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Real Worlds: Realities, Virtualities and the Protopolitics of Play

My daughter knew that Brownie was only a 'pretend mouse' – this was how she used to refer to him. One day she spilt a glass of milk and accused Brownie. To my 'but I thought he was pretend!', she told me earnestly that 'he's getting realer and realer'. He was her companion for about four years.¹

Make-believe is 'accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life'. (Caillois 1962, 9)

Play has always prompted reflection on the tissue boundary between reality and fantasy, and virtual media bring new technological realms and animate entities to the layering or multiplication of everyday realities. This chapter will pick up the theme of virtual and actual realities that have been addressed in different ways in the earlier chapters. Throughout this book, I have preferred to use the term *as-if*, to refer to the generation of moments and events of imaginative play, rather than the ostensibly synonymous 'let's pretend' or 'make-believe'. I want to keep hold of the sense of play and games as *real* that runs through the most astute and productive theories and descriptions of children's play and culture that I have drawn on here. Whether material or immaterial, embodied in equipment and machines or imagined, mundane reality is transformed or multiplied in play. The opening gambit of the *as-if*, the approaching or becoming real of the *virtual*, Caillois's 'second reality' are all – like VR – accessed through technologies and techniques and experienced in bodies (not only human) as real. This chapter will offer approaches to describing the significance of the multiple and shifting realities of everyday play for understanding children's culture today. It is particularly interested in the *immaterial* or intangible in play and everyday life: the operations, effects, affects and behaviours of software code and entities, and virtual physics, but also dreams, fantasies, collective and individual imaginations.

My concern throughout is with imaginative play events, particularly those in and around video games and other playful virtual media. These are a significant aspect of contemporary childhood in the developed world, but they are only one part. These gameworlds come into being in the networks of commercial children's media and Internet media, within domestic and educational environments and discourses that are themselves shaped by the power relationships of families, schools, and cut across by social stratifications of gender, class and ethnicity. There is an ongoing, if intermittent, politics of children's culture that addresses the representational and material resources for play available to children, generally concerned about the rigid gendering of toys and popular media, and concomitant questions of the resources for identity formation and aspiration as children move towards adult life. In recent years, for instance, there have been widespread concerns that consumer capitalism has been encroaching on childhood by thrusting adult, and hyper-gendered, behaviours into children's lives and play, with the marketing of make-up and sexualized clothing for 'tween' girls or the violent, military themes of video games with adult ratings but played extensively by younger boys.

Children's play today worms its way through the rigid gendering of toys and narrative media and the commercial imagineering of transmedia and online spaces. However, as I argued in Chapter 4, research that assumes or reads off playful behaviour from these powerful political and economic realities and their materials, media and environments may miss the peculiar imaginative and physical inversions and fantastical operations of children in play. If a critical concern with children's culture begins and ends with a critique of the mimetic dimension of the media and toy resources available, then the concern could be counterproductive. In this book, I have tried to work from the momentary events of gameworlds and playgrounds (virtual and actual) up. The dervish circuits of imaginative play whip up physical and semiotic material, invert the natural and cultural order so that torture is a delight, objects come to life and individuals become multiple. The profound ambiguities of play seem to subvert and parody, but games are also played by the rules.

Gameworlds are heterotopian, not utopian. Rules are played with and broken as well as obeyed. Children test the roles they see ahead of them, the sexualities they are beginning to be aware of. The hyper-gendered bodies of muscular superheroes and wrestlers or Barbie and the Bratz are compelling in an intensity that cannot be explained simply by the power of marketing and peer pressure. The rigid binaries of male and female, reality and fantasy,

child and adult, individual and collective, human and non-human are simultaneously exaggerated and dismantled in play. Moreover, attention to the events in which media play takes place highlights constraints and affordances of the material environment from playground furniture to more complicated technologies. These connect with and articulate symbolic and narrative material but have their own politics designed in or emergent in particular moments of use. To oversimplify, it is more important that boys and girls have a space that is safe (but not too safe) and open (but with interesting corners) in which to play together or around each other and with useful materials to mobilize and transform than it is to police the semiotic characteristics of these materials.

