**Seth Giddings (2014) *Gameworlds: virtual media and everyday children's play*. New York: Bloomsbury.**

# Draft Chapter 7: Play Grounds

> Playground games and computer games are structurally similar, then. They both feature rule-governed structures, quantified assets, obstacles and challenges, dynamic 'engines' of play. They can vary from loose improvisation to tight rule structures. Like drama, and indeed any kind of fiction, they involve an imagined world of some kind whose governing principles are understood to be different from those of the 'real' world […] Both kinds of game provide complex, often impenetrable forms of pleasure which range from the purely ludic - beating the rules of the game - to the representational - the pleasures of mimicry and role-play (Burn 2013, 124).

25th February 2007. It's the last Sunday of the school half-term holiday, and we're at the Adventure Play Ground (APG) at Windmill Hill City Farm in Bristol. The sky is overcast, and the players and playworkers are chased in and out of the APG building or under play structures by the occasional shower of rain. There are only a handful of other kids there, a few drift in and out, the other diehards are two girls of around 10, and two boys of around 12. There are 3 or 4 playworkers.

Jo, Alex and Sam (aged between 7 and 9) are playing Star Wars. The game is primarily conducted through light sabre battles with sticks. The sticks are broken from

branches lying around the edge of the APG. At first glance the game would be familiar across generations of boys' play: boisterous free-wheeling arms and sticks, bodies leaping from play equipment and the negotiation of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Occasionally too details of the Star Wars diegesis or narrative inflect the boys' dramatic pronouncements and performative gestures and actions – evident throughout the play is a flickering of point of reference from the Star Wars films to the Lego Star Wars videogames.

The interpenetration of the actual and the virtual, the material and the intangible is a central concern throughout this book. This chapter stops to address the actual and the material in play and games through a microethological study of a play event that took place without the immediate presence of any sophisticated technology. Outdoor play with sticks, climbing frames, friends, and action and characters inspired by children's media is both *pre-digital*, in that – broadly - the materials and activities of the gameworld are the same as children's gameworlds long before the widespread availability of computer entertainment media, and – as we have seen throughout this book – *post-digital* in that the game itself is suffused with images and characters from computer games, and is shaped and directed at least in part by the peculiar spaces, conventions and repetitious temporalities of computer games. So, firstly, this case study develops an ethological attention to the materiality of play and bodies in play (including natural objects, play technologies, human bodies); secondly it extends this concern for the material to ask how we might conceptualize the very real, but *immaterial* play elements or bodies as they come together with the material (such as mental imagery, media images, conversation, and collective or intersubjective imagination); and thirdly it will reflect on how this gameworld can be understood as

actual in the era of virtual media – both in terms of its transductions of videogames and in the rethinking of play in general, pre- and post-digital, in the light of virtual media. It will pick up on the suggestion at the end of the last chapter – that imagination in play might itself transducted and distributed across the material and the immaterial.

The microethology of this event of 'free play' will explore the nature of these worlds within worlds, the kinds of spaces or timespaces they generate, their patterns and dynamics, and the phantasmagorical realities they are constituted by, or bring into being. The game – or games – were populated by characters, scenarios and technologies from the media universe of Star Wars (and others) in a imaginative engagement with transmedial ecology of children's popular culture. They were also formed from the material environment of the playground and its buildings (play equipment, sticks, office stationery), as these artefacts both initiated play events and were transformed by it.


(fig. 11)

**Talking into being**

The game began with talk, the boys standing on a play structure, a house-like wooden construction with a ramp leading up to it (fig. 11). Sam decided he will be Luke Skywalker, Jo claimed Anekin as his alter-ego. The talk continued for some minutes, sometimes the children seemed to be talking just to themselves, conjuring up the world they want to inhabit, sketching in the environment and agonistic motive for the action to come. The brothers Jo and Alex argued. They have had occasional arguments in the past over Alex's refusal to conform to the accuracy and continuity of the Star Wars transmedia universe of films, and games and television series, and the particular scenarios Jo wishes to inhabit. The controversy was not so intractable as to stop the emergence of the game, though over the next half an hour or so it flared up from time to time, temporarily stopping play. I – from my position as interested observer from the sidelines - was asked to arbitrate. On such interruption was caused by Alex's dissatisfaction with "Episode 6", the starting point, and most consistently inhabited scenario in this particular game. The reference here is to *The Return of the Jedi*, the third film to be produced (in 1983), but with the subsequent "prequels" becomes in narrative terms the last in a series of six. Interestingly the children made little distinction in their talk or games between the film itself and its remediation in the *Lego Star Wars* games that they had also recently been playing. The ending to "Episode 6" in particular, offended Alex:

