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Media Worlds

I use the term 'worldly' to indicate the of-the-world and participatory nature of contemporary children [... This is] the childhood reflected in the complex problem-solving, intertextuality and non-linear pathways of the Rugrats computer game. These texts, and others like them, situate contemporary children in global flows of consumption, identity and information in ways unheard of in earlier generations and contribute to the construction of new discourses around childhood. Where once children grew into literate habitus within a relatively confined, predictable and supervised field of information and discourses, this is no longer the case. (Carrington 2005, 22)

Video games and other popular virtual media emerge from and intersect with the established forms and channels of children's culture in a complicated media ecosystem. They are in themselves popular entertainment media: animated characters and environments in vivid colours, sounds and music, played out on TV screens and monitors. The video game is a commercial media object, a commodity often fully part of a wider media symbolic universe – a game version of a film or television programme or even a book. It might emerge itself from the cross-media commercial strategy of contemporary transmedia systems such as *Pokémon* and *Lego*. Even video games with their own self-contained fictional world (the *Animal Crossing* or *Grand Theft Auto* series, for example) are fully part of the everyday media ecology, drawing semiotic nutrients from it, competing for the sunlight of players' attention with other games, media objects and devices, sending shoots out through the Internet media of walk-through and cheats sites and flowering other forms and moments of play.

They are also, of course, *games*, bringing the ludic structures and long histories of board, card and playground games to electronic and digital

media, challenging the dominance of narrative as a fundamental organizing principle or form whilst also effecting a confluence with other streams of children's media culture such as game shows, quizzes, competitions. Games in themselves, whether digital or not, are a medium. Marshall McLuhan devotes a chapter to them in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Thinking mainly of sporting events, he regards games as utopian performances, enacting a microcosmic model of a national cultural identity, but entwined with and transformed by television (McLuhan 1964, 254–266). Video game consoles, particularly handheld devices, might be shelved with other toys in the shops, and some virtual media objects, such as Tamagotchi, are a hybrid of toy and computational media.

The encroachment of popular media (often commercial) from comics to radio, cinema to television, in children's culture, their hold on children's attention, their structuring of daily lives and the messages they may channel have all contributed to a widespread sense of an incremental transformation of childhood. The precise nature of these perceived changes varies tremendously, but they tend to assume the worst. The dating or periodization of these changes is similarly varied yet often coincides with any particular commentator's own life history – that is the most serious decline is perceived to have occurred since that individual's own childhood. For generations now it appears that children have played traditional games with friends outdoors, then grown up to a world in which *their* children seem to be fixed indoors, in thrall to electronic media, solitary and inactive. Writing in the late 1970s, Iona Opie noted several generations of adults observing her research on playgrounds and remarking that games were more structured and sophisticated when *they* were children (Opie 1983). This is not to argue that there have been no changes to children's culture and everyday lives – and I will briefly set out some of these changes below – it is instead again a call for a closer attention to what children are doing with their media and with their play, and a call for a trust in play itself in the face of, and as a mode of living with, change. Another deep source of anxiety concerns the representational operations of children's media, the messages that have been sent from the *Penny Dreadful* and the first-person shooter. In Chapter 2, I questioned the dominant critical assumptions that the significance of media lies in their representational and ideological operations, so this chapter will address the question of what, if anything, games as media might communicate.

Predictions and diagnoses of decline or catastrophe today are bound up in the new characteristics and operations of digital and communications technologies and networks, as well as the commercial targeting of children as consumers. The immersive virtual gameworlds, social media networks and commercial franchised transmedia systems of the past ten or twenty years all work on childhood, imagination, media influence and nature itself. There are smaller, but still significant, questions to be asked about the nature of children's media when narrative forms are displaced or augmented with ludic forms. Through ethnographic and ethological case studies, this chapter will track some of the ways in which media worlds, rather than being necessarily bounded, self-contained playgrounds for (or shackles on) imagination, are often used instead as material for extensions of games and play, generally referred to as meta-games.

Finally, an understanding of digital popular media must describe and theorize the collusion of computer technology and children's media (and this issue will be explored further in the next chapter).

Media histories of decline

Historical studies of play present a more complicated picture of the mediatization of children's oral and game cultures than the narratives of homogenization and extinction. Howard P. Chudacoff's useful history of children's play in the United States echoes the common view that there was a golden age of play in the first half of the twentieth century – a historical moment begun with the removal of children from the workforce and the expansion of compulsory education and ending with the advent of television and its 'appropriation of children's culture' in the mid 1950s. Yet he also traces adult intervention in play, and attempts to control play, back to the mid-nineteenth century. Here, then, is a much longer trajectory of directing play into the worthy channels of education and learning, moving it into purpose-built playgrounds and parks and away from the dangers of rivers, waste grounds and woodland. The intense urbanization saw the concentration of children in cities, adding to this shift in the environments of play:

Play environments shifted as the urban-built environment offered new sites and material. Nature still gave youngsters sites for 'roaming,' and domestic spaces still could be appropriated for games and fantasies. But now, paved streets, better

lighting, telephone poles, fire hydrants, and fences increased hazards but also provided opportunities for playful inventiveness. (Chudacoff 2011, 105)

Alongside, this period saw the rise of children's consumer culture for middle-class children, shifting play into the home with a new commercial toy industry (Chudacoff 2011, 105). Many of these toys and games facilitated solitary as well as social play. The 'sheltered-child model' has a longer history than the last couple of decades of 'stranger danger' and domestic children's digital culture.