I will tentatively sketch out what I call a protopolitics of play, in which realities, agencies, activities and passivities and meta-games seem not only to reproduce cultural and social forms, but also to generate new times, spaces and assemblages – new realities. I will explore this protopolitics through five main overlapping concepts, picking up themes and concepts already discussed in this book. Firstly – and briefly – a note resisting the unqualified celebration of children's imaginative play, and the ambiguities of power and transgression in 'bad play'. Secondly, the 'multiplication' of realities, from the real effects of fantasy to the actualization of the virtual, has been a theme throughout, but is essential to an understanding of how intangible phenomena such as the imagination and virtual worlds, and play itself, operate within and transform everyday life. Thirdly, the peculiar tendency of play to render hierarchies, rules and meanings ambiguous or even to invert them – from the momentary nonsense of a joke or song to the medieval carnival's turning of the world upside down. Fourth, but closely linked to the third, I will pick up and apply Brian Sutton-Smith's eighth rhetoric of play: *phantasmagoria*, and will argue that without attention to it we can know little of the nature of imaginative play, with or without technology, and nothing of play's monstrous potential to reinforce or undermine social norms. And finally, I will address the phenomenon of playful events that are mediated by an implicit or explicit recognition of their own (real) artifice. The 'as-if', 'let's pretend', 'suspension of disbelief' and so on of play and playful media in and of themselves trouble simple models of media ideology. Players may feel their play to be more real than everyday reality, but they also know and feel (perhaps because of this hyperreality) that it *is* play. I will explore some examples of meta-play and meta-games, which also suggest ways of thinking about play, culture and communication in more general terms.

Bad play

Perhaps the type of (gendered) imaginative play that has generated the most anxiety, argument and debate is boys' war play, play with toy guns, knives or other forms of fighting and combat. War toys and war play have been scrutinized and agonized over for decades, and toy guns, or any object or gesture intended to act as a toy gun, have been banned in many schools (see Smith 1994). Research by Burn, Willett and Richards in English playgrounds in the past few years found that even playful gestures indicating an imaginary gun or knife were forbidden. However, boys improvised their own work-around by adopting gestures from the amalgam of martial arts and magic powers that characterize many contemporary animated television programmes.

This policing of playground gestures and actions, of course, cannot be separated from ongoing debates on the effects on children of war films, violent videos and of course military/action video games. These discussions have been particularly fraught in the United States in the aftermath of a number of mass killings in schools. In all these play forms, in different ways, the anxiety or assumption is that children (or some children) cannot tell the difference between play and reality, or may be more likely to adopt violent behaviour in later life.

Critiques of these 'media effects' assumptions are well set out and argued elsewhere.² What a close descriptive attention to play can contribute, I would suggest, is a sense of the complex interplay of fantasy, imagination and fear – or excitement – about real violence in the world.

We are camping, soon after the riots that swept through English cities following a police shooting in August 2011. Jo, Alex, and Alex's friend Niko are playing with some Lego in the tent. I record their talk, and later take photographs of the aftermath of the game (Figure 7.1).

J: I only have two people, but they have sticks!

A & N: fighting/shooting/impact noises

N: Is my guy ever going to die?

A: No!

J: This guy dies.

A: This guy's my last rioter...

N: No! No! Not yet, he doesn't die yet!

N: I'll tell you when he can die.

J: There's a fake policeman ... Alex, I killed him with his own neon riot stick

Figure 7.1 Lego riot

J: You know riot shields? This is what they do...

J: Alex, I'm just beating this guy to death with his own stick!

N: The police have got a robot!

A: Err! Err! Err! Err!

J: It's a bomb disposal.... I've beaten him so hard his legs fell off.

J: Grr! The last rioter alive!

Whilst it seems to be generally understood that children know the difference between playing violence and actual violence – a fight is an utterly different experience to make-believe combat – for some parents and teachers, the noise and aggression of war play appears to leave no space for boys in particular to exercise their imaginations or develop verbal and emotional relationships.³ Hence teachers or playworkers may intervene to channel play into more constructive patterns (see Smith 1994 for a study of the war games and toys debates).

Imaginative, 'free' play isn't necessarily always creative, fulfilling and joyful. It can be repetitive, boring or bullying. Jo's mini-game with the Lego Racers in which he drove the little car repeatedly over a cliff, drowned and respawned shed any obvious imaginative or even pleasurable aspects along with the virtual Lego bricks and seemed to be driven by thanatological feedback between the computer game's cybernetic grip and his own encroaching sleepiness. Iona Opie documents numerous desultory moments of mild cruelty among the playground's exuberance and collusions (Opie 1993). Brian Sutton-Smith notes games between siblings that seem to be shaped by the attractive force of younger children's desire to be involved and the repulsive forces of ludic humiliation, and even harm, from their older brothers and sisters. Often, 'for the younger sibling, the price of fun is getting hurt' (Sutton-Smith 1971, 104).

