Giddings, Seth. "Virtual Media and Children's Everyday Play." *Gameworlds: Virtual Media and Children's Everyday Play*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. 35–54. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501300233.ch-003>>.

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Virtual Media and Children's Everyday Play

Events

The subtitle of this book is 'Virtual Media and Children's Everyday Play'. None of these words has a simple, single definition, and they could be swapped around and still do some descriptive work for the book's themes: for example, 'children's everyday media and virtual play', or even 'everyday media play and virtual children'. The unstable core of my enquiry is not 'children', 'video games' or 'play'. For example, the Lego Racers account (see Chapter 1) cannot be reduced to a study of a particular computer game, to an example of a child's use of popular media or to an enquiry into the impacts of digital technology on everyday life. It cannot be disaggregated into a media cultural practice, a subject position, a set of technologies or even any straightforward relationship between the three.

The object of the descriptive studies that form the case studies in this book is not 'children' or 'video games', then, but the playful *events* in which these various entities come together. To talk of events is to foreground the temporal unfolding of video game play on- and off-screen, as well as the spatial dimensions of its overlapping gameworlds, and to establish the dynamic between the elements in play: a sense of entities coming together, material chains of cause and effect or feedback. Dan Fleming's consideration of the effects of diverse contexts for (in this case) toys in play is relevant here:

... the effects we are going to be interested in are simultaneously in the formation of an object and in that object's consequences within the processes that formed it. In a way, therefore, it might be better to talk about 'events' rather than 'objects'. (Fleming 1996, 10–11)

This chapter will first set out the key terms in the book's subtitle, questioning their conceptual and descriptive stability, before sketching some broader research

contexts and influences, then finally explaining the conceptual and practical characteristics of the empirical approaches I have developed in this research.

Anti-glossary: Virtual; media; children; the every day; play

Glossaries offer concise, coherent definitions of key terms and concepts. As I have indicated, the key terms of this book's subtitle are unstable, ambiguous and multifaceted. I will use another small event of children, play and digital media to open up these terms to suggest how they might be deployed and studied.

The twins were bored. Their father had called round on their way home and was now engrossed in conversation with my wife, Penny. To keep the girls occupied we showed them the Photo Booth application on my laptop. The application uses the laptop's built-in webcam to capture still images and video and offers a wide range of filters, image manipulation settings and animated backgrounds for users to play with their own image. The girls, Lily and Josie, first filmed themselves dancing in a multi-screen posterized set of images suggestive of an Andy Warhol painting. Demonstrating the ability of some sets of twins to pick up on or finish each other's sentences, they quickly and spontaneously slipped into a brief synchronized song and dance:

L: I'm a good dancer, dancer, dancer, I'm a good dancer, dancer, dancer

L and J: I'm a good dancer, dancer, dancer ...

L: And I'm strong, strong, strong

J: And I'm the main character, character, character

L: No you're not, I am!

This was followed by a series of video self-portraits that grew steadily more monstrous, first through the time-honoured game of face-pulling for the camera and then, using the distorting filters provided by the software itself, pinching, elongating and swirling their faces into delightful disfigurements – an augmented gurning (Figure 2.1):

L: Oi look really uglyoi don't oi?

J: Yes, you dooo.

J: Do your face like this (she pushes up close to the camera) and you look like a giant!

L: Oooaargh ... are you a giant?

Figure 2.1 Ugly giants, electric eels and shark-human-cats

Children

The word 'children' in this book's subtitle would seem at first glance to be the least ambiguous, the most self-evident. However, the notion of the child as a distinct entity both biologically and socially is historically recent and culturally varied. For Ancient Greece, and the European cultures it influenced, 'distinguished children socially from babies and adults if only as objects of aesthetic appreciation', and 'children did not emerge as social entities' in the West until the early seventeenth century (Stone 1971, 5). And,

across different cultures children are looked after in periods of dependency in a variety of social arrangements, are cultural participants in varying degrees of inter- and intragenerational segregation and integration, and occupy the status of 'child' for varying lengths of time. (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 2001, 1)

Before the seventeenth century, it seems, there were only babies and adults. Once babies were out of their swaddling clothes they were dressed in small versions of adult clothing, and play and festivals were not differentiated by age groups.