Whilst the move to domestic or structured playspaces and the increasing commercialization of play have a longer history than is often recognized, there are clearly subsequent moments at which play and children's culture underwent significant transformation. Television from the mid 1950s not only offered children a media alternative to board and card games or books, but its commercial imperatives (in the United States at least) also drove an intensive targeting of children as the consumers of toys and merchandizing. Indeed, from *The Mickey Mouse Club* in the 1950s to the new economic models of 'limited' animation and toy tie-ins of the 1980s (Kline 1993), children's play culture was increasingly intertwined with media and consumer culture. The Disney Corporation was at the heart of conflicting attitudes to children's media culture in the twentieth century. The integrated marketing of characters and environments across films and other media, licensed products and merchandizing and theme park rides and displays prefigured the transmedia universes of contemporary commercial children's culture (Forgacs 1992). The imagineering (to use Disney's own phrase) of physical and semiotic worlds for some critics was so sophisticated and all-encompassing in their manipulation of pleasure that it marked a total commodification of not only play but children's imaginative and fantasy lives:

we are faced with a growing commercial sphere that profoundly limits the vocabulary and imagery available to youth and others [...] What we do not need is a global culture industry in which Disney imagineers and executives turn children's desires and dreams into fodder for advertisers and corporate-controlled media. (Giroux and Pollock 2010, 15)

As a critique of the expansive cultural economic reach of corporations like Disney this is laudable, but the claims that 'our most intimate perceptions and desires' are being conditioned (Giroux and Pollock 2010, 2) are founded on sweeping assumptions about the nature of children's everyday engagement with media. Thus, children are increasingly

left on their own to navigate the virtual and visual worlds created by U.S. media corporations. Even if many of these kids do not end up developing obesity, attention deficit disorder, anxiety, and depression, to name just a few long-term effects of media consumption, they still lack the adequate nurturing, guidance, and support they need to feel secure and happy entering their adult lives. (Giroux and Pollock 2010, xvi)

Kieran, aged three years and seven months, loved to wear his grandmother's high heel shoes as he watched *101 Dalmatians*. The shoes were always kept next to the television. His mother stated,

He re-enacts it. That's why we've got my mum's shoes over there. [To child] Cruella Deville, aren't you? You're Cruella Deville, aren't you? [To interviewer] And he re-enacts everything that he watches in *101* and *102* all the time... and then we'll re-enact it but we'll re-enact it for about two weeks. Honestly, if he's really found it funny or something he can talk and talk and talk and talk. And he talks about the same thing over and over again. (Marsh 2005, 41)

And yet, studies of children's play with media resources, including Disney, such as this indicate that children rarely, if ever, fully inhabit and act out a prescribed media world, whether that be a book, film or TV programme. The passage of media images, narratives, worlds and action however well coordinated and systematized can never be simply adapted or translated from their particular 'platform' to their performance in play. They are transformed in the negotiations of collective play, or in performances and repetitions such as those of Kieran in the earlier example. The simple fact of transduction from one kind of gameworld (a Disney film or transmedia storyworld) to another (a group of children in a specific environment) necessitates a more or less surreal actualization. As Gilles Brougère notes in a discussion of the circuits through the mediated and lived worlds of *Power Rangers*,

even when the children try their hardest to match their own play behaviour to that modeled for them by television [...] they are forced by their need for cooperation to make all kinds of compromises, such as bargaining for who takes the negative roles, deciding how they can adapt their unique 'power' feelings to the scenario, devising costumes, weapons, gestures, and sequences. What they reproduce is a playful theatric adaptation. There is no *tabula rasa*. The point is, no matter what the cultural stimuli might be (toys or television shows), they have to be mediated by children's fantasy in order to be accepted, and adjusted to their play norms and social competence in order to be assimilated into the active theatric play forms of childhood. (Brougère, in Sutton-Smith 1997, 154)

At the very least the constraints and affordances of the physical environment (available toys, space, play equipment, weather, interruptions of other children, adults, the temporal boundaries of school playtime, children's bodies and their capabilities – see Chapter 6, 'Playgrounds') and of the imaginative environment (compliance of fellow players, depth of understanding or memory of the storyworld) mix up, distort, transduce the characters, narrative, magic powers, technologies and so on into a dream-like version. Shanly Dixon and Sandra Weber's account of a group of six-year-old boys and girls playing a game of 'Snow White' illustrates this. To capture the construction of this collective gameworld, and its flow of embodied and symbolic behaviour through and beyond the narrative template provided by Disney, I'll quote it at length. The game began with a cry of 'let's play Snow White' and intense arguments over who would be Snow White herself:

One girl has dark hair and soon convinces people she should have the role because she looks like Snow White, although another girl claims that the fact she has a Snow White lunch box gives her an edge. An older boy suddenly announces that he wants to be the wicked Queen because he has a cape he could use as a costume. No one seems to want to be the prince. The children begin enacting the story, stopping and restarting, giving each other directions [...] and improvising many touches that bear little resemblance to the movie. The game stops and then starts up again as one child tickles another, or someone calls attention to the mushrooms growing on the damp ground. Hilarity breaks out when one boy decides he is a deer who discovers Snow White asleep in the woods and tries to wake her by licking her [...] Snow White is called home by her mother – and another girl suggests her Barbie doll could take the part of Snow White. She proceeds to use her Barbie as a puppet, acting as ventriloquist for 'Snow White Barbie'. Another child goes along with this, but two others just sort of parallel play a different version of Snow White. The play keeps falling apart (to my adult observer eyes at any rate) changing directions, as a couple of boys engage in rough and tumble play, one child bursts into tears saying 'I don't WANT to be Dopey', and so forth. And then the dwarfs start singing a popular song, 'I'm too sexy for my shirt' and dancing around, while two girls decide the piece of cardboard they were using as the Mirror Mirror on the Wall is not very good, and announce they are going to make a 'real one'. (Constructed from Weber's fieldnotes, August 1992). (Dixon and Weber 2011, 483–484)

Dixon and Weber suggest that far from being programmed by the Disney Corporation, this imaginative play realized (surrealized perhaps) a 'cumulative popular cultural text', not a slavish reconstruction of the film, but 'an evolving

script' that swept up and filtered memories and materials from toys, lunch boxes, non-Disney storybook versions and so on.

Through the children's active play, negotiations, and improvisations, the text was adapted, ignored, disrupted, and reconstructed. There was a fluidity to the play despite a series of abrupt halts and changes of directions as the children moved in and out of the various roles that they had assumed. (Dixon and Weber 2011, 484)

The Snow White game was observed in 1992, however, and the subsequent twenty years or so have seen further transformation of children's media culture. Disney's cross-media stories and characters could now be seen to prefigure the convergence or dissolution of discrete media forms into the synthetic worlds of video games and the global information networks of Internet media. Over the decades since their arrival in living rooms, video games have not only drawn on media franchises and genres, and fed back into them, but also spawned new hybrids of games and programmes, merchandise, toys, websites and 'advergaming'. This hybridity is hypercharged by digitization and the networked distribution of all popular media along with the emergent participatory and fledgeling co-creative practices of the web to form new media ecologies in which images and narratives are functions of the ludic mechanics of navigation and accumulation. Films, TV and toys have become subsumed into the ludic forms of games, social media and networks, from the carefully moderated virtual worlds of HabboHotel and Disney's Club Penguin to services such as Facebook (officially populated by an older age group, but which attract young children too): networks that are characterized by an aggressively commercial motive. *Neopets*, for instance, is an online world, a vivarium of 'virtual pets', but one dominated by what the company calls 'immersive advertising',

defined more specifically as 'creative programs that integrate the advertisers' commercial products, services, brands and names into existing or customized activities and scenarios within the site, thereby making the product an important part of the activity or game'. (Wasko 2010, 118)

The site is a mix of product placement and advergames as well as banner ads and commercial sequences. Janet Wasko's analysis of the site echoes earlier critiques of the *Pokémon* universe of acquisition as a kindergarten for consumption (see Lister et al. 2009, 292–294):

The Neopets site is not just about adopting and caring for a pet – it can easily be interpreted as a training ground for capitalist consumer culture. While other

values or ideas are represented on the site, themes related to materialism and consumption are particularly overt. Neopia is organized as a capitalist society, as is apparent, for example, in its bank and stock market, as well as the game 'Plushie Tycoon' where one can become a successful manufacturing tycoon. There are lots of shops [...] players are encouraged to acquire (buy) items and sell them for Neopoints [...] A recent addition is the NeoCash Mall where items are available for 'real world' money. Customized clothes and decorations can also be purchased through Neocash cards, which can be purchased through PayPal or at participating stores. (Wasko 2010, 119–120)

Privatized gameworlds like *Neopets* 'naturalize the commercial process that is at the core of advanced capitalism' (Wasko 2010, 127).