Scarlett et al. draw attention to what they call 'bad play'. Acknowledging the contentiousness of the term, they are careful to point out that it is not the symbolic material in play that they consider 'bad' (in the sense of contemporary anxieties about make-believe war or sexualized toys), nor rough physical play, but rather play that

does not allow for the socialization process to take place in positive ways for all children involved. Play that excludes or ridicules other children and play that is destructive qualify as bad play. (Scarlett et al. 2005, 80)

We might note that as with all play boundaries, that between good and bad is shifting and permeable. Other playground ethnographers have observed that the techniques and gestures that signal the start of a game and the constitution of its players may also, more or less subtly, exclude children on the periphery (Richards 2013, 75–76). The younger sibling must balance pain and pleasure; ridicule is a dominant mode of friendly communication for boys well into teenage years and early adulthood; and the borderline between playful destruction and vandalism is one drawn as much by social context as by individual motivation.

Throughout Jo and Alex's childhood in video game culture, the moments of anger, tears and aggression (mainly against the game technology itself) were triggered not by violent scenarios, characters and action in the digital gameworlds, but by frustration with the game on the structural, ludic level. Losing online at FIFA has resulted in Xbox controllers and even mobile phones being broken, whereas the frenetic and ultra-violent online combat of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* seems to generate nothing but hilarity. This topsy-turvy generation of frustration in the breakdown of 'violent' play, rather than in its fantastical performance, is well-illustrated in this account of a play event:

A respected and popular boy in the group is sitting bound to a chair and is being whipped – about 30 times with relatively hard blows – by two other boys with a leather strap. The roles are assigned: He cries out accordingly, 'Ah!' 'Oh!' Two girls give the bound boy some blocks as bananas to eat. The two boys wielding the whip join in and give the bound boy something imaginary to drink. The game thus experiences a resolution through which new excitement may be generated: The whipping proceeds. Obviously, all the playmates are satisfied, the game is, for all intents and purposes, okay. When the teacher intervenes, the children become directly aggressive; chairs are thrown around, and everybody is in a bad mood. (Wegener-Spöhring 1994, 97)

The teacher's alarm at this simulation of torture is understandable but apparently misplaced, for – as the researchers note – the game was relaxed and fun for all the participants, not least the 'victim'. It is the disruption of the game system – the intervention of the everyday exercise of benign authority in this case, the cybernetic gameplay in the preceding examples – that triggers stress and actual violence (against objects at least).

Realities

A baby doll is not a real baby, but it is not *not* a baby. (Gregory Bateson, cited by Sutton-Smith 1994, 144)

One of the most dominant rhetorics of play is that of *progress* or *development* – that children and animals prepare themselves for the reality beyond parental protection through play-hunting, play-evasion and so on. For human children this includes the acting out of the adult world they see ahead of them, playing at doctors or dressing up in adult clothing. As Sutton-Smith points out, ‘This belief in play as progress is something that most Westerners cherish, but its relevance to play has been more often assumed than demonstrated’ (Sutton-Smith 1997, 9). This notion of play as progress is particularly evident in educational and psychological discourses, but it shares underlying assumptions about the nature of culture and communication, about the mediation of the real with play, with critical approaches to media culture touched on in Chapter 4. Both assume a more or less linear transfer of images and ideas from an exterior world to the interior world of imagination. Children’s play is seen as fundamentally imitative or mimetic. Any attention to the transductive operations of play, however, demonstrates that the ‘transfer’ of non-play elements of reality is rarely if ever so straightforward. From the necessary surrealism of play’s magical animation of toys to the misunderstanding or embellishment of actual events (as in the Lego riot), mimesis at the very least has to project its images onto other textures and moving bodies. Though play at first glance may seem imitative or mimetic, often the marvellous is generated as much by the repurposing of available materials available as by the child’s imagination. Consider, for example, the scene in the film *Toy Story* where Hannah, the younger sister of the toy-hacking Sid, comes across the space toy Buzz Lightyear and incorporates him into her dolls’ tea party, dresses him up with apron and hat and renames him ‘Mrs Nesbit’. Such transductions are probably near-universal in play with toys.⁴

Play may start from a reassuringly imitation of reality (family group, adult jobs, etc.), but has a marked tendency to then rapidly move away from these realities – and not towards them as one might expect if play were primarily ‘training’ or practice for adult life. Take this transduction of adult family life, for example:

The researcher asked 3 children what they were playing. Each of them said ‘families’. In their play, Henry was a brother to a younger sister, Marie. Jack was also a brother, though his position in their age order was not immediately

specified. Marie commented: 'We act like normal families, except we don't do what families do, we do different jobs'; Jack added: 'We sort of shout at each other. If it's time for someone to go to school you just get go to school and shove them out of the house'. So, given these comments, it was possible to see the bedding down, the restlessness and the brief tussles as enactments of sibling relations. But they were more than that. All three were also secret agents. X-3 (*X-Men*), *Spy Kids* and *The Incredibles* were offered as sources. Henry had water powers (like Frozone in *The Incredibles*). Marie could stretch, 'like Elastigirl'. Jack was the mechanic – 'I just build all the weapons so I just go into my workshop and build something and ten seconds later I come out with a weapon' and 'I'm sort of half Mr Incredible and half Dash, because I'm really strong and I'm really quick'. (Richards 2013, 77)

The children clearly weren't training to be mummies and daddies and gradually edging towards *realizing* those adult roles. Here instead a familiar domestic setting serves more as a springboard from which to launch into dream-like condensations of film characters, powers, with some scraps of the surface features of adult behaviour caught up in its semiotic and kinetic dynamism.