> Alex (rhetorically): "What happens to Luke?"
>
> "What happens to the ghosts?"

Alex announces that he is instead going to play "Episode 7", a story-world of his own invention. Episode 7 is conjured into existence there and then, but its central

protagonist – Starjumper – is a well-established creation of his. Starjumper first made an appearance in our house two or three years before, but had not been heard of for quite some time until this game. This did not settle the dispute over diegesis however: Jo is very annoyed about this multiplication of play worlds, and loudly accuses Alex of "cheating."

Despite the momentary vehemence of this argument the game quickly sprang back to life and circulated around the playground, gathering its forces at key landmarks and particularly useful play structures. It appeared that the imaginary scaffolding of play such as this shifts or mutates according the shifting modes of play itself: rules, settings, characters, quests must be clearly established as the gameworld is talked and negotiated into being, but once the swirling and flailing game itself is underway the details are superceded by bodily actions and performances that sweep up semiotic and gestural material from other films and games and the play is much more forgiving of continuity errors. The close agreement required in the talking prelude diverged into a kind of imaginative parallelism as the boys held in their imaginations individual iterations of the gameworld, and their dynamic role within it, with the others' actions were generically appropriate enough to sustain and develop a looser but more exciting collective imaginative world.

A little later they argued about whether they are on Hoth or another planet, the name of which I didn't catch. Alex is a wampa, a yeti-like creature indigenous to the icy planet Hoth in *The Empire Strikes Back*. This sudden attention to location was triggered, I thought on reflection, by the coincidence of two factors. Up until this point whilst the narrative positioning of the game was of great importance, its

geography hadn't been significant, but when Alex took the role of the wampa then the distinct climatic character of this monster came to the fore, its white fur inseparable from its snowy environment. At around this time in the game a shower of light rain started. In a simple but powerful procedure of semiotic synthesis, the fictional world and the actual environment were fused to create a novel material-semiotic environment: a new (un-named) planet analogous to Hoth but characterized by rain rather than snow. Alex soon joined in with the energetic wielding of sticks in a game of light sabre combat. These stick-wielding performances are kinaesthetically sophisticated, but their symbolic consistency less so, and wampadom was forgotten, and the new planet disappeared as if it had never existed.


(fig. 12)

The younger Star Wars boys payed little attention, as they were engrossed in their light sabre driven play (fig. 12). They broke off now and then, the talk often returning to the Lego Star Wars game.

> Jo: 'in one of them if you get a full minikit you get a ghost – an Obi Wan or Yoda ghost'.

Sam has decided that an adult should be included in the stick battles, and while he waits for a reluctant playworker to join them, handed me a stick and I too became a light sabre wielding character. Sam, who had a marked taste for the nonsensical and had affected to have forgotten my name (he has known me most of his life), had already named me George Washington, so I was not allocated a proper character (perhaps because I was merely a stand-in). This shift in number of players from 3 to 4 suggested a team-based dynamic as Jo and I take on Sam and Alex. There was some narrative logic to this pairing though in the resulting melée of both bodies and identifications I did not grasp it. I think at one point both Anekin Skywalker and Darth Vader were involved which should have offended Jo's sense of diegetic accuracy but which seemed to pass unnoticed in the swirling action of this particular game-mode.

