

Identities at play: Exploring children's digital gaming in two settings in Cape Town

Abstract

Children's digital gaming is understudied in the Global South. Research on children, gender and games abound in the Global North, some utilising Childhood Studies research findings on children's gendered play in Western societies or methodological orientations towards children (Kafai 2008, Jenkins 1998). This study presents a South African ethnography of how middle-class children (aged 4 to 13, N = 60+) in two settings; an after-school Arts and Crafts club and a holiday club; in Cape Town appropriated gender-specific and non-gendered digital games for peer play. The children in the two research settings played a range of age-appropriate laptop and PlayStation 3 games. More than 100 hours of gameplay were observed and recorded over a period of six months. Ethnographic methods and Social Network Analysis were used to document children's appropriations of digital games and gendered play patterns. The children's playground discourse marked digital games and related technologies as objects of conspicuous consumption signifying middle class assimilation. Boys and girls marked their gender identities through appropriations of particular games within same-sex and cross-gender peer groups. This study documents the children's identity development through digital gaming in their relationships with peers, and also in response to the gatekeeping role of adult authorities such as parents and ratings bodies. It proposes a theoretical frame to understand children's appropriations of games developed from de Certeau's (1980) distinction between strategies and tactics which allows one to view children's gameplay as tactical creativity in relation to institutions and power structures such as peer groups, game design, middle-class parenting and age-ratings.

Peer relationships play a central role in how children appropriate gaming platforms and titles in particular play contexts. This study integrates Childhood Studies literature with Cultural Studies research on digital games and play to explore children's digital gaming in relation to gender and social class. It finds that children's digital gaming amplifies existing gendered play patterns and playground practices in these settings. Childhood Studies research on children's non-digital mediated play is still relevant to studies of how children play with modern, technological objects and how they appropriate these objects for borderwork (Thorne 1993) and other social distinctions. This study also applies Caillois' (1958) typology of games to describe how children use game rules to configure particular types of play and how (often gendered) hidden transcripts of play emerge. I also consider how children develop gendered

and class identities through their consumption patterns in relation to adult society by discussing differences between parents' and children's definitions of 'good' games and the rhetorics of play (Sutton-Smith 1997) suggested by their discourse.

This study contributes to the 'social turn' in Game Studies (also known as Ludology) research, while expanding on Childhood Studies, currently lacking insights into children's digital play. It also presents a new way of thinking about the gender-games nexus. Children's gendered and class appropriations of games involve a 'double articulation' (Silverstone *et al.* 1992) of games: not only do children develop meanings of games, but the gaming platforms and titles involved in play also take on particular meanings as objects. This is why studies of children and games are murky territories, since children and adult society often do not share these meanings. While parents privilege progress rhetorics of play, children see digital games as a way to communicate hidden transcripts of play amongst friends. Agonistic or conflictual play, hegemonic in Game Studies and studies of dominant (masculine) technicities, are drawn into question. This study provides accounts of diversity in children's gameplay as tactical creativity which go beyond Game Studies assumptions about play. Analyses of children's negotiation of game rules question Game Studies definitions of 'play' and 'games'. Theoretical contributions of this study include: proposing wider definitions of 'play' and 'games', challenging 'magic circle' (Huizinga, 1949) views of play which see such spaces as ideologically neutral, expanding on definitions of configuration in New Media Theory by considering children's social configurations and meanings of games during play, recognising normative models of childhood and access inscribed by notions of game literacy, and how rhetorics of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997) position research on children and digital games in particular ways. It also provides a more nuanced understanding of how children navigate existing power relations with adult authorities in the process of constituting their identities.

This study approaches children's identities as relational constructions, not residing in the minds of individual children, but rather performed through discursive interactions with peers and parents. The children's gaming practices in this study are treated as instances of appropriation (Silverstone 1994), which involves an assemblage of social practices that children use to perform and configure gendered identities in relation to the platforms and games available, their peers and parents. A Cultural Studies approach highlights the contextual nature of gameplay by drawing on Butler's (1993) notion of gender performativity and the work of Cultural Studies theorists, such as Buckingham (2009), who consider children's identities in relation to their media use.