With its surface familiarity but its animation by more abstract and playful systems of signification, this imaginative play resonates with the structure and processes of the simulation game. A Sims family and home may be constructed along mimetic lines of the player's aspirations or fantasies for future life, but they are driven (as we saw in Chapter 5) by quite different motives and possibilities. I would suggest that as well as using the *virtual* as a way of rethinking the time and space of play in contemporary technoculture, we might view imaginative play in particular in terms of simulation, not imitation or representation. A simulation, in both its philosophical and computer senses, is a model or copy without original, and simulacra are self-moving devices with behaviours that go beyond that suggested by their surface appearances (Giddings 2007b, 2014c).

Children's play fantasies are not meant only to replicate the world [...] they are meant to fabricate another world that lives alongside the first one and carries on its own kind of life, a life often much more emotionally vivid than mundane reality. (Sutton-Smith 1997, 158)

Poesis

The computer simulation's predictions, its generation of 'synthetic histories', are productive of reality, then, not merely or directly reflective. In his ethnographic

research of Huli children's play in Papua New Guinea, anthropologist L.R. Goldman separates imaginative or imaginal processes into two types that support these distinctions in the relationship between play and non-play realities. In terms that he takes from Coleridge, he distinguishes the catoptric and the metoptric (sometimes written as catatropic and metatropic). The former is a mere mirroring of external reality, the latter a 'transposing through rearrangement'. They correspond with the distinctions made throughout this book between media communication as the transmission and reception (more or less as intended) of a message and the playful production of culture through the collusions of play event. In Goldman's terms, they mark the difference between 'reproduction and recreation, the unadorned and the adorned, fidelity and fantasy', establishing a notion of children's fantasy play as poetic and poeitic: 'a dramatic mimesis of human behaviour; a mimesis in the sense not of bland reproduction, but of something transformed' (Goldman 1998, 19). Children's imaginative performances, then, 'are never intended as veridical representations, real-world documentaries. Rather they present as distorted simulacrum, not copies but editorialized caricatures incorporating embellishment and exaggeration...' (Goldman 1998, 19).

The simulacral operations of imaginative play open up a different kind of protopolitics to that of 'representation'. Beth Cross, for instance, notes the implications for the expression of ludic or cultural *power* in metroptric play:

Metatropic mimicry by its very nature is a process open to variable interpretations, and therefore a useful strategy of those in subordinate positions. This may be one of the reasons it is such an attractive tactic for children. It works within the power structures without overtly challenging them. (Cross 2005, 128)

Phantasmagoria

With the kraken attack, the already unstable paddling pool/*Age of Mythology* gameworld described in Chapter 1 dissolved in a metroptric cloud of noises, actions and fantastical allusions – like a decaying subatomic particle ejecting exotic new objects:

J and A: Argh! Man overboard! We're going to use the lobster as [indistinct]

J: But these is related to a crayfish

J: Here is an underwater dinosaur

J: and then they boil him, and eat him!

A: (exaggerated munching noises and gestures)

J: He's related to ... what's a worm-like thing that lives in the sea?

A: A seasnake?

A: Yum, yum!

A: I'm a robot!

A: He should just malfunction, and explode

A: He's dead, that guy's dead for good

A: The crayfish is dead! Yummy!

A: That guy should be malfunctioning...

A: Actually, my robot should malfunction and explode as well

Sutton-Smith notes that children's own stories 'portray a world of great flux, anarchy and disaster' often without resolution and with 'repetitive episodic plots', a 'preference for rhyme and alliteration' and characterized by nonsense, obscenity and 'crazy titles, morals, and characters' (Sutton-Smith 1997, 161). He cites an energetic story told by a four-year-old boy:

Once there was a dragon who went poo poo on a house and the house broke
then when the house broke the people died
and when the people died their bones came out and broke and got together
again and turned into a skeleton
and then the skeletons came along and scared the people out of the town
and then when all the people got scared out of town then skeleton babies were
born
and then everyone called it skeleton town
and when they called it skeleton town the people came back and then they got
scared away again
and then when they all got scared away again the skeletons died
no one came to the town
so there was no people in that town ever again. (in Sutton-Smith 1997, 161–162)

