might be, alongside consideration of the ways in which children engage with these attempts at shaping.

## Literature Review

Children's games come in multiple genres, formats and rely on various economic models. These games can also be played in multiple locations: from educational games played on tablets or phones, to console first person shooter games, to virtual worlds on desktop computers, the range of games children can be offered

are immense. The below discussion is necessarily very general; however, it demonstrates how children's game research (that focuses on children rather than on parents and other stakeholders' management of game access) is focussed on motivations, behaviour and gaming cognitive strategies in different types of age/gender cohorts and through various types of games. Games are grouped by genre and the kind of play they encourage: simulation, action, prosocial, adventure, 'challenging' (of the self) or competitive (between two or more players). The studies described below assess the motivations, behaviours and cognitive strategies according to how they fit into understandings of gender difference and various states of maturity and development.

### ***Motivations and behaviours in gaming***

In our review of literature on children's games, we identified the theme of motivations for game consumption where the research discusses why children make the game choices they do. Much of the scholarship in this area approaches age and gender as key social factors that construct these choices, but much of this tended to reinforce gender binaries and essentialist understandings of 'boys' and 'girls'. Specifically, key subjects of study in these works were often adolescents, and explored the difference in gaming motivations for girls and boys. Kristen Lucas and John Sherry (2004), in a study involving a large-scale survey of gender differences in 'young adults' (defined here as ages 18–24), argued that their findings suggest that different motivations to play games (for example: being challenged by the game itself versus competition between two or more players; the desire for social interaction and inclusion while playing the game and so on) was supported by both biological sex difference and socialisation. This discussion of violence, competition and aggression in video games as being preferred by males is one of the dominant discourses around children's gaming, and tends to reinforce stereotypical gender binaries. Similarly, Tilo Hartmann and Christoph Klimt (2006) argued that adolescent girls were less attracted to competition, games that lacked meaningful social interaction and types of games that featured violent content or sexist stereotypical characters.

Ferguson, Trigani, Pilato, Miller, Foley and Barr (2016)'s study on the impact of violent video games showed that violent video game exposure increased stress, but only for girls. Their study examined the responses and self-reports by teens aged between 12–18 on their stress and hostility levels during and after playing a violent video game (*Tomb Raider 2013*, an adventure game) as opposed to a game that was categorised as non-violent (*FIFA*, a sports game). Their findings reflect a minimal impact of video games on social hostility, in response to dominant moralistic discourse that assigns blame to video games for violent behaviour, but suggests that the girls may have experienced more stress due to not being familiar with the expected behaviour and strategies involved in gameplay (Ferguson et al. 2016: 53). Jeroen Jansz, Corinne Avis and Mirjam Vosmeer (2010) conducted a study among fifth, eighth and eleventh graders and college students, both girls and boys, and found that the males self-reported their motivations by fantasy, challenge and social interaction more than the females did. While the suggestion that women and girls tend to prefer games that involve social interaction as noticed by Lucas and Sherry (2004) seems to contradict this, Jansz et al (2010) argue that while women and girls value social interaction in games, they may find it elsewhere.

Behaviours and motivations are often linked in literature around gaming practices, especially in terms of how children play games as method of social interaction (Viera 2014). Coyne, Jensen, Smith and Erickson (2016) examined how siblings co-played video games, looking specifically at levels of affection and conflict. Their findings were that playing video games with a sibling was associated with higher levels of sibling affection for both boys and girls, but higher levels of conflict for boys only. Playing a violent video game with a brother was associated with lower levels of conflict in the sibling relationship, whereas playing a prosocial video game was not related to any sibling outcome. This study continues to explore, from the perspective of children, how social interactions are facilitated or impacted by digital play, notably outside an educational context.

Overall, these studies discussed what types of games were played and why, rather than what was actually done in the games and how they were played. In the literature, there is an overwhelming emphasis on the habits and behaviours of adolescents 12–18 or older children between eight and 12. We are interested in widening the emphasis to incorporate younger age groups that are often omitted from these studies without constructing prescriptive boundaries around what each age group can and should do. We are also interested in turning away from the comparison of 'boys' and 'girls' in their gaming practices but will rather aim to include all genders and other social characteristics of difference as one of many factors that influence how children engage with the external forces that shape their gameplay.