No doubt children played together, but there was no 'children's culture' as such. Gregory Stone notes that the invention of childhood as a time characterized by play (and by implication, the child a being primarily characterized *by* play) was established with the rise of entrepreneurial capitalism in Europe and its attendant moralism, 'and *pari passim*, children were established as identifiable social beings' (Stone 1971, 6).

Through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, children in the industrial world were incrementally removed from the (now) adult worlds of work: first the offspring of the bourgeoisie, then – with new legal frameworks and the introduction of universal education – working-class children too. Differentiated from adults socially and discursively as 'school children', they also became positioned, before long, as *consumers* of a commercial children's culture of books, toys and games (see Chapter 4, 'Media Worlds').

To oversimplify, by the twentieth century, children in the developed world were constituted by four overlapping worlds: as school pupils they were to be defined now not simply as juvenile, immature or 'not-adults', but increasingly as works in progress – always at a certain stage of learning and development and always short of the next stage or level. Play has shifted from by and large ignored behaviour that took place when adults were not placing demands on children's time to an ambiguous process that might hinder intellectual and moral development with its trivialities and animal passions, or support and edify it through imagination, cooperation, rules and the disciplines of training and practice. This ambivalence remains evident today. Another effect of school is to establish clear distinctions – through organization of school years, classes and shared playtimes – between children according to the year in which they were born.¹

Secondly, the child has become a more domesticated being – as social and cultural life became increasingly oriented towards the family and home through the gradual 'mobile privatization' of everyday life in the twentieth century (Williams 1974). Thirdly, and closely bound up with the domestication of childhood, children have become consumers in a new commercial toy and media culture, with its ever more nuanced rendering of demographic categories from the 'pre-school' to the 'tween'.

Fourth, children are sometimes boys and girls. In Bruegel's paintings of street play in the sixteenth century boys and girls are barely distinguishable, whereas in contemporary representations in television advertising they appear to be different species – they are certainly rigidly colour-coded as blue or pink from

before birth. Some observational studies of young children's play note minor differences in play tastes between boys and girls as well as overlaps in preferences for certain types of toy or make-believe scenarios (e.g. Herron and Sutton-Smith 1971, 79), whereas much recent work on children's culture has focused on the construction and reconstruction of gender through toys, games and video game culture (Alloway and Gilbert 1998, Cassell and Jenkins 1998, Walkerdine 2007). Children's access to computers and video game consoles, and the kinds of play they conduct, is framed and shaped by the cultural and discursive frames of the family, school and commercial culture. However, boys and girls also play together, and alongside each other in the playground or with siblings at home. In the small studies of moments of the flow of gestures and images in performative or imaginary play, gender roles are sometimes less clearly drawn than in children's material and media. Moreover, as I will argue in Chapter 7 ('Real Worlds'), the semiotic and behavioural materials of play are rarely straightforwardly imitative or representational. Play inverts, turns the world upside down. Media identities and roles can turn out to be not only constraints but an armature or scaffolding for new hybrid or emergent performances.

All this said – and lastly – children always did, and still do, play beyond the scrutiny and structure of well-meaning adults, inside and outside, often with siblings and friends of different ages, in a world both spun out of nothing in the moment and also shot through with jokes, games and songs that can be traced back over decades and centuries: an oral and gestural repertoire documented across generations by Iona Opie (Opie 1993).

The division of children into levels or age groups by educational and psychological theories establishes a temporal taxonomy of development. This book is not concerned with development in these terms, and it refers to play events involving children from infancy up to the mid-teens. This is in part a function of pragmatics or personal history, in particular the various points and trajectories of coincidence of the ages of my own family with my own research contexts. Alex and Jo were aged three and four when I began, and they are fourteen and sixteen as I write this book. In part, though, it is a function of the particular aspects of play that seem most appropriate for engaging with playful digital media culture: the imaginative, make-believe, performative and transformative play that characterizes children's behaviour from infancy to the approach of adolescence. Moreover, whilst it is concerned with moments of play – not its 'development' nor that of its players – the book is interested in the temporality of play. Gameworlds extend in time as well as space, and even

ostensibly fragmentary or discrete moments of play can prove to be simply one surfacing of a twisting, changing thread of images or behaviours, whether the evolving playground song that Iona Opie hears in the same playground but decades apart, or the repetitions of a particular child or group of children over days and across space – sustained by imaginative investment (the reiteration of favourite characters or animals in performance or drawing, for instance) or through the mnemonic augmentations of media technologies (repeated DVD or YouTube viewings, progression through the levels of video game). To use a concept from philosophy, the book is more concerned with children and media in their ‘becoming’ than in their ‘development’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1997). Reading Iona Opie’s funny and astute accounts of playground activity, I was struck by one small boy who pops up by Iona Opie’s elbow over several weeks. With his obsessive imagination and his intense desire to know about, and evangelize for, gorillas, he is not *developing* into an adult, but rather *becoming-gorilla*:

Thursday 7th September

[...] The gorilla boy was still there. ‘Elephants are not very strong,’ he said. ‘D’you know how a gorilla walks? *Stamp*’; and then, wistfully, ‘I wish gorillas could talk’. [...]

