The protopolitics of play

> The semiotics of gesture, mimicry, and gameplaying regained their liberty in the child's activities, are disengaged from the 'trace', that is, from the dominant competence of the school teacher's language, and a microscopic event disrupts the equilibrium of local power. (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 33)

The microscopic events of children's imaginative play including those in and around video games are phantasmagorical. In describing and opening up numerous examples of unexpected and fantastical play around media and video games from my own research and that of others, I have hoped to question the entrenched and limiting division of reality into nature and artifice, human and non-human, active and passive, offering instead an everyday ecology of material and immaterial realities, constituted by flows of information, imagination and love. On one level, I hope I have helped to counter assumptions that play with virtual media is unimaginative, commodified, mechanical, antisocial, separate from and destructive of social, imaginative, creative outdoor play. However, I do not want to perpetuate these binaries. Play with computer games may not be 'mechanical' in the popular sense of inflexible, pre-scripted and without any intelligence, but it is – like all gameworlds – *machinic*. Gameworlds have always been located in and formed from their environments (sand, lamp posts, fields and virtual places), have always had their technologies (knuckle bones, balls, controllers and screens) and techniques (swinging, building, twitching thumbs). For all the events of openness, negotiation and transformations of rule sets, games can also be precise systems and for all the emergent behaviours they might allow, much play with and in them is by the rules. To play *Snakes and Ladders*, *Solitaire* or *Modern Warfare 2* by their rules is not to succumb to ideology but it is to render oneself passive – though partially, incompletely and interestingly. The rules of these games are a convenient artifice to facilitate and structure periods of play with others (including machines), or by oneself. Or at the very least we need to rethink the terms 'active' and 'passive'. As discussed in Chapter 5, in a cybernetic system there is a flow of agency: components act and are acted upon.

However, this emphasis on describing and theorizing the machinic and non- human participants in children's video game play should not lead us to disregard concerns about human desires, anxieties, identifications and investments as players in these media technocultural events. They may not simply initiate or dominate a gameworld, but games were spun into being through the tastes, personalities, relationships and abilities – *technicities* – of children through and with the non-human participants (Dovey and Kennedy 2006). If code and information must be understood as real, material, of the world, then so too can the intangible yet real, embodied yet distributed, monstrous operations of human factors – perception, imagination, creativity, anxiety, play – without always already reducing these to the reassuring singularity of identity or subjectivity, and without assuming that they are unchanged in the processes. The multiple and varied transductions of the Lego video game both on- and off-screen are a reminder of the wide range of possibilities and the complexities in children's play and in the varying networks that facilitate but also shape that play.

At the molar level of the politics of children's media and toy culture, it is important that adults pay attention to and care about the actual acquisitiveness and surveillance required by online spaces for children, the reinforcement of social divisions of gender and race in the design of toys and concomitant access to digital media and technologies. Campaigns such as Let Toys Be Toys, all-girl game jams, and initiatives such as GoldieBlox open up spaces and possibilities in adult thought and children's play. But at the molecular level of moments and events of play these divisions are often fluid, and flow across each other and into other strange and monstrous configurations.

I would argue that it is equally as important to allow space and time for gameworlds to emerge in playgrounds, parks, streets, in and around virtual worlds. The threat to imaginative play is not ultimately video games or pink and blue toys, but decreased access to the open space of streets and parks because of traffic or fear of strangers, and the shortening of school playtimes. It is also in the well-meaning surveillance of children's play, from the attempts to ban virtual guns and knives to the channelling of play into the rhetorics and structures of learning and development. Gameworlds need actual time and space (and benign neglect) to open up their own second dimensions. Adults need to pay less attention in some ways (and the irony of this is not lost on this parent ethologist), and more in others:

Children need their play to make the present tolerable to themselves, and to do that they need a lot of time to themselves. We should defend that need and not intrude upon it for the protection of our own past values under the guise of preparing their future. (Sutton-Smith 1994, 146)

We need a politics of opening up symbolic and material resources for boys and girls, towards a rendering of difference as malleable, insignificant, meaningless, not a policing or closing down of disapproved types of play.

Recent years (not least in our house) have seen the emergence of a household politics of time, with parental policies and negotiations, around 'screen time', injunctions and rewards regulating Internet use and gameplay. As parents our concerns over video game play have generally not been to do with digital play itself, nor the symbolic content of particular games, but the rapt attention these passional circuits engender, the hours they command sometimes at the expense of other, less intense, social and game worlds. The temporalities of games discussed in Chapter 5 take on a different character in network culture. Organizing and conducting a collaborative *World of Warcraft* raid is not something that can be paused, packed away and reopened another day – it must be done *now* and to be interrupted is catastrophic. The timespace of the virtual and the everyday collide. This engineering of attention at the local level of particular games is inseparable from the broader temporal politics of the attention economy in which corporations fight for our media time and that of our children, and for our money through the iterative economies of micro-payments and upgrade culture, training our attention for the demands of consumption in a media world of proliferating channels and platforms (Crogan and Kinsley 2012).