Observations of play often reveal either a bricolaged aesthetic, in which fragments of songs, gestures, powers, relationships and so on are accreted in a flow of symbolic and performative activities, or substantially more nonsensical or phantasmagorical mixing up of media tropes, playground games, toys, everyday concerns, rhythms of sound and activity. As with the less rarified realms of cultural expression from medieval carnival to Victorian fairs and freakshows to all the grotesqueries of animated film and television, and, of course, video games, children's culture and play are populated with monsters, ghosts, zombies,

witches, unicorns, robots and magic (Caillois 1962, 134–135, Klevjer 2006) (Figure 7.2). Like the carnival, children's oral folklore of jokes and songs is also shot through with a fascination for grotesque bodies and bodily functions, in part through hyperbolic or euphemized sexual and scatological allusions⁵:

The bell must have rung because the football came to a halt and the footballers gathered by the classroom steps, still full of uproarious energy. 'Shall I tell you my nicest story?' said Paul, the lanky blond sophisticate. 'There was this lady and a man, and he said, "I'm going to get divorced from you, you don't half smell. You've got rubber lips and smelly breath. The rubber lips is your bottom and the smelly breath's your fart". I made that up'. He got his breath back and recited,

Figure 7.2 Phantasmagoria

A man's occupation
Is to stick 'is cockeration
Up a lady's ventilation
To increase the population
Of the younger generation.

'I know one', said Andrew.

There was a young man from Cosham,
Who took out his balls to wash 'em.
His wife said, 'Jack,
If you don't put 'em back
I will tread on the buggers and squash 'em'.

The polite version of that, which I have known since the 1930s, concerns eyeballs.
I am not sure I don't prefer the rude one. (Opie 1993, 86)

In its irruption of the monstrous and the taboo into everyday life, its synthesis and condensation of heterogeneous symbolic material into an irrational yet integrated pattern, phantasmagorical play has a dream-like quality. Some child psychologists have identified a similar psychic-semiotic structure to play as in Freud's dreamwork:

a play act – like a dream – is a complicated dynamic product of 'manifest' and 'latent' themes, of past experience and present task, of the need to express something and the need to suppress something, of clear representation, symbolic indirection, and radical disguise. (Erikson 1971 [1951], 129)

It seems evident that to some extent traumatic or libidinal material finds expression in play, but the degree to which studies of play could afford the psychoanalysis of players falls outside the scope of this book, and I would also suggest that this return of the repressed seems to be at most just one stream in the turbulent confluence of gameworlds.⁶ The boys playing 'Lego riot' were no doubt in part responding to the disquiet and excitement driven by their emerging awareness of violent events in the wider world into which they are gradually moving. But their carnivalesque invocation of lasers and police brutality, and the surrealist juxtapositions necessitated by the Lego itself (including bodies, technological fragments, robots from *Star Wars*, etc.), was driven too by the symbolic perversity of play, a depthless orgy of signifiers and materials. As Susan Stewart puts it in her study on the aesthetics of nonsense in literature and folklore,

Nonsense involves a transgression of common-sense interpretive procedures, a hermeticism in its establishment of another domain of reality, and [...] not a simple rearrangement of the hierarchies of common-sense discourse, but a transgression of such hierarchies. (Stewart 1989, 37)

The affectual hold of nonsense's hermetic domains can be extremely powerful in both its aesthetic and behavioural prescriptions. The rules of the paracosm, for instance, are systematic and absolute (Cohen and MacKeith 1991, 53), whereas for older children, nicknames, graffiti tags, slang, singing and clapping games, hairstyles and fashion, are *meaningless* in conventional communication, and their rules and syntax change constantly – but at any particular moment they are absolutely precise and key to the sustenance of the micro-worlds of friendship groups and subcultures.

Phantasmagoria is often the result of a simple symbolic algorithm. For example, Jo, Alex and Niko played on an old tractor in the grounds of a National Trust house. They took it in turns to sit at the wheel and drive the virtually careering vehicle. On the way there they had been talking about *Grand Theft Auto*. They had not been allowed to play the 18 rated game, but were excited about it and may have watched Niko's older brother playing. Actual tractor plus imagined video game equalled an energetic and ludicrous game of *Grand Theft Farmer*, complete with 'gangster farmers' and drive-by shootings (of other visitors walking past the static tractor – here, literally in another world). Perhaps the simplest phantasmagorical operation, though, is *inversion*. The medieval carnival turned the world and its hierarchies upside down for a day, with donkeys elected pope, idiots crowned king and men and women wearing each others' clothing. Blasphemy, licentiousness, promiscuity and gluttony were sanctioned for the brief interlude of the feast day. Contemporary Halloween inverts the residual Christian cosmology of the West as a liminoid hell opens and well-behaved children become monstrous, undead, animal and – again – gluttonous.⁷

Meta-play

Children know that they are manipulating their thoughts about reality, not reality itself, and they know that their play self is not the same as their everyday self. (Sutton-Smith 1997, 159)

The playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite. (Bateson 1972, 180)

Josie and Lily: I'm a good dancer, dancer, dancer...
I'm the main character, character, character...