However, these critiques of entertainment supersystems and transmedia franchises read off their effects and uses – the everyday cultures, it is assumed, they generate – from the imagery, investment and intentions of the corporations that produce them. There is a grudging acceptance that the world of Disney has its pleasures, but this pleasure is utterly passive and no genuine play – semiotic or material – is possible. Janet Wasko asserts that Disney texts in particular are closed off to play and imagination:

there is little room for active or alternative readings of texts, like Disney's, which are carefully coded and controlled, and not polysemic and open. (Wasko, in Giroux and Pollock 2010, 11)

On one important level these worlds function as designed – they are successful because they capture children's imagination and instigate a circuit of attention and a flow of money from advertisers and in-world purchases. Yet these critics offer no evidence for their claims of semiotic and playful closure, or for the notion that children's imaginations are colonized or rewired by the ruthless logic of consumer capitalism. On the contrary, empirical and ethnographic research on everyday transmedia cultures suggests a more vibrant, participatory and creative engagement with media play.

Again *Pokémon* is key here. A Japanese media world designed as transmedia system from the start, it revolved around the Nintendo GameBoy video games and collectable playing cards, and this dynamic of collecting both actual cards and virtual creatures ('gotta catch 'em all') assumed its young players would read, watch, collect and play across comics, toys, television, cinema and merchandizing. Significantly, game mechanics are central and generative to the transmedia system rather than being mere merchandizing spin-offs from the narrative media of television and cinema. Indeed, as Julian Sefton-Green

observed in his son's obsession with *Pokémon*, enthusiasts needed to embrace transmediality to fully engage with, or even to progress through the games. Cheats and hints must be sifted from magazines or online forums and walk-throughs, or elicited from other players (Sefton-Green 2004). Connecting GameBoys with a cable allows the trade of rare and desirable monsters. As a media storyworld, engagement with a *Pokémon* game is just as 'imaginative' as other storyworlds, but it also investigative: a process of research, learning, trial and error, puzzle solving and deduction. They are built for and anticipate player/consumer activity, and are only fully realized within it. This activity includes not only purchasing the elements, but collecting them – which entails swapping with friends, developing specialist knowledge of rare items, of shops that may have new stock, and for the aficionado, specialist events and forums:

new convergent media such as *Pokémon* require a reconfigured conceptual apparatus that takes productive and creative activity at the 'consumer' level as a given rather than as an addendum or an exception. (Ito 2011, 494)

As Mizuko Ito concludes from her ethnographic research on Japanese children and transmedia systems (she prefers the Japanese vernacular term 'media mix'), along with convergence, these new cultures are characterized by

authoring through *personalization and remix*, and *hypersociality* as a genre of social participation [defining] a new media ecology keyed to a more activist mobilization of the imagination in the everyday life of young people. (Ito 2011, 492)

Whilst the thousands of available cards, and the manipulation of rarity (tried and tested strategy from the era of collectable cards in bubblegum and boxes of tea in the mid twentieth century), are conducive to sustained consumption in particular (and perhaps a general orientation towards the accumulative pleasure of consumer capitalism more broadly), this array of characters and monsters also support players as:

a massive collectively shared imagination as source material for producing local identities and performances. The practices of talking about and exchanging cards are an example of hypersociality as a genre of participation: the merging of local social negotiations with the exchange of media-based knowledge and signifiers. (Ito 2011, 500)

Video games and other playful digital media, then, mark a significant transformation of children's culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Causal relationships between these new media and perceived new patterns of

consumer-driven, solitary, even morbid, play are not so easily established. The video game's arrival in living rooms (at the end of the 1970s) coincided with an increased awareness of, or perception of, dangers of child abduction and abuse, a continued rise of traffic levels that rules out street play in large parts of the urban centres, a tendency in middle-class families in particular to structure children's lives around developmental activities (music lessons, organized sport, etc.) for social status or to improve educational and career prospects. Parental attitudes to digital technology are often deeply ambivalent: computers are seen as essential for education, yet at best these educational aims are constantly diverted by the pleasures of gameplay, whilst at worst they threaten to inculcate isolation, screen fixation and to allow in new predatory threats from cyberspace. Computer games and interactive toys exacerbate concerns that arose with broadcast media that children's imaginations wouldn't be given free rein but would be channelled by, or simply filled by, the spectacular images and dramas. The generic character of pre-electronic toys (dolls, cars, rattles, building blocks), it is often asserted, helped small children to be the 'creators and controllers of their play', whereas these 'individualized and open-ended opportunities for play are greatly hampered by programmed responses and scripts,' limiting not only play, but also 'the child's imagination and development' (Levin and Rosenquist 2001, quoted by Plowman 2007, 210–211).