Monday 25th September

[...] ‘Who’s supposed to be on it now?’ they called to each other, giggling. ‘I think it’s Nicky’. It seems that the basic games, though not ‘special’, are as good fun as ever.

The gorilla boy put his arm in mine and assured me that ‘Gorillas can lift you up’. It is as if he is in love with gorillas; their name must always be on his lips.

The craze for miniature cars is still going on [...]. (Opie 1983, 80, 85)

It is worth noting here that the gorilla boy isn’t becoming a single gorilla with a name or gaining individual features from, say, a cartoon or natural history documentary. He is becoming *gorillas*, and this multiplicity across species and beyond individuals, ‘interkingdoms’, is of particular interest to Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze and Guattari 1998, 266–267). It is a distinctive aspect of imaginative play too, and I’ll return to it in Chapter 7.

Finally, the theoretical concerns with which I approach the observation and description of video game play events are concerned with undermining ostensibly fixed distinctions between the human and the non-human in contemporary technoculture. The collaged human/synthetic images on the laptop screen as the computer fish, camera and girls play together are a visual

metonym of the hybrid state of everyday life in digital culture. Children are born into an environment replete with digital media technologies, play with computers and tablets before they can talk, are looped into cybernetic circuits of play and communication at home and at school. These conceptual frameworks are sketched out in the next chapter and underpin the descriptive work throughout the book. For now, I will note that children are no less monstrous than all the cyborgs and posthumans that populate contemporary technoculture (Davis-Floyd and Dumit 1998).

Play

Playfulness is a volatile, sometimes dangerously explosive essence, which cultural institutions seek to bottle or contain in the vials of games of competition, chance, and strength, in modes of simulation such as theater, and in controlled disorientation, from roller coasters to dervish dancing.... Most definitions of play involve notions of disengagement, of free-wheeling, of being out of mesh with the serious 'bread-and-butter', let alone 'life-and-death' processes of production, social control, 'getting and spending', and raising the next generation (Turner 1982, quoted in Schechner 1998, 4)

There is no agreed definition of the word 'play'. As well as referring to the pleasurable activities of children and adults when not constrained by work it can also denote any free movement or latitude in human, animal, mechanical and natural bodies, from the play of light to the play of gears in an engine. It seems easier to list and categorize play rather than define it. For instance, Gordon Burghardt cites a recent study of US kindergarten play that categorizes types of play: 'large-motor play, small-motor play, mastery play, rule-based play, construction play, make-believe play, symbolic play, language play, and risk-taking play' (Burghardt 2011, 10). These are not mutually exclusive, and I would suggest that any particular moment of play would involve a number of these so the whole taxonomic exercise is largely unhelpful. Indeed, as I suggested in the introduction, it is equally important to explore and trace the movements of play within and between games, to note the productive tension between fluidity and flexibility and rules and structure:

The game consists of the need to find or continue at once a response *which is free within the limits set by the rules*. This latitude of the player, this margin accorded to his action is essential to the game and partly explains the pleasure

which it excites. It is equally accountable for the remarkable and meaningful uses of the term 'play', such as are reflected in such expressions as the *playing* of a performer or the *play* of a gear ... (Caillois 1962, 8).

I have touched on some significant concepts and thinkers for the study of play and games, and they will be developed throughout the book. I have found it useful to develop an approach to play and games from an ethnographic tradition of cultural enquiry and not through any attempt to establish formalist definitions or taxonomies of types of play, players and games.