Apart from this brief involvement in the main drive of the play event I kept to the sidelines, or more precisely a small wooden shelter where I could sit and read out of the rain. My kids had been inside a lot over the preceding week's holiday and had seen a great deal of me so were not as enthusiastic about my involvement as Sam was. I did play some roles though, mainly referee between my two sons' periodic sulks and fallings-out, but I was also an intermittent audience for Sam's nonsense performance, including an accomplished rendition of the theme to the Mel Brooks' film *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*. I also helped to make new light sabres, breaking off lengths of branch from the pile of branches near my shelter. The wood is new and green so took some bending and splitting before it could be separated. My stronger fingernails help to strip bark from one end to accentuate a bright (green) light sabre appearance.

**The environment of the playground**

Game spaces are fashioned from the material characteristics and features of the environment as well as imaginative and cognitive operations. As described in the last chapter, videogame worlds suggest ways of re-thinking actual environments (and vice versa) – as space and time, as lawful or rule-bound, as affordances and constraints, as material and immaterial. There is a persistent view, evident from Romantic poetry and painting to today's dire predictions for children's technoculture, that the child is truly at play (only truly a child) when he or she is immersed in the natural world. "Natural" here means the countryside, plant and animal life, the weather:

> In the creative perceptions of poet and child we are close to the biology of thought itself – close, in fact, to the ecology of imagination, in which the energies of the body and mind as a unit, and ecosystem, and the energies of nature combine in a mutual endeavour to adapt to nature, to culture, and to the societies devised by man to everybody culture (Cobb 1977, 109).

Edith Cobb's ecological thinking, influenced by her friends Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, does not rule out the artificial objects of children's culture. Her notion of the child's "cosmo-poetic exploration of the environment" includes plastic play with blocks, paint, "any amorphous or semi-structured material (e.g. sand, twigs, and stones) (Cobb 1977, 30). However, the amorphous and semi-structured material is significant here: there is a strong tradition of thought, from the education pioneer Friedrich Froebel in the early nineteenth century to Margaret Lowenfeld's therapeutic gameworlds of sand and water in the twentieth, through to everyday and popular discourses on toys, that toys or other playable fragments of the child's environment should be as semiotically and formally indistinct or open as possible (Lowenfeld 2008 [1935]). The young child's imagination, it is often felt, should not be scaffolded or

guided by inbuilt and prescribed stories, characters or shapes (an attitude clearly echoed in critiques of children's media culture outlined in earlier chapters). Just as ethnographic work on children's play with media resources reveals much more fluid and creative events than predicted though, close studies of play with physical objects and environments, both indoors and outdoors, trace similarly complex inter-relationships between resources and events. School and park playgrounds offer a wide variety of armatures for play and games. Some of these are intentional – climbing frames, painted courts or hopscotch matrices, and so on, others are either improvized for moments of play, or established as persistent cultural sites and technologies in their own right, often reproducing games down generations and for decades:

> Every feature of the playground is used: the corners and walls of the buildings; the fences (as 'home', or for tying one end of a skipping rope); the ledge outside the largest temporary classroom (for walking along, or as a vantage point, or for a game of King of the Castle); the flat drain covers (as sanctuaries or as marble boards); the small cavities at the foot of 'the marbles fence', where the asphalt meets the grit surface of the lane; the dust-bowl at the edge of the grass, used for flinging toy cars (Opie 1993: 11).

June Factor describes a remarkably persistent material-semiotic culture built into and from the micro-topography of a school playground:

> Its inhabitants– children–have developed, sometimes over generations, a map of the school grounds which designates functions and attributes values to every major feature: open space, treed space, benches, shelter-shed, toilets, grass, asphalt, tree roots, secluded corners, verandahs, rubbish bins (Factor 2004: 143).

A fallen tree becomes a spaceship for generations of boys, its control panels and components shaped from "the intricate crevices, lumps and nodes caused by the decaying wood" (Russell 1994: 93, in Factor 2004: 147). Whilst two girls, on a public thoroughfare with trees, leaves, log fences, played "princesses and flying unicorns":

> The girls used the physical and natural features of their chosen play-site to represent their home and other far-away lands they travelled to…[one girl's] bed was a low pine fence, her shop was a pile of stones, and the kitchen a clump of bushes with a strategically located sawed-off branch which served as the controls for the oven (Russell 1994, in Factor 2004: 147-8).