Though phantasmagorical play appears dream-like, there are important differences between play and dreams. The other-wordly realms of the paddling pool with its dinosaurs, robots and monsters, or the playground ghosts in a hooped transduction of video games, are structured by ludic demands and conventions as much as by the polymorphous perversity of any individual player.

Lily (*excitedly*): There's a ghost! There's a ghost on Level Three!
Rebekah: On Level Three there's a ghost? So now how did you find the ghost?
Lily: The thing is, there's a ghost, and we have to catch it –
Sophia: And then they're dead!
Lily: Yeah, but then more ghosts joined, so whoever gets caught by a ghost is a ghost.
Rebekah: Oh I see, and then what happens, if you're a ghost?
Lily: If you get caught as a ghost, then you turn into a zombie...
Sophia: The hula-hoops is ice, and the gaps are, is the world.

The design of the game acquires, then, a degree of representational staging, with ghost and zombie characters assigned, and imaginary spaces delineated. Meanwhile, the ludic structure is expanding into Level Three. The final extract shows, amid even greater excitement, the satisfying mix of ludic structure and suitably horror-themed content:

Rebekah: How was Level Three?
Sophia: Really scary!
Lily: We're on Level Four now with a zombie!

(Burn 2013, 138)

The girls here are playing a game, not dreaming a dream, however they are also playing at playing a game; their game has a (video)game nested within it. Gregory Bateson's insights on meta-communication are useful here. Bateson's observations of animals at play, and his application of these observations to human communication, have influenced game studies in its theorization of the boundaries between playful and non-playful behaviour. However, the full implications of Bateson's ideas are far-reaching. Like Huizinga, he suggests that play in a broad sense is generative of human communication and civilization, not a by-product or epiphenomenon of culture. Whilst Huizinga traces the development of culture as playful through the formalizing and

cultural-reproductive performances and architecture of ritual, art and law, Bateson's more speculative thinking suggests to me that communication is fundamentally simulational.

He watched two monkeys playing in a zoo. He defined their playing as 'an interactive sequence of which the unit actions or signals were similar to but not the same as combat'. It was clear to both the human visitors and the monkeys themselves that 'the sequence as a whole was not combat' (Bateson 1972, 179). It is important to understand not only that the monkeys knew they weren't fighting, but that they mutually recognized that their activities were 'not fighting', that is what they were doing shared features with fighting, but without the actual aggression and harm. This mutual recognition, Bateson argues, can only be initiated and sustained through *meta-communication*, that is 'exchanging signals which would carry the message "this is play"' (Bateson 1972, 179).

In commentary of Bateson's ideas, these observations are often abbreviated to the phrase 'the nip and the bite', where the nip is the playful use of the teeth in the 'not fighting' game, and the bite would be a real aggressive use of the teeth, drawing blood (e.g. Salen and Zimmerman 2003, 371–372). As far as this goes it, on the one hand, demonstrates the necessarily communicative nature of play – to ensure mutual recognition that this is a social and not an aggressive meeting – and, on the other, that there is something representational about play – the nip *denotes* a bite, 'signals standing for other events' (Bateson 1972, 181). Yet this theory of meta-communication has further implications. The meta-communication, he explains, is 'a negative statement containing an implicit negative meta-statement', or to put it in a different way, the statement 'this is play' can be expanded to '[t]hese actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote' (Bateson 1972, 180). A dog might bare its teeth or use them to hold or pin down another dog to intimidate it without necessarily fighting or causing injury. In this case the 'nip' would fully denote a bite – it is still *not* a bite, but the narrowness of the border between representation and actual fighting itself acts as a warning or threat.⁸ In play proper, though, there is an extra remove – the bite itself is absent, it doesn't exist and is understood not to exist (unless the meta-communication breaks down and play ends).