From gameworlds to playworlds: Material for other play

As we have seen, critical work on children's media culture is generally concerned with the representational operations of programmes, cartoons, toys, and films and the messages conveyed to impressionable minds. Specific questions of identity (Disney princesses and gender for example) may be addressed, or broader concerns about the induction of children into the adult worlds of consumer capitalism. These representational processes persist, or are accentuated, it is assumed, in the new structures of interactive games and toys. However, the ways in which these 'messages' are actually lived and played are often assumed and not examined. Put simply, how can we know what meanings children make of their media? Or even if 'meaning' is the most relevant mode of engagement with media in this context? Children *play* with their media – TV programmes and films as well as board games, videogames and toys. Play is rarely a process of unimpeded flow of 'preferred' meanings; it synthesizes

and condenses, it upturns the world as well as mirroring it. Secondly, video game culture brings the technological nature of media to our attention. The materiality and specificity of computer/entertainment hardware and software is a key concern of this book and must be central to any assessment or description of the processes of signification and use. Again the medium is the message/massage: whatever the symbolic or ideological content of children's media, the modes of interaction, play, the arrangement of bodies as well as images, of performance as well as narrative are at least as important. Children *use* digital media – and vice versa.

I'll give further two examples of play events that are formed in large part by popular media and that, along with a playful manipulation of their visual and thematic material (like *Snow White* above), are characterized by a transduction of physical behaviour: the embodied and kinaesthetic pleasures of singing, dancing, drawing and role-playing. Firstly, through the historically well-established patterns of girls' singing and dancing games, and, secondly, through the contemporary transmedia system of *Pokémon* through which playful semiotic and material engagement in gameworlds including the virtual is assumed and scaffolded.

Singing games and the media

Singing, skipping and clapping games are among the most thoroughly researched and documented aspects of children's play. Studied by folklorists and musicologists, and more recently by researchers on media and education (Opie and Opie 1985, Marsh 2008, Willett 2011, Willett et al. 2013), their transmission across time (some songs can be traced back over a century) and space (by individual playground, city, region and internationally) can be followed, and their shifting form and language analyzed in detail. As a living oral (and behavioural/gestural) culture, they contain archaic rhythms and references and accrete new material as they are taught and performed. Current pop songs, dance moves and jokes are woven into persistent traces of older songs from music hall, cinema and radio, nursery rhymes and fairy tales, as this Hollywood-inspired song recorded by Iona Opie in various versions across the 1950s indicates:

I'm Shirley Temple, the girl with curly hair
I've got two dimples and my skirts up there
I'm not able to do the Betty Grable

I'm Shirley Temple, the girl with curly hair.
 I've got a leg like nobody's business
 I've got a figure like Marilyn Monroe
 I've got hair like Ginger Rogers
 And a face like I don't know
 Oh Salome, Salome
 You should see Salome
 Hands up there, skirts up there
 You should see Salome
 Swing it, swing it
 You should see her swing it
 Hands up there, skirts up there
 You should see her swing it

The Opies recorded numerous other references to Shirley Temple in such songs, dating back to the 1920s. In some the star was interchangeable with Charlie Chaplin as their names provided the same rhythm of syllables. Like other forms of play (and dreams), singing and skipping games sometimes play on the boundaries of taboo material, particularly violence and sex. Opie notes that this iteration of Shirley Temple was seen as 'a bit naughty'.

Outside the circle the boys take up vantage points, clambering on to windowsills or hanging on drainpipes like monkeys. 'It's because when we lift our skirts up the boys can see our knickers', explained a nine-year-old. (Opie and Opie 1985, 419)

In a recent study of a London primary school's playtime culture, Rebekah Willett watched the performances and play of a group of girls aged between five and seven years. This included performances of the song 'Breaking Free' from *High School Musical* with the girls 'flying' around the playground in a "follow the leader" formation (repeating the lyrics "We're soaring, flying"), whilst others lined up their My Little Pet Shop toys on an improvised stage and, hiding, pretended that the toys themselves are singing and performing. The girls took their performance of JLS's 'Everybody in Love' and 'embedded [it] in a game of kiss-chase. According to the girls, they were singing this "love song" (or more accurately, singing the line "if you're in love, put your hands up") in order to taunt the boys in their kiss-chase game' (Willett 2011, 347).

In one sense, media images, songs, gestures, repertoires and themes become just more material to be stitched into play, and their performance seems to have little to do with identification as a character or as a consumer. Rather, these

media resources have more to do with their rhythmic potential as the framing of skipping or dance sequences. As Willett notes, the girls select catchy chorus lines that are easy to learn and that ‘combine a variety of actions and modes of engagement’ (Willett 2011, 349).

These children are ‘meme engineers ... active agents in the process of cultural change as they select, reject, adapt, modify – in short “engineer” – their musical narratives.’ (Barrett 2003, cited in Willett 2011, 342)

They are also material for the ritual and collusional processes of initiating, sustaining and renewing social groups and friendships through play – in the metropic sense of communication set out earlier. Dances and lyrics can be taught to new friends in processes of enculturation, signalling the group’s identity to the rest of the playground:

it is not only a visual display of their friendship (doing things together), the playground can hear the sign (particularly as they sing the songs in a high nasal tone), and it is a sign that they share the same interests and resources. (Willett 2011, 350)

Transmedia systems: Drawing Pokémon

As a transmedia system, *Pokémon* is designed to open up numerous and varied platforms for play with its characters and world. Our house was for years a monument to its success in this regard. Bedroom walls were covered with posters detailing and categorizing the hundreds of creatures, each name known by heart. Every birthday and Christmas brought a fresh deluge of plastic and cuddly toys, T shirts, books, games and trading cards – endless piles of cards to be stacked, sorted, filed, forgotten and refound. The detritus settled in corners and drawers, kicked around and un-noticed, until the demands of a game picked an object up and slotted it back into play. The boys talked about and enacted energies, evolutions and powers constantly, their parents learning enough about this artificial ecosphere to answer basic questions, particularly the frequent ‘What’s your favourite Pokémon?’

