
Gameworlds

Virtual Media and Children's Everyday Play

Seth Giddings



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Bad play

Perhaps the type of (gendered) imaginative play that has generated the most anxiety, argument and debate is boys' war play, play with toy guns, knives or other forms of fighting and combat. War toys and war play have been scrutinized and agonized over for decades, and toy guns, or any object or gesture intended to act as a toy gun, have been banned in many schools (see Smith 1994). Research by Burn, Willett and Richards in English playgrounds in the past few years found that even playful gestures indicating an imaginary gun or knife were forbidden. However, boys improvised their own work-around by adopting gestures from the amalgam of martial arts and magic powers that characterize many contemporary animated television programmes.

This policing of playground gestures and actions, of course, cannot be separated from ongoing debates on the effects on children of war films, violent videos and of course military/action video games. These discussions have been particularly fraught in the United States in the aftermath of a number of mass killings in schools. In all these play forms, in different ways, the anxiety or assumption is that children (or some children) cannot tell the difference between play and reality, or may be more likely to adopt violent behaviour in later life.

Critiques of these 'media effects' assumptions are well set out and argued elsewhere.² What a close descriptive attention to play can contribute, I would suggest, is a sense of the complex interplay of fantasy, imagination and fear – or excitement – about real violence in the world.

We are camping, soon after the riots that swept through English cities following a police shooting in August 2011. Jo, Alex, and Alex's friend Niko are playing with some Lego in the tent. I record their talk, and later take photographs of the aftermath of the game (Figure 7.1).

J: I only have two people, but they have sticks!

A & N: fighting/shooting/impact noises

N: Is my guy ever going to die?

A: No!

J: This guy dies.

A: This guy's my last rioter...

N: No! No! Not yet, he doesn't die yet!

N: I'll tell you when he can die.

J: There's a fake policeman ... Alex, I killed him with his own neon riot stick



Figure 7.1 Lego riot

J: You know riot shields? This is what they do...
 J: Alex, I'm just beating this guy to death with his own stick!
 N: The police have got a robot!
 A: Err! Err! Err! Err!
 J: It's a bomb disposal.... I've beaten him so hard his legs fell off.
 J: Grr! The last rioter alive!

Whilst it seems to be generally understood that children know the difference between playing violence and actual violence – a fight is an utterly different experience to make-believe combat – for some parents and teachers, the noise and aggression of war play appears to leave no space for boys in particular to exercise their imaginations or develop verbal and emotional relationships.³ Hence teachers or playworkers may intervene to channel play into more constructive patterns (see Smith 1994 for a study of the war games and toys debates).

Imaginative, 'free' play isn't necessarily always creative, fulfilling and joyful. It can be repetitive, boring or bullying. Jo's mini-game with the Lego Racers in which he drove the little car repeatedly over a cliff, drowned and respawned shed any obvious imaginative or even pleasurable aspects along with the virtual Lego bricks and seemed to be driven by thanatological feedback between the computer game's cybernetic grip and his own encroaching sleepiness. Iona Opie documents numerous desultory moments of mild cruelty among the playground's exuberance and collusions (Opie 1993). Brian Sutton-Smith notes games between siblings that seem to be shaped by the attractive force of younger children's desire to be involved and the repulsive forces of ludic humiliation, and even harm, from their older brothers and sisters. Often, 'for the younger sibling, the price of fun is getting hurt' (Sutton-Smith 1971, 104).

Scarlett et al. draw attention to what they call 'bad play'. Acknowledging the contentiousness of the term, they are careful to point out that it is not the symbolic material in play that they consider 'bad' (in the sense of contemporary anxieties about make-believe war or sexualized toys), nor rough physical play, but rather play that

does not allow for the socialization process to take place in positive ways for all children involved. Play that excludes or ridicules other children and play that is destructive qualify as bad play. (Scarlett et al. 2005, 80)

We might note that as with all play boundaries, that between good and bad is shifting and permeable. Other playground ethnographers have observed that the techniques and gestures that signal the start of a game and the constitution of its players may also, more or less subtly, exclude children on the periphery (Richards 2013, 75–76). The younger sibling must balance pain and pleasure; ridicule is a dominant mode of friendly communication for boys well into teenage years and early adulthood; and the borderline between playful destruction and vandalism is one drawn as much by social context as by individual motivation.