### ***Cognitive strategies of game practice***

There is an emerging field of works that discussed strategy of games, but much of this was about how the game was played *well*; that is, how were certain groups of players able to understand or formulate their

own instructions so that they could win the game or play most efficiently. Fran Blumberg and Lori Sokol (2004) examined gender differences in the cognitive strategies that children use when they learn how to play a video game. Their study centred on children in second and fifth grade. The results indicated that more frequent players and older children were more likely to cite internally based strategies (that is, ones they 'discovered' themselves) – notably, gender did not seem to be a factor that significantly affected these findings. Karla Hamlen (2011) writes that more research is needed in this area, because although much has been studied about playing habits and aggression, motivation and learning strategies are less represented in the current literature on video game play, especially as relating to younger children. Hamlen's study examined children in fourth and fifth grade and examined gender differences in terms of not only what kinds of games were preferred by whom, but also what strategies were taken in each kind of game. Hamlen (2011) argues that the strategy of repetition was often implemented by boys who played action and educational games, but was less likely to be used during simulation and adventure games. Girls who played adventure games were more likely to use the strategy of learning by watching others play than in other kinds of games. The emphasis in these articles is on cognitive strategy, meaning that the focus is on the choices children actively make in gaming practices. Valerie Walkerdine called for a reframing of looking at the choices children make in gaming 'which does not start with subject and object as simply a given frame to be placed onto everything,' (2007: 3) but to 'understand connections between hands, eyes, voices, screens, consoles, bodies – in a different way, a way that does not automatically separate them into a figure and a ground or a subject acting upon an object' (Walkerdine 2007: 3). Similarly, our proposed framework wants to account for not only the active, cognitive strategies children deploy in digital play, but the broader network of actions and actors involved.

The ways in which children interact with games has been framed as activity that is embedded within the design of the game, which may problematise classical sociology divides between structure and agency. David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green (2004) in their work on addressing children's engagement of *Pokemon*, argue that the relationship between consumer and producer (applied here as child and Nintendo, the game developer) would dominantly be described in terms of structure and agency in order to debate the power of media audiences. They suggest instead that the opposition between structure and agency is misguided, and propose the notion of pedagogy to understand this relationship. They posit that the structure/agency binary becomes noticeably irrelevant when looking at how the *Pokemon* games are 'designed to generate activity and social interaction...there is a level of cognitive activity required here, but also a level of social or interpersonal activity without which the phenomenon could not exist' (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 2004: 23). While their study complicates the producer/consumer binary in a way we are also concerned with, we are more interested in the kinds of activity not prescribed or enforced by either the game designers or other stakeholders.

### Strategy, tactic and playful subversion

In terms of subversive tactics, or how children engage with games in ways that are beyond or against the intended purpose, Isabel Fróes and Susana Tosca (2018) proposed the concept of 'playful subversion', which looked at the tablet use of children aged between four and eight. The study explored how the children resisted the expected use of the various applications in order to invent their own forms of interaction 'that are not based on game goals or usefulness' (1). An example of this is in an anecdote they describe in which a five-year-old, Clara, uses her mother's tablet to play a farming game where the aim is to make the town and animals productive; the child has instead chosen to ensure that the animals are sleeping peacefully and town residents are happy. Fróes and Tosca proposed the category of playful subversion to conceptualize the different kinds of technology appropriation and the pleasures of playful tinkering and 'to describe the play-driven practices that go against or challenge digital designs, and authoritative figures, such as teachers and parents' (2018: 2). They argue that playful subversions 'makes alternative forms of agency visible ....' (Fróes and Tosca 2018: 3) While Fróes and Tosca looked at tablet use more broadly on a variety of applications (apps), this framework could apply to digital games specifically and is not limited to those played on a tablet.

The central purpose of this paper is to explore the idea of 'playful subversion' (Fróes and Tosca 2018) through consideration of Michel de Certeau's 'strategy and tactics' (2005), where strategy (not to be confused with game strategy noted in the literature review above) is seen as the intention or manipulation of power relations from within a specific structure, and tactics are the negotiation of those relations from the side without a 'proper locus' or authority and are therefore seen as having perhaps more autonomy. As de Certeau writes, a *strategy* [is] the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated' (2005: 218, original emphasis). Here, 'strategy' can be applied to not only the rules enforced by the games,



encoded by the game producers, but also by the restrictions and frameworks imposed by a variety of stakeholders who have certain expectations for how, when, why those games are played and by whom, including parents, educators and the media. These cohorts have particular outcomes in mind: an ideal child according to expectations around education, and certain social, cultural and economic behaviour.

Conversely, 'a *tactic* is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy' (De Certeau 2005: 219). Rather than constructing the boundaries of powerful/powerless or producer/consumer here, strategy/tactics may have more applicability to children's digital play by virtue of the flexibility of these categories. As De Certeau argues, 'the space of a tactic is the space of the other' (2005: 219), which gestures towards how tactics can serve a function to negotiate the figure of the 'ideal child' (Willson, 2019). Mark, a 12-year-old boy, in one study of child digital game play (McLeod and Lin 2010) tried to make his avatar jump off the bridge to hide from the game's monster when he became bored playing the educational multiplication game *Timez Attack*. It is unclear whether he actually succeeded – the authors do not tell us the outcome – however, the point here is that Mark attempted to use the affordances of the game (the avatar, the bridge, the act of jumping, the monster) in ways not expected or intended by the developer and one assumes also, of any educators who wish the child to practice his multiplication. He employed tactics.