Alex drew Pokémon and Pokémon-like creatures incessantly. The attraction of drawing for young children is not the completion and display of accomplished pictures. It is a process of imaginative play in itself, an unfolding of imagined creatures and action into the material world, stories, combat or characteristics

are distributed across the mind and the paper, often akin to a form of animation rather than a freeze-frame or map. The duration of the drawing is itself the game. Watching her son Douglas drawing vibrant battle scenes, Sylvia Feinburg's noted that in this dramatic play

Specific subject matter was less a common denominator than the general orientation and disposition of the activity, i.e. the process, the purposes it seemed to serve, the inclusion of such elements as confrontation, danger, motion, power, and co-operative effort. (Feinburg 1976, 589)

The environment – land, sea, architectural complexes – would be set out, then the men and equipment and then 'the encounter would begin.' The child would

enter the combat as a highly active participant, moving his body ferociously to simulate the destruction that might be imposed upon a single human being or piece of equipment, pounding with his fists ferociously ... sometimes two or more crayons in each hand simultaneously ... rocking and rolling, and emitting diverse, relevant accompanying sounds. (Feinburg 1976, 589–590)

Alex is drawing quietly, with rapt attention and precise marks. He holds pens and crayons very close to the tip so that fingers, mark-making point and paper all touch. I try to prompt him: 'what are you drawing?'

A: A Pokémon

S: What kind of Pokémon is that?

A: Just a Pokémon.

Either he is so engrossed in the creation of the creature that he is simply deflecting my question, or there is a creation happening here that is not to do with the specificity of the media text and characters. I suspect the latter. *Pokémon* is so integral to the ecology of the boys' material and imaginary lives at this point that 'Pokémon' could simply function as the rationale for beginning to draw, a spell to invoke the gameworld into existence on the paper. The imaginary world, if that's not putting it too strongly at this point, is vocalized through a loose repertoire of sing-song words and phrases.

A (quietly): Who's going to win the world? World champion ... Whoa, it's metal things.

At this point the drawing mode shifts up a gear. The 'metal things' appear as Alex has picked up a silver wax crayon. He draws more quickly, a spiralling scribble over an area of already intense overlaid scribbles of different colours.

A: Look at these metal things. One of them's destroying... (he traces a silver line carefully along a figure drawn earlier across the top of the paper – something like a worm or spine).

A: They're giving their attack to another one (fierce scribbling now). You know what, this one just went *skrwerch!* and scribbled everything! Even its attacks!

A: Da-da-da-da

The plastic arts are always a coming together of ideas and aesthetic conventions with the material possibilities of the media: marks, colour, pattern, shape and so on. Felt-tipped pens set out clean, definite lines and edges, whilst wax crayons allow – and hence suggest – overlaying meshes of scribbles. The moment and action of drawing and the marks on the paper *become* the action itself: the actualization of the creatures' magical attacks like ectoplasm in a Victorian séance photograph (Figure 4.1). Scribbles are at one moment the representation of an attack (attacks depicted in the *Pokémon* games and comics as graphic lines of power, force and affect), and with a *skrwerch*, a crayon counter-attack – a meta-attack.

Figure 4.1 Drawing Pokémon

He turns the paper over, and – calm again – with a black pen traces large letter-like shapes. Capital W, M, a mirrored N. Then a jagged little figure with a dot in each spike on its body.

A (concentrating on the paper, but addressing me now, albeit absent-mindedly): Do you know what has two eyes? These are just lines.

He is conjuring up a fish-like creature, a large body – segmented, with a dot carefully placed in each segment.

A (pointing at a line he has just drawn): That is not its mouth – that's a line. Look at that whale one.

[...]

A: If you see very carefully ... Daddy, do you think this is Colourless or Water? (these, I know, are types of Pokémon)

S: Errr ... Water?

A: Colourless!

A: This one has a bandage on its tail (he scribbles over the tail with his silver crayon). That's the bandage!

A (talking to his drawing): You should do attacks what I do, what I say you should do. That Pokémon, that's what they're allowed to do. They can do it their-selves.

That night Alex read his picture to me in bed as a bedtime story. I didn't video record this, and don't recall the details, but readings of this sort were generally a series of events and moments of action and combat traced with his finger across the paper as if pointing to comic book frames. The drawing provided a couple of characters, but a much broader and more fully populated world would have been improvised in the moment. He then stuck the picture to the wall with blu-tack. Jo came in and I read them both a story from a *Pokémon* annual – Jo correcting my pronunciation of the creatures' names.