I also speak of this compound of subjunctivity, belief, action, intensity, and commitment as *meta-action*, because it is an action that is central and stylized, and that creates incongruity through indirect allusion to the mundane

world ... children are playing with interpreting their own feelings and thoughts, not primarily playing with repeating the external world. Playing is on the meta level, not the mimicry level. (Sutton-Smith 1997, 198)

So, play in its very nature operates on a meta-level of communication. It opens up a gap between the mundane world and its own everyday realities. With children's play, not least play with media forms and images, this gap itself opens up – concertina-like with folded levels of signals and performances. Perceptive ethnographies of children's play pay attention to these levels and mechanisms as children *perform* media scripts rather than *living within*, or fully *identifying with* their fictional world. The singers of the playground renditions of *Single Ladies* (discussed in Chapter 4) are both performing (to themselves, anyone in the playground who might be interested and to the researcher and camera) and *playing at* performing. They are learning the dance but also the dance as a media spectacle, inseparable from the aesthetic form of the pop music video. They adapt the dance to fit the demands of playground rather than soundstage performance. Anna, the leader of the *Single Ladies* performances, for instance, practiced the song not as enactment or dramatization of its lyrics, but as play with the idea and appeal of performance itself:

always I am daydreaming when I listen ... when I daydream I think like that like I'm at home and lots of people are at my house to watch me on the stage. (Willett 2011, 350)

Through media culture, then, the framings of meta-play often include the remediation of music videos, films and television programme. Willett also describes a group of boys playing the quiz show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* with questions from an official book, and with performances closely matching the overall programme format. The game is as much about the conventions and iterative structure of the quiz show and the performance of the host and contestants as about the competitive answering of questions. Even a playground game of football is generally a performative and dramatic event, eliciting the gestures and celebrations of professional players seen on television, as well as the speech and exclamations of commentators, the invocation of the roar of the crowd when a goal is scored.

With video game cultures, the layers and overlappings of meta-play are particularly complex:

A group of four ten year old girls gathers around a video game console in Anna's playroom. They are playing ... *Pirates: The Legend of Black Kat*, which features a

female pirate [...] The girls spend their time in the game searching for treasure, navigating the pirate ship from island to island and fighting off pirates and giant crabs. The game is meant for a single player, but the girls take turns with the controller... surfing the internet on Anna's laptop while waiting for their turn. They are engaged in multiple forms of play in the same space: instant messaging..., listening to music, playing games online while simultaneously watching and coaching whichever girl currently has the controller.... The game has captured their imaginations to such a degree that the play merges as they re-enact the adventure pretending to be pirates engaging in play sword fights and taking turns being Katarina [the pirate protagonist] [...]

Anna: 'This went so much faster than the 1st time but if I have to redo it again I'm gonna be so mad.'

Anna hands the controller to Molly who explores the island looking for the treasure chest eventually encountering pirates.

Molly: 'Pirates! Oh no!

I'm running through the trees...'

Molly explores the island in the game looking for clues that will lead her to the treasure.

Molly: (handing the controller to Virginia) 'Do you want to try?'

Virginia is... typically shy and timid on the schoolyard. She reluctantly accepts the controller.

Virginia: 'You don't need to kill the monkeys 'cause they won't hurt you'

Anna: 'Press 1, 2 right when the lock comes press 1, 2 go thru the door that opened'

Virginia: (Squealing) 'Crabs, crabs, crabs, eww!' (She swipes wildly at the crabs with her sword, laughing and screeching)

Dixon and Weber's analysis of this event highlights the flow between virtual and actual play with which this book started. Like Jo and Alex's designation of their father as the player of their actual Lego Racers across the floor, the girls were 'both *playing at playing* a videogame and playing the game', and '[t]here was a multiple layering or multitasking in the casual way they incorporated the pirate game into their play, cheering on the person playing, giving suggestions, and actually enacting or improvising around it' (Dixon and Weber 2011, 487).

Bateson suggests that animal play may have been 'an important step in the evolution of communication' (Bateson 1972, 182). If my connecting this animal meta-communication to the ludic digital media of simulation seems a stretch,

consider Bateson's own application of meta-communication to human culture: 'trompe l'oeil painting and conjurers and special effects in cinema', cultural forms commonly regarded as precursors of virtual reality technologies, or – for Jean Baudrillard – as stages in the precession of the simulacra (Baudrillard 1994). With metroptic culture,

the idea was introduced that an original achieves its significance only through copies; they have their being only in becoming. (Goldman 1998, 19)

In thinking of play as simulational – from animals to children to technoculture – it is important to note that these simulations are not deceitful: the playful 'bite' is an illusion, but dogs and monkeys know it, and the conjurer or *trompe l'oeil* painter aim is to impress with the technical virtuosity of their trickery, not to trick (Bateson 1972, 181). As I argued earlier, simulations and virtual realities are real in their technical apparatus and their effects on our bodies. Play and playful technologies might help us rethink artificial realities of culture and communication – and the reality of artifice.

Prosthetic imagination

There are many ways that technologies and environments, whether designed for the purposes of play or not, suggest, scaffold, extend and augment imaginative play. Play in this sense is fully machinic, and imagination is extended out into, and processed by, the mechanisms of the gameworld. Imaginative play is not only the imposition or projection of a child's fantasies into the animation of dead matter or onto the environment as if it were a cinema screen. The exercise of agency in actual play is analogous to the complicated technologies of simulation and virtual worlds. Each can be understood as a set of feedback loops and the child is acted on by the machines as well as acting on them. The game event is not reducible to the actions or locations of either. The imaginative motives of play cannot be simply located in the child's mind; just as a collective game between children conjures up a real world that does not exist – not even as electrical impulses in the nervous system – so too a collective gameworld generated by a child and a machine is distributed across and between them.