The emphasis in both Huizinga and Caillois' thought is on play as a voluntary activity, separate from work and mundane life, materially unproductive, an activity of 'pure waste', but characterized by intense absorption on the part of the player:

... the domain of play after all constitutes a kind of islet, artificially dedicated to calculated competition, limited risks, inconsequential make-believe, and meaningless panic. (Caillois 1962, 85–86)

This conceptualization works better for adults than children. Most of the waking life of an infant or young child is concerned with playing: playing with sound and language, the child's own body, food and any object within reach becomes a toy. Important theories of child psychology are predicated on the fundamentally playful way that the infant negotiates his or her emergence as an individual in the world (Winnicott 1974). The more enlightened approaches to education over the past century or two are underpinned by the belief that learning is most effective through play, whereas bored children (and adults) play *during* work, undermining the work in hand through whispered jokes, written notes (via paper or SMS), surreptitious missiles and so on. All of these everyday events are brought about by the tensions between play and more instrumental activities and behaviours, but in none can play and work be clearly mapped as separate domains.

Even the voluntary nature of games and play for older children is open to question. Involvement in sport organized by adults can be more or less coerced, as can involvement or exclusion from games by groups of children. Play can be cruel and bullying. Moreover, if, as many studies in psychology and animal behaviour assume, play is a fundamentally *natural* phenomenon, shared by many other species from the higher primates, other mammals such as otters, dolphins and domestic pets to some birds, then it must be driven at some level by instinct,

before its instantiation in any particular voluntary game (see, e.g., Bruner et al. 1976, Pellegrini 2011). Theorists of animal play argue over whether young animals are training themselves for essential adult behaviour, such as predation or the ritual combat of mating, whether play is the expenditure of redundant energy when the animal is well-fed and not facing imminent threat or whether it serves a primarily social function – building and sustaining relationships and hierarchies. Herron and Sutton-Smith are suspicious of the application of this first theory, ‘adaptive behaviour’, to human children’s play:

We are accustomed to viewing adaptive behaviour within a utilitarian ‘survival-’ or ‘achievement-’ oriented context. Whereas it may be that the intrinsic function of play is only very indirectly related to any of these things, it would appear to have more to do with whatever satisfaction comes from making one’s own unique expressive response to one’s own experience. (Herron and Sutton-Smith 1971, 2)

Though games are a more bounded category than the play that brings them into being, they too are an ambiguous and undertheorized phenomenon, particularly within the study of media cultures. Games are at once cultural practices (even rituals), media/aesthetic objects, toys and social (or solitary) events. Again, game studies is developing rich conceptual and analytical resources for identifying the particular forms and codes of games, from taxonomies of types of games and play to the analysis of rule sets in video and computer games (e.g. Walther 2003).

For Avedon and Sutton-Smith, games are

an exercise of voluntary control systems in which there is an opposition between forces, confined by a procedure and rules in order to produce a disequilibrium outcome. (Avedon and Sutton-Smith 1971, 7)

This definition probably applies to most playful events called games, from cards to football, and its identification of *control* as a salient characteristic will be explored later in the book. Its emphasis on a clear end – both temporal and agonistic – is shared in influential definitions in game studies, notably Jesper Juul’s analysis of winning states, or ‘variable and valorized outcomes’ (Juul 2003). However, whilst many games have definite winning states, there are many structured events of play which do not yet are called games by their players: young children might call any more or less sustained and coherent engagement with characters, actions or environments a game. These imaginative collaborations may well not have a competitive element nor a clear end point,

but they have enough of a symbolic theme or complex for the children to feel they are generating a gameworld. Moreover, if a descriptive rather than taxonomic approach is taken to the study of games in everyday life, even games with clear rules and agonistic motives may still not – in particular events of their playing – ultimately generate a competitive relationship between their player, nor a fixed winning state. For example, a ‘game’ of badminton or tennis can easily be adapted to a pattern in which the players are concerned to keep the shuttlecock or ball in play rather than trying to score points by hitting it out of play – we might wonder what the ratio is between games of Monopoly begun, over a Christmas holiday for instance, and games of Monopoly actually *finished* and won. For adults or children, or adults *and* children, formal games are often used as structure or scaffolding for social activity, rather than as an agonistic end in themselves.

The structuring and directing of playful behaviour through rules is a key factor in analyzing games. Within psychological research on children’s play, games and playful behaviour are categorized by the relative rigidity, flexibility or negotiability of rules:

A main characteristic particular to games is that they involve rules and roles that have previously been established by others, are probably codified in some way, and thus can be explicitly communicated. The existence of rules and roles places constraints on children’s behaviour within the game. These rules are much less flexible than the implicit rules and roles evident in peek-a-boo, rough and tumble (R&T) play, and those negotiated in fantasy play.... (Baines and Blatchford 2011, 262)

Games, then, are ‘social objects’ that can be planned with appeals to tradition and precedence with new forms emerging through negotiation or experimentation. ‘Cops and robbers’ might simply take the form of a chase, or it might be shaped by fantasy and role play.