There is a two-way flow between environment and children. Through an ecological feedback loop, the former seems animated, like a videogame world, attracting children to its playful affordances:

> Objects often call out for the young child's attention and exploration: the grass must be run through and rolled in, the sand and earth should be dug up, beakers need to be filled with water and then emptied again although, curiously, the toilet does not necessarily call out to be peed in. This engagement with the world is an interlocution, a dialogue – an object calls out to the child and the child answers (Aitken and Herman 1997: 83)

An object can call out to the child, and that call can triangulate with a fantastical idea from the imagination or media source in play. For example, a skipping rope in a superheroes game discussed in the next chapter was picked up and used by one of the boys, Henry, for just 'skipping', a long-established and flexible play practice with its own physical demands and expertise. Yet this familiarity itself seemed to form the nucleus of new games, attracting the thematic symbolic elements floating around

from other recent and potential games. It quickly became “really fast skipping” for Henry, a superpower inspired by Dash from *The Incredibles*. (Richards 2013, 77).

> Experience in childhood is never formal or abstract. Even the world of nature is not a “scene”, or even a landscape […] the child’s world, his surroundings, are not separated into nature and artefact. This environment consists of the information fed back to his own body by environmental stimuli. This responsiveness includes all levels of the child as a functioning organism (Cobb 1977: 28-29).

The bulk of Cobb’s observations of play predate children’s media culture, but her conceptualisation of play as environmental, informational and responsive offers a suggestive model for describing the artificial as well natural domains of the child’s world (though I’m not sure she would have seen it this way).

Here is an example of the way in which the material gameworld, and particularly the embodied behaviours of the players, can be shaped by the immaterial forms of videogames in particular. As we saw in the last chapter, videogames insist that certain cognitive functions and imaginative processes are delegated to their sub-routines. They keep score, note location and orientation, and enforce death. If a Lego man is submerged or a soldier is shot the gameworld notes it, and responds accordingly – the avatar disappears and respawns elsewhere. When transducted into the less precise material bodies and spaces of an actual playground, new negotiations must be made, and new ways of playing devized:

> Andrew: What would happen if you shot someone else and they got killed, then, in that game, what would they do, would they fall over?

Martin: No, they'd have to bob down like that (*crouches down*) but none of my friends agree that they'd got shot, so you go round prrrrtttt (*mimes shooting again*).

Andrew: So no one would agree to be dead?

Martin: No, but in the [computer] game, you fall down, the person falls down when they do it, and then has five seconds, and then gets back up.' (Burn 2013, 130-131).

The children have to devize a performative surrogation of the non-negotiable registration of game death. Free from software control, other players refuse to imagine their own fatality and the rhythm of the game breaks down. I don't remember this problem in the shooting games in my own childhood; it seems that having been delegated to the computer game's functional imagination, the return of this gestural-semiotic game mechanic to the actual playground and human imagination is something of a disappointment:

> Because physical play cannot reproduce the programmed certainty of this ludic system, it falls back on mimicry (bobbing the head), ineffectually supported by an agreement that this will be the consequence of being shot' (Burn 2013: 131).

The delegation of game rules, frames, and other aspects to software is a complicated but significant shifting of the circuits of agency in play. As I have argued, the *actual* environments and objects of play, from the manhole cover in the playground to the articulate and articulated smart toy, have always suggested, triggered, shaped, and sustained games and imaginative behaviour. In the previous chapter I noted the idea that the rules of a game are often embedded in the gameworld as "laws," analagous to

the physical laws of actual play. Gravity imposes the law that "flying" players must stay on the ground, or leave it only briefly in a jump, or with assistance from the simple technics of a swing or climbing frame. A player, in the intensity of the moment of *as-if* flight, may feel themselves almost flying – virtually flying – and this must be the game as embodied experience as well as aesthetic or performative form.

Caillois observes that many actual games do not imply rules, the performance of cops and robbers, the technically enhanced make-believe of dolls houses, in themselves they "presuppose free improvisation." They involve playing roles, "*as if* one were someone or something else." This fiction – the *as if* itself – replaces rules:

> Rules themselves create fictions by the very fact of complying with their respective rules, is separated from real life where there is no activity that literally corresponds to any of these games [they] are played *for real*. *As if* is not necessary (Caillois 1962: 8).