Throughout Jo and Alex's childhood in video game culture, the moments of anger, tears and aggression (mainly against the game technology itself) were triggered not by violent scenarios, characters and action in the digital gameworlds, but by frustration with the game on the structural, ludic level. Losing online at FIFA has resulted in Xbox controllers and even mobile phones being broken, whereas the frenetic and ultra-violent online combat of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* seems to generate nothing but hilarity. This topsy-turvy generation of frustration in the breakdown of 'violent' play, rather than in its fantastical performance, is well-illustrated in this account of a play event:

A respected and popular boy in the group is sitting bound to a chair and is being whipped – about 30 times with relatively hard blows – by two other boys with a leather strap. The roles are assigned: He cries out accordingly, 'Ah!' 'Oh!' Two girls give the bound boy some blocks as bananas to eat. The two boys wielding the whip join in and give the bound boy something imaginary to drink. The game thus experiences a resolution through which new excitement may be generated: The whipping proceeds. Obviously, all the playmates are satisfied, the game is, for all intents and purposes, okay. When the teacher intervenes, the children become directly aggressive; chairs are thrown around, and everybody is in a bad mood. (Wegener-Spöhring 1994, 97)

The teacher's alarm at this simulation of torture is understandable but apparently misplaced, for – as the researchers note – the game was relaxed and fun for all the participants, not least the 'victim'. It is the disruption of the game system – the intervention of the everyday exercise of benign authority in this case, the cybernetic gameplay in the preceding examples – that triggers stress and actual violence (against objects at least).

Realities

A baby doll is not a real baby, but it is not *not* a baby. (Gregory Bateson, cited by Sutton-Smith 1994, 144)

One of the most dominant rhetorics of play is that of *progress* or *development* – that children and animals prepare themselves for the reality beyond parental protection through play-hunting, play-evasion and so on. For human children this includes the acting out of the adult world they see ahead of them, playing at doctors or dressing up in adult clothing. As Sutton-Smith points out, ‘This belief in play as progress is something that most Westerners cherish, but its relevance to play has been more often assumed than demonstrated’ (Sutton-Smith 1997, 9). This notion of play as progress is particularly evident in educational and psychological discourses, but it shares underlying assumptions about the nature of culture and communication, about the mediation of the real with play, with critical approaches to media culture touched on in Chapter 4. Both assume a more or less linear transfer of images and ideas from an exterior world to the interior world of imagination. Children’s play is seen as fundamentally imitative or mimetic. Any attention to the transductive operations of play, however, demonstrates that the ‘transfer’ of non-play elements of reality is rarely if ever so straightforward. From the necessary surrealism of play’s magical animation of toys to the misunderstanding or embellishment of actual events (as in the Lego riot), mimesis at the very least has to project its images onto other textures and moving bodies. Though play at first glance may seem imitative or mimetic, often the marvellous is generated as much by the repurposing of available materials available as by the child’s imagination. Consider, for example, the scene in the film *Toy Story* where Hannah, the younger sister of the toy-hacking Sid, comes across the space toy Buzz Lightyear and incorporates him into her dolls’ tea party, dresses him up with apron and hat and renames him ‘Mrs Nesbit’. Such transductions are probably near-universal in play with toys.⁴

Play may start from a reassuringly imitation of reality (family group, adult jobs, etc.), but has a marked tendency to then rapidly move away from these realities – and not towards them as one might expect if play were primarily ‘training’ or practice for adult life. Take this transduction of adult family life, for example:

The researcher asked 3 children what they were playing. Each of them said ‘families’. In their play, Henry was a brother to a younger sister, Marie. Jack was also a brother, though his position in their age order was not immediately

specified. Marie commented: 'We act like normal families, except we don't do what families do, we do different jobs'; Jack added: 'We sort of shout at each other. If it's time for someone to go to school you just get go to school and shove them out of the house.' So, given these comments, it was possible to see the bedding down, the restlessness and the brief tussles as enactments of sibling relations. But they were more than that. All three were also secret agents. *X-3 (X-Men)*, *Spy Kids* and *The Incredibles* were offered as sources. Henry had water powers (like Frozone in *The Incredibles*). Marie could stretch, 'like Elastigirl'. Jack was the mechanic – 'I just build all the weapons so I just go into my workshop and build something and ten seconds later I come out with a weapon' and 'I'm sort of half Mr Incredible and half Dash, because I'm really strong and I'm really quick'. (Richards 2013, 77)

The children clearly weren't training to be mummies and daddies and gradually edging towards *realizing* those adult roles. Here instead a familiar domestic setting serves more as a springboard from which to launch into dream-like condensations of film characters, powers, with some scraps of the surface features of adult behaviour caught up in its semiotic and kinetic dynamism.