It is often assumed that a game must be social, a definition that rules out games with non-human players (i.e. video games), but also earlier single-player games (notably card games in the solitaire family), or – less obviously – games in which the ‘rules’ are not so much rules as laws embedded in the play environment, for example gravity, the arrangement of wall and playground for marbles and balls and the dynamic geometries of rope in skipping games (Opie and Opie 1997). As we’ll see later in Chapter 5 (‘Soft Worlds’), the ‘rules’ of a video game might be more usefully thought of as gameworld ‘laws’, built into the virtual environment.

Virtual

Let's return to the fishy world of the twins and Photo Booth, with a continuation of the passage by Victor Turner quoted above:

Play can be everywhere and nowhere, imitate anything, yet be identified with nothing.... Play is the supreme *bricoleur* of frail transient constructions, like a caddis worm's case or a magpie's nest.... Its metamessages are composed of a potpourri of apparently incongruous elements.... Passages of seemingly wholly rational thought jostle in a Joycean or surrealist manner with passages filleted of all syntactical connectedness. (Turner 1983, quoted in Schechner 1988, 4)

The girls found a feature that adds a photographic or video backdrop to the self-portraits. Lily improvised a rap-like performance about the Eiffel Tower against a Parisian scene, and then, joined by Josie, settled on an animated scene of tropical waters and fish. They soon found that the software assumed or required – in an echo of the very early days of portrait photography – a static subject. Otherwise, it could not adequately trace the edges of the human head and body and accurately map the pre-rendered background as if behind them. With their movement the real-time video image of the twins was broken up, mixed up and overlaid with the bright tropical waters in an animated collage. This virtual immersion inspired the girls to sing (Figure2.1):

J and L (with swimming actions): We're swimming in the fishtank (they push each other and giggle)... We're in Penny's house, and we are in the kitchen, and we are swimming even though we're on the ground!

J: And I might swallow you, fishy!

J and L: Because I'm half shark (Lily lunges towards the webcam with exaggerated biting gestures and noises)

(They sway from side to side together gracefully)

J: We are a shark and human put-together-to-make-a-cat (these last words spoken quickly as the rhythm of the song is dropped)

(The song picks up again)

J (with Lily picking up on the last drawn out word of each line): We're happy to be eating f-i-i-i-i-sh (they make smiling faces by pulling up the corners of their mouth with their fingers), even if, they're electric e-e-e-e-ls.

J: I'm gonna electrocute them!

(The song degenerates again into pushing, swaying, biting motions and snatches of singsong references to fish.)

The term ‘virtual’ is particularly ambiguous, but it is crucial for addressing the behaviours and bodies described in this book, and will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 7. In the context of digital media, it can function as a loose shorthand for anything to do with the intangible operations of computer technology, and particularly for the immaterial spaces of communication and play these operations generate. I have already used it as such to describe the computer-generated simulation of Lego vehicles. It generated excitement around actual and predicted technologies of virtual reality (VR) in the late 1980s and 1990s, promising to realize what the VR enthusiasts saw as an essential trajectory of the history of media technologies from cave paintings to Renaissance perspective, photography to cinema: an arc of technical evolution towards ever-greater immersion, a paradoxical disappearance of the mediating technology through its own sophistication:

Virtual reality is immersive, which means that it is a medium whose purpose is to disappear [...] transparent, perceptual immediacy, experience without mediation. (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 22)

The term ‘virtual’, then, suggests a phenomenon or entity that is not quite real. This ‘not quite’ could indicate something that has the potential to be real or will soon be real, in the sense of a task that is *virtually* complete; or it could be something that *seems* real, but may never *become* so, the worlds of VR applications, for instance. Lister et al. point out that for all its ontological instability, a VR world or other computer simulation is quite definitely real in a dual sense:

Without these machines, there would be no simulation. Therefore, simulations are importantly real by virtue of the technologies necessary to producing them, and the effect they have upon us. (Lister et al. 2009, 389)

