

**Postdigital playgrounds. CCA Panel: A is for Age-Appropriate: the politics and implications of “age-appropriateness” for children’s digital gaming. Canadian Communications Association conference, York University, Toronto, May 2023.**

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CCA Panel: A is for Age-Appropriate: The politics and implications of “age-appropriateness” for children’s digital gaming

## Postdigital Playgrounds

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Recent research on the technologies and cultures of online play spaces have addressed their proprietorial, surveillant and extractive strategies for monetising children’s play, and attention, and the implications for of these strategies for creative and social possibilities in children’s everyday lives. As Sara Grimes demonstrates in her book *Digital Playgrounds*, to track this interplay of constraint and creativity requires a grasp of online spaces and activities as both political and technical. In this presentation I’m going to take the notion of ‘playground’ literally, by using it to ask questions about the continuities, resonances, and differences between pre- and post-digital play spaces.



Both urban playgrounds in public parks and online games and platforms are constituted by adult-engineered boundaries of time and space, topographical zones, mechanisms for play, explicit and implicit rules, and varying levels of surveillance of children's behaviour. Each is technical in design and operation, and each channels children's bodily and imaginative behaviour accordingly. Each channels children's play in relation to contemporaneous technological paradigms, from the cast iron and steel frames and chains of the industrial era to the postindustrial environments of algorithmic space, data and networked communication. Juxtaposing industrial playgrounds with children's play across virtual and actual spaces, suggests key topographical and micropolitical relationships between technical infrastructure, bodily engagement, and imaginative and creative play.



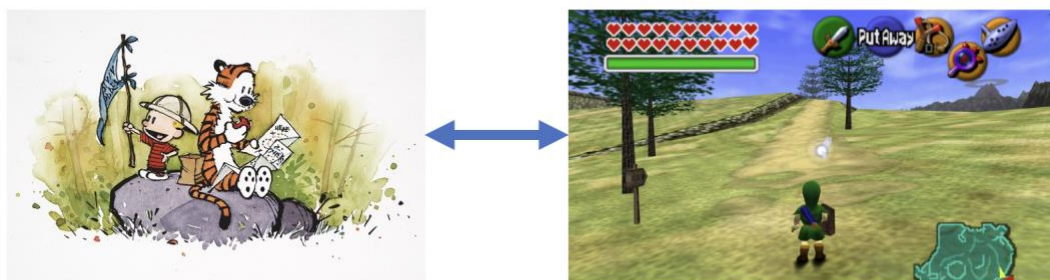
The distinction between outdoor play and online play in digital platforms as material, embodied, and phenomenological experiences is not as clear-cut as is often assumed. For instance, the media scholar Henry Jenkins compared his son's videogame-oriented play culture with his own childhood, in which Jenkins and his brother were able to explore and

play in woodland, free from adult oversight or regulation. Jenkins is careful not to bemoan contemporary digital media play in favour of a more 'traditional' childhood outdoors, but rather he suggests strong connections between them. Videogames offer, he suggests, adventure and exploration that, whilst not identical to outdoor roaming, is analogous in some key regards.

"Video games constitute virtual playing spaces, which allow for home-bound children [...] to extend their reach, to explore, manipulate, and interact with a more diverse range of imaginary places than constitute the often drab, predictable, and overly familiar spaces of their everyday lives"

(Jenkins 2006 [1998]: 332)

My own work on children's play across virtual and actual domains shares this refusal to hierarchise, but I am concerned too with the phenomenological differences between them. The embodied experience of climbing trees and wading through streams are clearly very different to performing these actions through an avatar via a keyboard or console controller.



To oppose play in virtual worlds with free outdoor movement is a common rhetorical trope in the evaluation of contemporary childhood. But for the large majority of children, since the

urbanisation of the nineteenth century, outdoor play has meant not fields and woods, but play in the street, the back yard, in the park or playground.



As Sybille Lammes has shown, considering videogames as related to *playgrounds* is a productive approach. Both games and playgrounds are bounded and demarcated from non-playful everyday life and space, designed and engineered for intensive playful and communicative behaviour, behaviour that emerges from the tensions between the activities pre-scribed by the equipment and environment on the one hand and children's individual or collective conjuring of imaginative and creative alternatives on the other. She talks of 'magic nodes' of intensive imaginative activity nested within the frameworks of play equipment.