The next day:

A: (pointing at an intensely scribbled part of his drawing) if you look very carefully you can see his eye – look!

J: It's an orange dot!

A: Yeah.

Jo is drawing too, off camera, but the microphone picks up his chatting and rummaging through the box of pens and crayons. Alex flips his paper over.

A: (indistinct) ... use the other side of the paper ... I bet it's another Pokémon what it evolves into.

This 'evolution' is an important aspect of the game and attendant stories as each creature is located within a short chain of transformation that is, strictly speaking, closer to the metamorphosis of insects and amphibians than the evolution of a species. For instance, every Pikachu evolves from a Pichu and into a Raichu.

The two stages of the transformation are being pictured on either sides of the paper. Alex draws a bold zigzag line across the page, then a straight line lengthways along the middle of the zigzag pattern.

A: Look, his teeth has got a line across it.

He flips the paper again and counts the angles in his zigzags.

A: This one has four teeth, but this one (he flips the paper and points as he counts) has 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 teeth!

[there is more discussion of teeth and the number of teeth he and I have]

Jo is in shot now, drawing what looks to me like a ghost. A plastic Pikachu toy looks on, smiling enigmatically as Jo sings quietly to himself.

A (off camera): And this is what it evolves into. It has teeth. All Pokémon have teeth don't they.

J: Not all Pokémon.

A: Pikachu can bite, can't he!

J (pointing at his drawing): Look at that! It's a jellyfish Pokémon!

A: Wow, that's a cool one.

J: It's Tentacool.

A: Tentacool!

J: Remember Tentacool?

A: Oh, yeah.

The talk for the next couple of minutes ranges over a number of *Pokémon*-related concerns, returning periodically to Tentacool and the nature of tentacles.

A (referring to his drawing): It has bigger eyes too, than what it evolves into. It looks like a Tyrannosaurus Rex.

A: Yeah, but it has tentacles. On its head it has tentacles!

A: ... is that really what tentacles look like?

In this sequence, the drawing is not driven by the dramatic generation of particular Pokémon and their world, but rather by an intense exploration of physical attributes – teeth, then tentacles. The tentacles are closer mimetically to

the images of Pokémon in the boys' games and comics, whereas the huge teeth seem to emerge from Alex's own immediate concerns, as – though technically monsters – Pokémon tend to be cute in appearance and not particularly fearsome. The drawing, then, is perhaps a touching or tracing of the contours and features of these compelling creatures, a summoning. Like Douglas' battles, bringing together 'a visible, concrete reality with a symbolically constructed reality' (Feinburg 1976, 591).

A little later the drawing begins to spin out into gestures beyond the page. Alex has drawn a fish-shaped creature.

A: It's a Powerfish! (not an actual Pokémon). Because it's got a ... (he swirls his pencil around the fish's tail) ... because its tail spins around! So it swims!

J: Like this? (he flaps his hand) Up and down?

J: Or twirling around? (twirling his hand)

A: Twirling around!

J: Or up and down?

A: Twirling around.

A (sings): Twirling around, twirling around, twirling, twirling, twirling around.

The boys themselves are twirling now, the drawing is more intermittent, punctuated by gestures, actions and movement away from the table. Before long the table is abandoned and Alex bounces round the floor repeatedly demanding that we 'Guess what Pokémon I am!'

Jo is holding a small bird Pokémon toy up for the camera – Pidgey I think.

A: Guess what Pokémon I am!

A: I'm small ... and spiky. (He bounces up to me on all fours).

J: Primape!

Alex bounces off again, fists held up in a simian gesture.

A: Primape! Primape! (It is a feature of Pokémon that their vocalizations are only their own names or abbreviations of them. Pikachu says 'Pika! Pika!' for instance).

A: Primape does do this, doesn't he.

Jo joins in the jumping and Pokémon-guessing game.

J: Try this one: what is small and has a flower on top?

A: Don't know.

J: An Ivysaur.

A: Oh, yeah.

Jo jumps on Alex and pins him to the floor, Primape and Ivysaur jumbled up in the rough and tumble, dissolving into an occasional shout or gesture. At some point it becomes apparent that Primape has been replaced by Pikachu and that the botanical Ivysaur must have evolved into its next stage: Bulbasaur.

(Fidelity to the *Pokémon* universe is lost in this rough and tumble play – Bulbasaur evolves *into* Ivysaur.)

J: Bulby! Bulby!

A: Pika! Pika!

Thirty seconds later the camera is switched off as the rough and tumble turns into an actual fight.