The nature of the virtual reality of a video game world as computer simulation, and the nature of the effects this virtuality has on players, will be examined throughout this book, particularly in Chapter 5. As the initial hype around VR faded, it became apparent that for all the new possibilities for VR as an immersive media form (recently revived in video games with devices such as Oculus Rift), predictions of *immediacy* – in Bolter and Grusin’s sense of the dissolving of the mediating apparatus – did not stand up to users’ experiences of cumbersome headsets, motion sickness and lag between their movement and the virtual world’s response. The ‘virtual’ persists as an adjective for a range of everyday digital media, however, from the numerous ‘virtual communities’ of

Internet media to online 3D worlds, and it overlaps with concepts of cyberspace and simulation. William Gibson's 'cyberspace' – a fictional future of immersive dataspace – was regarded as the prescient template for VR, but is now more commonly applied to the communicative networks of the Internet, particularly email, social media networks and forums. 'Simulation' is a key term for both theories of play and computer media worlds, and it will be addressed in detail in Chapter 5.

Additionally, using the concept of the virtual in this sense familiar from popular digital culture and technological research, Lister et al. articulate it with an older sense of the virtual from philosophy. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze, this virtuality insists on the temporal dimension of reality: there is a reality to things that do not (yet) exist. Like the task that is virtually completed,

[t]he reference to time is clear: the task's completion is just about *upon* us, but is not yet. In this sense, a reference to the virtual includes future states as part of the real; the future has a kind of reality which is virtual, but not *actual*. This is the sense of the 'virtual' that Gilles Deleuze maintains: the virtual is real, but inactual. That is, it has real existence but not in the same way as the things that are *actually* around us. (Lister et al. 2009, 389)

A proper examination of this sense of the virtual is not within the scope of this book, but I would highlight three aspects that might usefully inform the study of everyday play. Firstly, it draws attention to the media technological platforms that occupy so much of children's time and attention today – VR as an everyday, here and now, reality. Secondly, it emphasizes the real operations and effects of phenomena that are inactual. Together with the processes and configurations of software in digital play and communication, we might also include the intangible and immaterial – but still real – affectual realms of media images and dramas, and the building of imaginative worlds across individuals, groups and environments in playful events (see Chapter 6, 'Playgrounds'). Thirdly, it highlights the temporal and emergent dimension of play events – both the virtual time of video game worlds and the micro-evolutionary becomings of imaginative play. Rob Shields' explanation of the philosophical virtual evokes something of the fluid and creative dynamic of playful events:

The Virtual itself can be said to be a capacity to be actualized as a singular, concrete object. Actualization is performative – the Virtual itself is a multiplicity which can be actualized in different ways. If it is known by its effects, then it is known through a specific instantiation, not as a whole. It thus retains its

creative character as an ontological category pertinent to discussions of change, becoming, genesis, development, emergence, autopoiesis, the genetic power of codes as well as of codings themselves. (Shields 2006, 285)

Brian Sutton-Smith frequently refers to the imaginary dimensions of (non-digital) games and playing as 'virtual':

In solitary or private play children create cultures of play that are virtual worlds not mundane worlds, and often with not much obligation to the latter. (Sutton-Smith 1997, 155)

Again there is the sense of an affective reality that sits within, or opens up from, everyday reality, but that is of a different order in its microcosmic vividness. Like the simulated world of the video game it is a fabrication, but synthesized from different materials. All these senses of the virtual overlap and it is not my concern here to clearly define and delineate them. One important point to note is that in all these senses of the term, the virtual and the actual are both real.

Media

The words 'medium' and 'media' are also polysemic and unstable, even when we are only referring to the technologies, practices, aesthetics and meanings of information and entertainment media. In his book *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan provocatively included chapters on cars and weapons alongside those on television and typewriters (McLuhan 1964). When used in general conversation, 'the media' tend to refer to professionally produced and distributed information, news and entertainment channels (TV, radio, newspapers, cinema). Media studies has generally focused its critical and analytical attention on these media's transmission of messages or ideological shaping of public and private discourse via a circuit from producer to consumer through the economies and technologies of distribution, the ideological interests of dominant class and gender formations. The emphasis on the message, whether news item or cinematic representation, assumes both a fundamental distance in time and space (and social position and power) between producer and consumer, and that the salient operations and effects of the message are mimetic or representational. The task of media criticism, then, is to point out the discursive mechanisms through which encoding takes place, and to decode the meanings of a message (or to observe people in their everyday media cultures

decoding, accepting or negotiating these meanings) (Hall 1997). These circuits of signification are complex, shifting and entail various channels via which media consumers work with or feed back on their mediated lives.