There is some precedent for this type of analysis in broader game and play studies. Mary Flanagan (2009: 31–33), for example, recounts studies of Victorian girls' doll play – she refers to it as 'unplay' – where girls subverted or resisted the expected social and cultural play conventions. Flanagan notes that this was manifest through some game play where dolls were abused, dismembered, and 'killed', and also dressed in a manner contrary to expected doll play conventions. This can also be described as tactics enacted by girls to appropriate, resist and shape behaviours and action in ways contrary to the system's strategies of control.

To return to the anecdote relayed by Fróes and Tosca (2018) of Clara's game play, she appropriates the game's functionality and digital affordances of animals, residents, building materials and available actions within the game to achieve the types of outcomes that she wishes to derive rather than follow the underlying strategic intent of the game which is endless capitalist reproduction. This means that not only is she playing contrary to the model that the game and its developer impart, her mother is also working in the background to sustain this model by maintaining a productive game environment so that Clara can continue to play as she wishes. The parent must modify her own behaviour to sustain and accommodate the child's playing practices.

Similarly, in the discussion of Victorian doll play, when play was undertaken contrary to the expected manner, the system (parents, doll manufacturers) modified their strategies by introducing funeral paraphernalia (caskets, costumes, other doll products) and by parents teaching children about funeral rituals. De Certeau (2005) also notes the way that the system can adopt tactics and refashion them in a recursive manner: strategy enables tactics which can be adopted into strategies then invoking other tactics. Tactical play, then becomes one form of child agency that can potentially extend beyond that one immediate act of subversive play to indirectly refashioning game design, play or affordances.

## Games or Play

The distinction between strategies and tactics could be paralleled, to an extent, to the distinction between games and play, which has been theorised in other forms of media. Bruno Bettelheim argues that the difference lies in the implementation of rules, as well as the impact of stress to win:

*Generally speaking, play refers to the young child's activities characterized by freedom from all but personally imposed rules (which are changed at will), by free-wheeling fantasy involvement, and by the absence of any goals outside the activity itself. Games, however, are usually competitive and are characterized by agreed-upon, often externally imposed, rules, by a requirement to use the implements of the activity in the manner for which they are intended and not as fancy suggests, and frequently by a goal or purpose outside the activity, such as winning the game. (Bettelheim 1987)*

While 'games' could be equated here with 'strategy' in that both categories suggest a type of structuring imposed by a source of power (the game producers, parents and other figures that either regulate or instruct 'proper' gameplay), 'play' appears to exemplify the use of 'tactics'. Bettelheim's account of play discusses how rules may be involved, but they come from the child – not from the game itself or the parent/educator who regulates. To link this with Fróes and Tosca's (2018) example of Clara, the rules she is following are self-imposed and are different to those enforced by the game itself. Henry Jenkins uses the games/play distinction to discuss how children's and adults' experience of watching television may differ. Jenkins

describes children's television watching practices as 'unstructured and exploratory' (2006: 163), converse to his description of television as requiring 'skills they have imperfectly mastered, and that assume goals which they do not yet share' (163). The emphasis for children, Jenkins argues, is on the sensation and spectacle of fun. This also frames play as the space of the other, akin to the space of tactics, in that play is taken up by younger children who are othered or excluded by the more adult and structured domain of television as narrative as a means of negotiating their role in the text.

### Future directions and conclusions

In our development of a framework for theorising the potentially subversive deployment of tactics by children in digital play, there are areas that require further research. We suggest that certain concepts discussed in adult and teen focussed game studies may be useful: specifically, the practice of modding. Modding (modifying) could be considered as tactical, to an extent. Modding refers to the practice of modification of the software, hardware, narrative, or other elements of the game and its environment. Hector Postigo argues that fan modding, not specifically endorsed by game producers, can be transformative and creative, and potentially productive (2008: 60). It is – for our purposes here – somewhat tactical as some mods are now expected/anticipated by the game developers and incorporated into the game design. Where modding is encouraged this would seem less tactical, specifically because of the ambiguous boundaries constructed between play and labour – what Julian Kücklich terms 'playbour' (2005). While young children are less likely to hack or mod the software and technical elements of digital games, their capacity to disrupt narratives and affordances reflects similar discussions of modding as a playful and creative practice. Where this research notably diverges from conceptualisations of modding, however, is that the subversive play enacted by children is usually not done with subversion as the goal, where modding takes place with participants knowing consciously they are altering the game from its original version. Future directions for this framework include the aim to apply our approach to a specific study that examines the lived experience of subversive play, specific to the context of digital games. It will be useful to extend the theories of this paper to collect data that addresses the gaps in the literature we have identified. Specifically, we are interested in expanding the object of study to include all genders and broader age cohorts without employing a methodology that necessarily compares these groups, which may function to essentialise or reify certain normative understandings of social difference. Children's digital play is a rapidly shifting field: as new forms of technology, media and texts are developed and made available to children earlier and more often, the research surrounding how children's interactions with games needs to become more nuanced.

### Competing Interests

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