"Digital games offer us playgrounds, where gamers can find an intensified space to express, and give meaning to, spatial regimes and spatial confusions that are part of our daily life"

(Lammes 2008: 264)

A look at the origins and history of actual playgrounds is instructive here. The industrial cities of the mid-to late-nineteenth century were marked by new temporal and spatial divisions between work and leisure, made concrete in the conversion of common and waste ground into parks for the rapidly growing urban population.





A key impetus to the construction of parks – and subsequently to the playgrounds established within parks - was a desire to constrain and tame children’s outdoor play. As technical and disciplinary structures, playgrounds enclosed play, but they also shaped it. When dedicated children’s playgrounds appeared in Britain, generally in the early years of the twentieth century, they engineered a mechanised analogue of the play environments and behaviours that parks had replaced. Slides, swings, climbing frames and roundabouts offered a regulated and intensified simulation of the vertiginous pleasures of rope swings, tree climbing, mud slides, and so on.



Around the time Jenkins was writing his essay, the first websites featuring browser games were appearing, a format that would evolve in the early 2000s into the game-based commercial platforms playgrounds Sara explores in her book - Neopets, Club Penguin, Barbie Girls, Habbo Hotel, etc. The analogy with actual playgrounds is apposite here: rather than the coherent dramatic and topographical world of the videogame these are, to mix the

analogies a little, ‘walled gardens’ containing discrete zones, activities, games, puzzles, social channels and so on. Importantly, unlike early, generally single-player, videogames—but more like actual playgrounds—these platforms offer extensive and intensive opportunities for communication and sociality.

The stand-alone computer game generates a coherent, immersive and navigable space, whereas digital platforms often have many computer games nested within them. Each of these is constructed from, and channels, varying ratios of control and direction, regulation and oversight, range for imaginative and creative latitude, etc. Online communication is now fully part of children’s culture, through a variety of shifting channels and platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok and SMS, along with those more closely linked to game culture such as Discord and Twitch. Playgrounds, pre- and post-digital, are spaces for hanging out as much as for play - places to meet, chat, joke, bully or be bullied, perhaps, all flowing into and through games and physical play with the equipment.



So, what if we apply these material, architectural and regulatory structures of the playground to contemporary game platforms? And the various types of social, imaginative, competitive, and creative play that each facilitate or suggest? These types vary significantly according to mode and organisation of platform, business model, gameplay mechanics and social channels. On one level all are, like actual playgrounds, designed by adults for children, each is clearly bounded – whether the virtual map of Fortnite or the ‘walled garden’ of Habbo Hotel.



I would note here that key to the ludic pleasures of many children’s platforms is their facilitation of creative production and making. This stretches the playground analogy somewhat. We are closer here perhaps to more formal and organised spaces of domestic or school art and craft equipment and activities.

To conclude: addressing the politics of the age-appropriate design and maintenance of children’s online platforms must of course examine and critique the exploitative business models of their producers, and imagine and propose alternatives to data-mining, micro-transactions, copyright exploitation and surveillance. But it would be unhelpful to assume that the invasive business motives of the corporations that run children’s platforms extract all social, creative, and affective value from play within them. Rather, there is a politics of connected play, one that demands analysis and critique of the opacity of its business models and modes of surveillance—but not necessarily of the games systems, communication, participatory and creative cultures in and of themselves, nor of their linkages to and promotion of particular toys and children's media.

We should recognise the positive pleasures of “lively multiplayer games and quiet creative platforms, forums for connecting with other children, and tools for playing dress-up with beloved media characters” [and offer children] “exciting opportunities [...] to have a more direct role in and impact on our shared culture”  
 (Grimes 2022: 271-2)

To develop an ethical and generative critique that prioritises children's play, creativity, and sociality, we must also be curious about the pleasures of online play for children and the inventive possibilities it affords them. It is often not at all clear how to separate out the extractive and the creative in the mechanics and models of digital playgrounds or the activities that take place through them. Practically all spaces of play for children, actual and virtual, are adult designed and to a greater or lesser degree regulated and monitored. But if we can't, as Jenkins argues, 'escape adult intervention', we can instead aim to shape these spaces as ones where environments are not 'built and sold' but rather 'discovered and appropriated.'

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