Replace cops and robbers and dolls-houses with their digital descendants Grand Theft Auto and The Sims, and the complex circuits between rules, laws and the as-if are unplugged and reconnected. Jo and Alex recently showed me a carnivalesque little mini-game they had devized in a break from the hard work of conducting crime in . Through game settings or a cheat, they turned down the virtual gravity as one might turn down the volume on a television. Rather than trotting through the virtual city as normal, the gangster avatar now leapt ludicrously high above the streets, twisting and writhing, before crashing down and leaping up again. He looked to me like an animated version of Robert Longo's life-size drawings of business men and women suspended, ecstatic, in mid air. The virtuality of as-if flight is transducted into the technological virtuality of the game system; the imaginative operation transformed and split – partly into the playful manipulation of the software (the tweaking of virtual

gravity), and partly delegated to the software itself (its mechanic enactment of a flight that is no longer possible, just not the gameworld's default option). A similar logic can be applied to The Sims: the child no longer directly animates the dolls in their as-if aliveness, the software does that. A degree of imaginative control is ceded to the prosthetic imagination. Thus the intangibility of children's imagination is not only laid over an inert but compelling environments, it is also delegated to machinic analogues. This process by no means replaces human imagination, as the critics of digital play might have it, it extends and augments it – rendering it poorer in some aspects but opening all sorts of new games and meta-games (as we'll see in the next chapter: Real Worlds).

**The space-time of play.**

Like videogames, time is a key dimension in actual play. The simple fact of duration, the child psychologist Donald Winnicott argued, renders it real: "playing is an experience, always a creative experience, and it is an experience in the space-time continuum, a basic form of living" (Winnicott 1974, 67). The stopwatch punches the intense and formalized activity of competitive sport into precise periods. Imaginative play warps time and space into polyrhythms of frenetic and languid activity, and is characterized by repetitions and circularities as much as by the linear continuities of quests and stories. These rhythms are set by immaterial factors such as degrees of agreement, resonance of imaginary framings between players, and by material factors from the regulation by school bells of playtimes to the energy levels of the children themselves. Lili Peller explains that in dramatic play

> there are frequent interludes in which the ideational content runs low or gets confused and hazy and only the pleasure in some kind of manipulation or repetition keeps the children going (Peller 1971 [1952], 122).

Moreover, adult attention – whether family or academic – tends to notice play as a sequence of more or less coherent imaginative or competitive games, and not the flows between games nor their repetitions and returns:

> Written records of children's family and households play have a tendency to gloss over its incoherences and sudden shifts […] Yet the play of children under five usually resembles less a stage play more a dream. There are duplications of persons and episodes, sudden changes of locality– all of which just don't make sense, not even to the observer who knows the players well. It's amazing how children can apparently enjoy playing "together" for a long time, their ideas clicking for a while – then go far apart (Peller 1971 [1952]: 122).

For all its shifts of rhythm and mutating media frame of reference, there was a certain continuity and flow to the Star Wars game. At moments though it was punctuated by what I can only refer to as equivalent to a videogame "mini-game." At some subtle signal or cue the three boys ran across the APG to the far corner and an arrangement of green netting strung between some small trees. Once climbed-into, the webbing took on a hammock-like form and the children seemed at first to be having a rest from the frenetic activity of the game-event. Yet these interludes (this activity was repeated three or four times), these gaps in play, are themselves games, suggested by the characteristics of the assemblage of boys, webbing, the shapes and dimensions of movement the boys-in-webbing formed, and generating their own symbolic points of

reference. Initially they were in hammocks. Alex was particularly enthusiastic about this as he was always excited by pirates, and he rocks from side to side contentedly. The others climb and the hammockness diminishes as the tangle of bodies disrupts both the rhythm and the form. To me on the outside it had mutated into a bean pod — an idea which amused the boys who adopted bean-ness enthusiastically. However, probably due to the kinaesthetic and dramatic limitations of this as a game, it lasted only a few seconds. It quickly became clear that the green webbing/tree assemblage is not an optimum play mechanism for three children. Muddy shoes are too close to other's heads and the combined weight results in the middle bean bumping on the ground. With two boys in the pod however the hammock and pirates return, this time driven by the third boy's rocking of the webbing, a motion loudly interpreted by the general assemblage as analogous to pirates trying to sleep in hammocks in a stormy sea (fig. 13).