Roger Silverstone suggested it might be more useful to think in terms of mediation as a dynamic process rather than media as discrete platforms and channels:

Mediation involves the movement of meaning from one text to another, from one discourse to another, from one event to another. It involves the constant transformation of meanings, both large scale and small, significant and insignificant, as media texts and texts about media circulate in writing, in speech and audiovisual forms, and as we, individually and collectively, directly and indirectly, contribute to their production. (Silverstone 1999, 13)

What help does this central concern with meaning offer to the study of the often nonsensical and meaningless worlds of children's play, now so tangled up with the images and technologies of popular media? We can, of course, look for the meanings and the representations in commercial children's culture, in Disney for instance (discussed further in Chapter 4), but this would be to ignore perhaps the most extensive and intensive of children's media experience. For example, I will later refer to a study of primary school girls singing and dancing to Beyoncé's 'Single Ladies'. We might analyse the song's lyrics and its representation of gender relations, or the song's video with its assertive sexuality. But how do we describe the music as a media form through its rhythm, harmonies, tone, etc., and particularly important for the study of play, how its aesthetic form acts on the players' bodies, how it suggests or compels dancing, singing and performance by individuals and groups? Girls' playground singing games pick up and shred media 'messages' such as pop songs, recompiling them into nonsensical rhythms and rhymes: affectual devices for establishing and synchronizing moments of collective pleasure. Meaningless but deeply significant in children's everyday lives, closer perhaps to McLuhan's assertion that the medium is the message, the significance of media technologies or technics (including bodily techniques of rhythm and dance) exercised through the orienting and pressing in on bodies rather than communicating any particular story or theme.

Against the notion of mediation as the transmission of messages over distances of time and space we can posit other models of communication. Jackie Marsh suggests that in its performativity, use of props or artefacts and its repetitions, children's media play can be seen as akin to ritual, with children

creating 'social performances in which they are the pivotal character' (Marsh 2005, 42). Ritual and play unfold in an intense, proximate space and time, they are of the moment and their effects localized, generated in and through the participants. This expansive definition of ritual reaches from the formality of religion and the sacred to the minutiae of everyday life, 'ritual can be recognized as performance which is habitual' (Marsh 2005, 41). For James Carey, the ritual view of communication is no less important than transmission. As ritual, communication is 'a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed' (Carey 1992, 23).

If the sacred nature of ritual seems too formal, and possibly culturally conservative, to fully account for the fluid and improvisatory nature of children's play, it can be linked to contiguous and overlapping profane cultural formations such as carnivals and festivals. Huizinga sees play itself exercised through ritual up into the structure of civilization, but also as a productive degeneration of ritual forms and practices; for example, the labyrinth of the monk's symbolic pilgrimage has become the child's hopscotch matrix. Anthropologist Victor Turner makes a key distinction within ritual cultures of performance. Play, religion and ritual all occupy liminal zones within cultures (often mapped onto or enacted within liminal space as well), but whereas liminal practices such as initiation rites reinforce and reproduce a social order, there are also liminoid zones within the developed world that have more potential for disruption and the generations of new cultural forms and behaviours. This model of play and cultural production has been usefully applied to video game culture by Jon Dovey and Helen W. Kennedy:

The player returns from the liminal ritual space with a renewed sense of his or her place in the established social order. Liminoid phenomena, on the other hand, are much more individualized and commodified. They develop 'apart from the central economic and political processes, along the margins, in the interfaces and interstices of central and servicing institutions – they are plural, fragmentary and experimental in their character'. (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, 34–35)

In the next chapter, I will open up this question of the relationship between the micro-world of the ritual or play event and the material and symbolic environments within which they form. A theory of communication as ritual captures something of the distinctive space-time and character of games, but these gameworlds are not closed systems.