Play with *Pokémon* games continued intensely for some years, with the GameBoy and Nintendo DS games returned to occasionally even when the boys were teenagers. A set of drawings produced by Alex at around the age of eight demonstrate an imaginative and processual engagement with the gameness of the *Pokémon* world, as well as its personalities and plots. The creatures are depicted, and new ones invented, as, at the same time, dramatic characters and as game elements. They are given the numerically valued attributes and abilities of the card and computer games. At times he created full sets of tiny cards, complete with a uniform abstract design for the obverse sides (Figure 4.2). There are echoes here of other spontaneous moments of meta-play, a playing with and framing of games and performances that appears to be fundamental to play (see Chapter 7, 'Real Worlds'), but which is particularly evident in play with the existing frames, screens and micro-worlds of contemporary media.

Activity and passivity

Our contemporary understandings of media and the childhood imagination are framed by a set of cultural distinctions between an active/creative or a passive/derivative mode of engaging with imagination and fantasy. (Ito 2011, 493)

These distinctions between active and passive media are mapped across particular media forms and cultural practices, Mimi Ito notes. Drawing, performance, writing and so on are 'productive' and hence are considered 'creative, agentive, and imaginative', particularly when set against those that involve the passivity of

contradictory, interactive media also effect a distinct mode of passivity in their audience. Though the player engages with game as a semiotic machine, interacting with its world and characters, he or she is also in significant ways *acted upon* by the machine or system. In the circuits of input/output and stimulus/response, it is far from clear that the player is the initiator and controller of the gameworld, he or she is positioned and configured by the game's cybernetic and passional circuits (Lister et al. 2009, 398).

These circuitous questions of control will be answered in more detail in Chapter 5 ('Soft Worlds'). For now, I want to raise a question that is rarely asked in relation to media: what is wrong with passivity anyway? Many of the pleasures of media aesthetics and aesthesis (their effects on our bodies) are predicated on them acting on us. The rhythms, harmonies, forms, the play of expectations and revelations of visual art or music all play us as much as we play them. To be 'lost' in a film or book requires imaginative engagement but it also involves a delicious surrender or subjection to its structure, imagery, plot and character. Games are a key form here. By no means is all play phantasmagorical, straightforwardly imaginative, creative or poetic. 'Activity' in media consumption for media studies generally means a more or less reflexive challenging or subverting of dominant meanings, but to play a card, board or computer game is to subject oneself and one's fellow players to the rules and the game as a system. Play with toys, cards, media can be repetitive, unchallenging, distracting, lazy. And often this can be deeply satisfying. For playful media such as comedy, getting the joke and laughing along is key – not reading against the grain or subverting it. And whilst game structures from board game rules to missions in *GTA* can be undermined, stretched, subject to parody and ludicrous performance, playing a game by its rules – accepting more or less the intentions of the designers and producers – is often, perhaps more often, more pleasurable, satisfying and sociable. Some games offer latitude for intellectual effort (chess), or individual style and flair, but others – for example, games of chance such as Snakes and Ladders – simply offer a system, a mechanic, a configuration of the players' movements and actions for its duration.¹

Whilst much of this book is a celebration of imaginative agency within the rules or worlds of play, it also recognizes and explores the aesthetics of control and the circuits of action and passion. In not questioning the binary of activity and passivity, we can overlook significant cultural, cognitive and embodied pleasures, and miss key characteristics of particular media forms and behaviours.

Media materials

we see how children co-opt a variety of ideas and images to inform or guide their play, culled from various sources such as personal experiences, books, television, songs, and movies. Children adapt these images to the playspace and opportunities available to them – in this case, adapting the traditional story of Snow White to accommodate the roles the players wanted to adopt and making use of the props at hand. (Dixon and Weber 2011, 484)

Video games, virtual media and transmedia systems all offer resources for imaginative play or expect and demand a creative engagement. These ecologies and their ludic forms allow a revisiting of the histories of children's media culture that highlights games over stories, and metamorphosis and transduction in the spontaneous worlds generated by play. They also require a rethinking of the nature of play in the contemporary media environment. They raise questions of materiality in the transduction of semiotic stuff into drawings, gestures, dance, objects and toys, and questions about the materiality of technologies in particular. Whilst the interactive consumption of digital media highlights their technological and *machinic* nature – in that they must be operated as much as watched or read – this does not represent an absolute distinction from pre-digital media. Rather it suggests that we relook at TV, films, books as media technologies that are also *used*, for play, for pleasure, for emotional or attentional modulation. The bedtime story is one familiar example of the book that can be rethought as a technology (linear narrative, illustrations, page-turning), with its associated technics of reading aloud and parenting (emotional reassurance, ritual marking of the transition to sleep, etc.). The advanced technologies of recent media forms invite us to rethink the operations of pre-digital media technologies and the events that realize them.

Finally, I have questions about the immaterial, but real, aspects of play, media and technologies, from the operations of game software to the operations of imagination. These will be addressed in the chapters that follow.

Note

- 1 Roger Caillois' spectrum of play is pertinent here: rule-bound games sit at the *ludus* pole, the spontaneous and improvised *paidia* at the other. It is important to note that Caillois does not privilege one over the other (Caillois 1962).