(fig. 13)

The Adventure Play Ground is a space set aside and designed for play. The children present had their own temporal boundaries, set by parental expectations, meal times, and so on. Within this encompassing space and time though, the playing itself demonstrated a resistance to any simple mapping or schedule. In spatial terms, the

games seems to coalesce around particular locations or structures rather than draw a touchline or magic circle around themselves.

There were delimited zones within the APG within which the sabreplay is manifested, areas with enough elbow room for the flailing sticks. Material structures with particularly rich symbolic (the webbing), but which also set in train temporal and kinaesthetic rhythms of iterative games and swaying hammocks. The players' bodies themselves were zoned according to which parts (including their stick extensions) were acceptable to strike. The zoning had a temporal dimension to this zoning in which initially tacitly (though clearly) demarcated zones are progressively approached and breached:  a giddy transgression.

The games had no spatiotemporal boundaries then, but rather a gravitational pull – either a physical structure (a wooden boat, a webbing hammock) or an intensity of imaginative or kinaesthetic activity (the talking of the game, the swirling of the sabre fights). There were no centres of gravity as such, the games shifted and overlapped too much, but there was a kind of centripetal force that gave some durational and symbolic cohesion – eccentric orbits around an idea or an action. The best analogy I can come up with is that of a skateboarder or BMX rider in a skate park. The circling up and around a bowl is formed by the interaction of momentum, skill, concrete topography and gravity. Movement is fluid and improvized but contained and tropic, always looping back towards, but not necessarily reaching, the centre of the bowl. However, when skaters– by accident or design – achieve a trajectory or velocity that ejects them from the bowl they don't exit playspace, they take flight into the neighbouring bowl - another centre-less centre of gravity. The boys' sudden arcs out of the Star Wars battles and over to the webbing hammocks, and back again was for

me the result of this interplay between the pull of a game (around a particularly compelling fantasy or exciting physical activity) and a centrifugal force (of a competing idea, boredom, distraction) that effects a phase transition.

Just as there are no spatial boundaries, the start and end of these loose games then are not signalled by a whistle or even the clear formality of the long-established counting-out techniques of playground games ("eeny meeny miney mo") or the winning state. Observers of children's play and games have noted the transitions into and between games in space-time as well as their structures, rules and rhymes. This account by Iona Opie beautifully captures the rolling individuation of a game from inchoate behaviour:

> We strolled over to where a game was brewing. Six or seven children were concentrating on each other, becoming active, becoming a self-reacting entity. Their faces were animated, they communicated with quick smiles. They started running in different directions. One of them shouted, 'Who's on it?' and another replied, 'Helen's on it.' 'I'm no-ot,' shouted Helen. The confusion about who was chaser made the game more fun: muddle is in itself intoxicating, and they laughed immoderately. A boy, meeting them head-on, was brought into the game. He ran away; then realizing he had run beyond the boundaries of the game, ran back towards the others. 'Who's supposed to be on it now?' they called to each other, giggling. 'I think it's Nicky.' (Opie 1993, 84-85)[i].

The game swept up the boy, but his own momentum nearly ejected him from it immediately before he realized the boundary – relative to the movement and intensity and not to actual space – and looped back in.

Actual play spaces (and times) may be “pure” as Caillois asserts, but they are not homogenous, nor topographic. Finite but without boundaries, they spread their map over the heterogeneous territories of the physical and media environnments from Hoth to the Spanish Main.