Virtual media

For all the ambiguity and openness of the terms 'virtual' and 'media' as set out earlier, I use the term 'virtual media' rather straightforwardly to refer to popular entertainment and communication media on digital platforms and which generate their own time and space for engagement, interchange or play. My main interest is in video and computer games, but these extend into other playful digital formats such as social media networks, mobile phone play and apps for mobile and location-aware devices, and are often found within the broad mediascapes of commercial transmedia systems (see Chapter 4), or accessed through managed network services such as Xbox Live. There is no longer a clear distinction between the terms 'computer game' and 'video game'. Until the early 1990s (with the dissemination of the personal computer as a consumer product), 'video games' were produced for a video game console or dedicated device whilst 'computer games' were produced for home computers. The latter were often less sophisticated graphically but afforded the player the opportunity to intervene in the game software and make changes to the appearance or structure of the game. Over the past few decades, the popularity of personal computers in the home has led to the rise of PC gaming and a marked overlap in the games available for consoles and PCs.

The everyday

The concept of everyday life is central to work on the social and cultural locations and operations of technology, media and children's culture (Highmore 2002). Media studies, cultural studies, sociologies and anthropologies of technology all address the public, work or domestic relationships, routines, cultural practices and spaces through which people, including children, make, and make sense (or nonsense) of, the world (e.g. Akrich 1992, Mackay 1997, Mackenzie and Wajcman 1999, Holloway and Valentine 2000, Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 2001, Facer et al. 2003, Flynn 2003, Michael 2006, Weber and Dixon 2007). Everyday life is the site in which the popular instrumental and ludic uses of digital media are negotiated, played out and invented, and it is in the realm of the everyday that spatio-temporal limits, restrictions and power relationships are reinforced or opened up through technologies. The home and households are a primary

target for the producers and marketers of media objects and platforms and hence the lived practices, experiences and techniques within which these artefacts are engaged with and consumed.

I will return briefly to the Photo Booth performance to set some of these terms into play. It was a tiny event, the girls played with the laptop for around ten minutes, with the fishy theme lasting less than two. The space of the gameworld extended in to the laptop itself, its camera, software, RAM and storage, and out to little more than a square metre of bodily movement. However, I could have described it in much more detail than I have discussed here. It was not a complicated game, but it was complex – *a* complex: it brought together patterns and themes, it organized diverse physical, virtual and semiotic material into an event that was nonsensical yet with its own patterns, rhythms and playful logic. There was no centre as such to the event, it couldn't be said that the PhotoBooth software generated the game, nor the camera, the animated fish, the computer or even the children. They brought themselves together, images, sounds and actions, human and non-human, familiar routines of singing and performance and new routines of video feedback, collapsed space and visual artefacts.

As already noted, the place or space in which this game event takes place is ambivalent. The girls are dancing in front of the screen and camera, so we might draw a map shaped something like a beam of light fanning out from the plane of the laptop screen. The field of vision of the camera marks the edge of the playing field so the spatial boundary is not drawn in actual space but is enforced by visual feedback: simply, a girl knows she is out of the game when she moves off the edge of the image on the screen. The webcam, a barely visible 3 mm diameter disc above the computer screen, defines the possible actual space, whereas the feedback of the video signal, looping through the human lenses and motor systems, regulates it. But the playspace is also *on* the screen: a dynamic but flat surface of computer animation and live video, torn up and overlaid. These loops of information and feedback are processed invisibly as well, both in the hardware and software of the laptop and through the imaginations and sensorimotor systems of the children. And the familiar games of mediated domestic performance, established in the twentieth century with domestic photography and later home video, are newly mediated and concentrated by the webcam and real-time video feed.

The multiplication of space across the actual and virtual is felt and lived by the children, so much so that they can sing it: 'We're swimming in the fishtank... We're in Penny's house, and we are in the kitchen, and we are

swimming even though we're on the ground!' The technological artifice of this simulated ocean environment is alluded to as well: these fish look and swim like ordinary tropical species, but they also electrified, 'electric e-e-e-ls'. This adds a new cyborgian dimension to the more familiar monstrous hybrids of nonsense play, here the half-human, half-shark that somehow adds up to become a cat.

These little descriptions indicate much that will be explored throughout this book. A key concern is the role of digital technology and play in generating confusions or renegotiations between usually distinct concepts in our understanding of children, technology and media: in everyday life and media culture – the new with the old; in the use of computer media – virtual with actual space; in the moral critique of popular culture – passivity with agency.

Note

- 1 Studies of child development establish broader developmental stages. For example, one possible structure of periodicity is that set out by Elizabeth B. Hurlock: babyhood 0–3 yrs; childhood 3–6 yrs; youth 6–11 yrs; adolescence 12–21 yrs (in Herron and Sutton-Smith 1971, 52).