With its surface familiarity but its animation by more abstract and playful systems of signification, this imaginative play resonates with the structure and processes of the simulation game. A Sims family and home may be constructed along mimetic lines of the player's aspirations or fantasies for future life, but they are driven (as we saw in Chapter 5) by quite different motives and possibilities. I would suggest that as well as using the *virtual* as a way of rethinking the time and space of play in contemporary technoculture, we might view imaginative play in particular in terms of simulation, not imitation or representation. A simulation, in both its philosophical and computer senses, is a model or copy without original, and simulacra are self-moving devices with behaviours that go beyond that suggested by their surface appearances (Giddings 2007b, 2014c).

Children's play fantasies are not meant only to replicate the world [...] they are meant to fabricate another world that lives alongside the first one and carries on its own kind of life, a life often much more emotionally vivid than mundane reality. (Sutton-Smith 1997, 158)

Poesis

The computer simulation's predictions, its generation of 'synthetic histories', are productive of reality, then, not merely or directly reflective. In his ethnographic

research of Huli children's play in Papua New Guinea, anthropologist L.R. Goldman separates imaginative or imaginal processes into two types that support these distinctions in the relationship between play and non-play realities. In terms that he takes from Coleridge, he distinguishes the catoptric and the metoptric (sometimes written as catatropic and metatropic). The former is a mere mirroring of external reality, the latter a 'transposing through rearrangement'. They correspond with the distinctions made throughout this book between media communication as the transmission and reception (more or less as intended) of a message and the playful production of culture through the collusions of play event. In Goldman's terms, they mark the difference between 'reproduction and recreation, the unadorned and the adorned, fidelity and fantasy', establishing a notion of children's fantasy play as poetic and poeitic: 'a dramatic mimesis of human behaviour; a mimesis in the sense not of bland reproduction, but of something transformed' (Goldman 1998, 19). Children's imaginative performances, then, 'are never intended as veridical representations, real-world documentaries. Rather they present as distorted simulacrum, not copies but editorialized caricatures incorporating embellishment and exaggeration...' (Goldman 1998, 19).

The simulacral operations of imaginative play open up a different kind of protopolitics to that of 'representation'. Beth Cross, for instance, notes the implications for the expression of ludic or cultural *power* in metatropic play:

Metatropic mimicry by its very nature is a process open to variable interpretations, and therefore a useful strategy of those in subordinate positions. This may be one of the reasons it is such an attractive tactic for children. It works within the power structures without overtly challenging them. (Cross 2005, 128)

Phantasmagoria

With the kraken attack, the already unstable paddling pool/*Age of Mythology* gameworld described in Chapter 1 dissolved in a metatropic cloud of noises, actions and fantastical allusions – like a decaying subatomic particle ejecting exotic new objects:

J and A: Argh! Man overboard! We're going to use the lobster as [indistinct]
 J: But these is related to a crayfish
 J: Here is an underwater dinosaur

J: and then they boil him, and eat him!
 A: (exaggerated munching noises and gestures)
 J: He's related to ... what's a worm-like thing that lives in the sea?
 A: A seasnake?
 A: Yum, yum!
 A: I'm a robot!
 A: He should just malfunction, and explode
 A: He's dead, that guy's dead for good
 A: The crayfish is dead! Yummy!
 A: That guy should be malfunctioning ...
 A: Actually, my robot should malfunction and explode as well

Sutton-Smith notes that children's own stories 'portray a world of great flux, anarchy and disaster' often without resolution and with 'repetitive episodic plots', a 'preference for rhyme and alliteration' and characterized by nonsense, obscenity and 'crazy titles, morals, and characters' (Sutton-Smith 1997, 161). He cites an energetic story told by a four-year-old boy:

Once there was a dragon who went poo poo on a house and the house broke
 then when the house broke the people died
 and when the people died their bones came out and broke and got together
 again and turned into a skeleton
 and then the skeletons came along and scared the people out of the town
 and then when all the people got scared out of town then skeleton babies were
 born
 and then everyone called it skeleton town
 and when they called it skeleton town the people came back and then they got
 scared away again
 and then when they all got scared away again the skeletons died
 no one came to the town
 so there was no people in that town ever again. (in Sutton-Smith 1997, 161–162)

Observations of play often reveal either a bricolaged aesthetic, in which fragments of songs, gestures, powers, relationships and so on are accreted in a flow of symbolic and performative activities, or substantially more nonsensical or phantasmagorical mixing up of media tropes, playground games, toys, everyday concerns, rhythms of sound and activity. As with the less rarified realms of cultural expression from medieval carnival to Victorian fairs and freakshows to all the grotesqueries of animated film and television, and, of course, video games, children's culture and play are populated with monsters, ghosts, zombies,

witches, unicorns, robots and magic (Caillois 1962, 134–135, Klevjer 2006) (Figure 7.2). Like the carnival, children's oral folklore of jokes and songs is also shot through with a fascination for grotesque bodies and bodily functions, in part through hyperbolic or euphemized sexual and scatological allusions⁵:

The bell must have rung because the football came to a halt and the footballers gathered by the classroom steps, still full of uproarious energy. 'Shall I tell you my nicest story?' said Paul, the lanky blond sophisticate. 'There was this lady and a man, and he said, "I'm going to get divorced from you, you don't half smell. You've got rubber lips and smelly breath. The rubber lips is your bottom and the smelly breath's your fart". I made that up'. He got his breath back and recited,



Figure 7.2 Phantasmagoria

A man's occupation
Is to stick 'is cockeration
Up a lady's ventilation
To increase the population
Of the younger generation.

'I know one', said Andrew.

There was a young man from Cosham,
Who took out his balls to wash 'em.
His wife said, 'Jack,
If you don't put 'em back
I will tread on the buggers and squash 'em'.

The polite version of that, which I have known since the 1930s, concerns eyeballs.
I am not sure I don't prefer the rude one. (Opie 1993, 86)

In its irruption of the monstrous and the taboo into everyday life, its synthesis and condensation of heterogeneous symbolic material into an irrational yet integrated pattern, phantasmagorical play has a dream-like quality. Some child psychologists have identified a similar psychic-semiotic structure to play as in Freud's dreamwork:

a play act – like a dream – is a complicated dynamic product of 'manifest' and 'latent' themes, of past experience and present task, of the need to express something and the need to suppress something, of clear representation, symbolic indirection, and radical disguise. (Erikson 1971 [1951], 129)

It seems evident that to some extent traumatic or libidinal material finds expression in play, but the degree to which studies of play could afford the psychoanalysis of players falls outside the scope of this book, and I would also suggest that this return of the repressed seems to be at most just one stream in the turbulent confluence of gameworlds.⁶ The boys playing 'Lego riot' were no doubt in part responding to the disquiet and excitement driven by their emerging awareness of violent events in the wider world into which they are gradually moving. But their carnivalesque invocation of lasers and police brutality, and the surrealist juxtapositions necessitated by the Lego itself (including bodies, technological fragments, robots from *Star Wars*, etc.), was driven too by the symbolic perversity of play, a depthless orgy of signifiers and materials. As Susan Stewart puts it in her study on the aesthetics of nonsense in literature and folklore,

Nonsense involves a transgression of common-sense interpretive procedures, a hermeticism in its establishment of another domain of reality, and [...] not a simple rearrangement of the hierarchies of common-sense discourse, but a transgression of such hierarchies. (Stewart 1989, 37)

The affectual hold of nonsense's hermetic domains can be extremely powerful in both its aesthetic and behavioural prescriptions. The rules of the paracosm, for instance, are systematic and absolute (Cohen and MacKeith 1991, 53), whereas for older children, nicknames, graffiti tags, slang, singing and clapping games, hairstyles and fashion, are *meaningless* in conventional communication, and their rules and syntax change constantly – but at any particular moment they are absolutely precise and key to the sustenance of the micro-worlds of friendship groups and subcultures.

Phantasmagoria is often the result of a simple symbolic algorithm. For example, Jo, Alex and Niko played on an old tractor in the grounds of a National Trust house. They took it in turns to sit at the wheel and drive the virtually careering vehicle. On the way there they had been talking about *Grand Theft Auto*. They had not been allowed to play the 18 rated game, but were excited about it and may have watched Niko's older brother playing. Actual tractor plus imagined video game equalled an energetic and ludicrous game of *Grand Theft Farmer*, complete with 'gangster farmers' and drive-by shootings (of other visitors walking past the static tractor – here, literally in another world). Perhaps the simplest phantasmagorical operation, though, is *inversion*. The medieval carnival turned the world and its hierarchies upside down for a day, with donkeys elected pope, idiots crowned king and men and women wearing each others' clothing. Blasphemy, licentiousness, promiscuity and gluttony were sanctioned for the brief interlude of the feast day. Contemporary Halloween inverts the residual Christian cosmology of the West as a liminoid hell opens and well-behaved children become monstrous, undead, animal and – again – gluttonous.⁷

Meta-play

Children know that they are manipulating their thoughts about reality, not reality itself, and they know that their play self is not the same as their everyday self. (Sutton-Smith 1997, 159)

The playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite. (Bateson 1972, 180)