**bodies**

Back in the stick-fighting arena, a playworker braved the drizzle and joined the fray. She decided to be Darth Maul, a choice that was no doubt suggested by a strange little mini-game that will be detailed below. As has been noted, the early insistence on diegetic accuracy and concomitant close identification with specific characters that may characterize the beginning of a game will often evaporate as it shifts more into the material realm of the environment, bodies, and kinaesthic action. The main motive and activity was now the stick battles. These were conducted in the form of sword fights in films in which the alternate angled blocking of the other’s sword is performed rather than any serious attempt to make body contact through thrusting or stabbing motions. My slip here from ‘light sabre’ to ‘sword’ is intentional as it follows the children’s own performances (much more swashbuckling than the martial arts-influenced *Star Wars* fights) and speech (they slip into talking about sword fights too). The material characteristics and affordances of physical sticks lend themselves much more to cinematic sword-fighting than they do to the fantasy technologies and techniques of the light sabre. No doubt this is another example of playful collapsing of time and space as the momentary pirate world of the green webbing was looped into the overdetermined swordplay. And as I wrote up my notes I realized that Sam’s rendition of *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* must of course have been triggered by that film’s scenes of sword fighting. So much of children's knowledge of literary, cinematic and other cultural narratives, themes and characters comes to them filtered

and ludically transducted through parodies and comedy, from Halloween's festive flattening of the gothic to the voracious parodic machine of *The Simpsons*.

The patterns of play emerged from this risky coming together of bodies and weapons. A distinct rhythm was established: an initial and tentative clicking of sticks by opponents, carefully angled and alternating in a pattern familiar from action film swordfights. This careful alternation would increase in tempo as the fighters' confidence grew, faster and faster until the respectful turn-taking degenerated into flailing arms and sticks, and – inevitably – the contact of stick and body. Knuckles and faces struck accidentally, and backs and bottoms deliberately; these collisions punctuate the full on battles as the injured player withdraws and the over-excited assailant stops briefly, "calming down" (a little). The duration of the interlude would depend on the severity of the injury and the degree of outrage of the injured player. Then, the fight would resume, slowly, carefully… The gradual positive feedback as the clashing sticks are wielded more and more frenziedly is sharply regulated by the event of the minor injury, before the fights begin their spiral from simulated to actual pain again. Players' bodies - as borderline accidental targets for stick blows, and as demonstrative, media-choreographed, dramatic dimensions or vectors in the game's manifold, are more or less precisely, differentially and emergently, mapped and hierarchized. Lines are drawn in space and across bodies to be – momentarily, intentionally, tentatively, deliciously even – transgressed.

After some time, the cluster and clatter of sticks ran low on energy. It seemed that there had been little elbow room for diegetic drama and that this was needed to re-energize play. With no apparent sign, instruction or individual initiative, the pairs split

apart in the central arena of the APG, one heading towards a tower supporting a zip wire, the other towards a small wooden boat in its incongruous dry dock. Immediately this generated a geodramatic structure of opposing bases to be stormed and defended. Jo mapped this new time-space onto another of his Star Wars videogames, *Star Wars Battlefront II*, which is based on a well-established videogame motive in which play driven by the capture and defence of an opposing team / army's command posts.

**A micro-carnival**

Two older boys who have been maintaining an aloof distance from the younger children's frenetic activities have found a roll of red circular sticky labels in the play centre office. They are absent-mindedly sticking them onto their hooded tops, first one or two on their chests like badges, then down their sleeves in a regular polka dot pattern, on their hands and faces, and then a play worker and the two girls join in to completely cover the boys' faces with labels. Throughout, the key participants remain serious looking, refusing to acknowledge verbally or performatively what is clearly a ludicrous activity. I hear the phrase 'phantom of the opera' from the play worker as she fashions this stationery mask, though I am sure that the boys' frightening bright red faces under their hoods resonate with the surrounding Star Wars worlds – they gather to themselves the fearsome and otherworldly gravitas of Darth Maul, without stooping to childish role play (fig. 14).

(fig. 14)

For all their studied cool however, this is for them a significant event as, still deadpan and mute, they wander off out of the APG, no doubt to alarm with their freakish transformation elsewhere in the City Farm and surrounding streets. This was on the one hand an an improvized, liminoid, and tiny instantiation of the carnivalesque, and on the other fully part of the logic of children's role play:

> It is not enough only to establish an identity for one's self; it must be established for others at the same time. Identities are *announced* by those who appropriate them and *placed* by others. Identities must always be validated in this manner to have reality in social interaction. Usually such announcements are silent, accomplished by clothing, the posturing of the body, painting of the face, sculpting of the hair, the manipulation of props, or the physical location of the self on the scene of action. For these reasons, child's play demands costume and body control, and it is facilitated by props and equipment (toys) appropriate to the drama (Herron & Sutton-Smith 1971, 12).

The phantasmagorical nature of play, evident in all of the overlapping and nested gameworlds described here, will be examined in detail in the next chapter.

**Flux of games**

The flowing of play through negotiated storyworlds, kinetic and risky stick fights, periodic and iterative retreats, and spin-off performances would later be summarized as "playing Star Wars." My notes and photographs traced a web of material-semiotic metamorphic microevents… the slippage between Star Wars light sabres and more generic sword fight echoed in a song to a film that includes swordplay. As do any number of the pirate-related artefacts from children's culture that captured Alex's imagination from cartoons and dressing up clothes / toys, to a stage production of Treasure Island he had been taken to a few months before. The peapod / pirate game was both an iterative gameworld and one that emerged, as if though some hyperspace or ghostly visitation, in the sabre / sword melee, the swords/sabres summoned pirates, and the wider media trope of spectacular cinematic swordplay. This non-linear dynamic of affect across time and space no doubt ran through the stickered-up double Darth Maul performance and the playworker-Darth Maul's spirited engagement. Darth Maul himself was distributed over a pair of boys with stickers and a playworker with a stick. Swords, sabres, and light sabres, or perhaps more accurately, the performance and kinaesthesia of dramatic swordplay, twisted and swung like the webbing throughout the general field of play that afternoon.

Against the formalist notion of games as clearly delineated structures and activities, defined by in part by their end points and winning states, this afternoon reminded me of Deleuze and Guattari's adoption of Bateson's notion of the "plateau" as a

> Vibrant and continuous area of intensities that develops by avoiding every orientation towards a culminating point or external end (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 24).

Where is the Star Wars universe in these plateaus? The "as if" framing of the collective pretend games sketched out a fluid symbolic and physical assemblage, and not a coherent and consistent imaginary world. The game and its mini-games, effortlessly mutated, was abandoned, and returned to. Through the process of being talked into existence, and then in the very different dynamic of free-wheeling physical play, the adherence to particular videogame or film episodes and characters were condensed and transposed, at times cycled through like a videogame player flicking through the inventory for the appropriate weapon or tool for the challenge at hand. *Star Wars* itself at times fades from the talk and gestures, the stick light sabres become swords, pirates come and go, and two Darth Mauls manifest in three bodies. This was no paracosm – if I hadn't had a pencil and paper there would be no trace of its vibrant intensities apart from the stripped sticks, and the empty reels of stickers. The kids would have forgotten it by the next day. In the event itself it was never only in one child's head. Collective imaginative play is real but intangible and immaterial – it couldn't even be said to exist as neuroelectrical activity, as we might speak of the materiality of virtual space in the magnetic particles of memory storage because it wasn't formed in only one child's mind but across three. It was constituted in the space between them and the playground, finding material form here and there in a stick, a gesture, an exclamation, a plastic net.

[i] See also a video recording in the British Library of a child's explanation of the three games they are playing: "Star Wars, 'the tree one', and Tigers – all at once", and the researchers' description of the play environment:

> The area is contoured with mounds resembling low hills and is covered with a slightly shock absorbing material – in this case coloured in greens with blue to represent a river running through the landscape. There are also tree stumps dotted throughout this area. The kind of pllay shown here involves imaginary conflicts and belongs to a broad spectrum of play involving agonistic scenarios – play exploring conflict, contest, challenge and resolution and including family feuds and disputes, military manoeuvres, superhero battles and even football. The sources for some of the play here include Tae Kwon Do lessons at a local college (and advertised in the school's reception area), stories about big cats (from the classroom), *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) and a mix of additional generic media sources. In these examples, physical contact is controlled, stylized and causes neither injury not offence. http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/playground/browseadultview.html#cm=Videos&gm=Pretend&id=120551&id2=121262