To return to simulation games,⁹ computer simulations are artificial imaginations, modelling systems too complex for the unaugmented human mind. We delegate to them the storage and processing of dynamic non-

linear variables, whether these be market data in the modelling of economic predictions or the ratio between the 'Outgoing' and 'Nice' aspects of a *Sims* character. In a simulation game, these variables play out through, and feed back to the player from, the behaviour of the virtual world and its creatures. The mechanisms of transmedia systems provide a looser system, the components of which are plugged together by individuals and groups in many different ways:

this is the question of how the imagination as produced by commercial media articulates with the imagination, agency, and creativity of diverse children going about their daily lives. (Ito 2011, 492)

Simple machines such as toys or objects co-opted as toys may serve a similar function. In the paddling pool event discussed earlier, Jo at one point picked up a plastic footpump that was lying around after having been used to inflate the pool itself. He wanted to use it to mechanize the 'tidal wave' god power previously visited on the world through the bucket. By reconnecting the pump's hose, he could get it to suck instead of blow, and he aimed to suck up water and direct it at boats and toys in a powerful jet. I wasn't happy about having a pump full of water so stopped him.

J: What are we supposed to use then?

S (with a touch of sarcasm): Your imagination?

J: How are we meant to use our imagination on something that's meant to be real?...

J: We're meant to try, we're trying to do it so that it's real.

In retrospect, my irritable response clearly shows I had not grasped the multifaceted workings of the boys' imaginations or the machinic environment of their gameworld. The exercise of imagination had been effected all afternoon from the spinning into being of the heterotopian and phantasmagorical world of Mr Happy in the *Age of Mythology*. The vivid blue water and red-striped sails looped visual and embodied memories of the computer game, whilst the other more or less randomly accumulated toys were caught up, triggering new associations and possibilities. The materiality of this environment suggested playful behaviours, and enacted them – submerging and floating, exercising cataclysmic powers on the tiny figures. Similarly, the visitation of god powers on the computer game characters is triggered by the player's decision, but the visual animation and destructive effects of the process itself is delivered by

the machine. Divine intervention flows through the player and the machine, so it should be no surprise that in the actual game Jo was 'trying to do it so that it's real'.

The protopolitics of play

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

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

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

At the molar level of the politics of children's media and toy culture, it is important that adults pay attention to and care about the actual acquisitiveness and surveillance required by online spaces for children, the reinforcement of social divisions of gender and race in the design of toys and concomitant access to digital media and technologies. Campaigns such as Let Toys Be Toys, all-girl game jams, and initiatives such as GoldieBlox open up spaces and possibilities in adult thought and children's play.¹⁰ But at the molecular level of moments and events of play these divisions are often fluid, and flow across each other and into other strange and monstrous configurations.

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

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

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

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

As I complete this book, Jo and Alex are in their mid teens, Lego and Playmobil has been consigned to the attic, and imaginative play evident only in the occasional eruption in jokes, flights of fancy or recollections of their own play history. However, the micro-worlds of video games persist into adulthood, a bridge alongside the blurred returns and relays of TV and literature for older children and adults, *Call of Duty*, Mario and *The Sims* alongside Harry Potter and *Lord of the Rings*.

Their virtual media culture has changed from the stand-alone console and computer games, through their early adoption of the MMO *World of Warcraft*, to the interwoven playful networks of Xbox Live, Steam and social media. These platforms and the connections they form have developed as the children have grown up, but they were prefigured by (and to an extent prepared for by) the

local hook-ups of GameBoy cables in *Pokémon* swaps, the asynchronous social networks of virtual worlds such as *Moshi Monsters* and the sharing of tiny sound files in their first mobile phones. These online gameworlds are also spaces of collusion and communion: a friend's eleven-year-old daughter has learned the 'cup game' (a very skillful, fast and rhythmic clapping game) from YouTube; the video channel has revolutionized childlore, allowing songs, dances and crazes to spread virally not via the slow and contingent routes from playground to playground (Bishop and Burn 2013).

Jo at age sixteen can still sing the theme tune to the *Pokémon* TV series and the two of them still return, from the varied grown-up attractions of online culture to the reassuring familiarity of a new iteration of the *Pokémon* DS games. Particularly in the holidays, when they spend time together again, playing *Pokémon* in parallel reconnects the brother-machine.

Notes

- 1 Letter from Virginia Lowe, Ormond, Victoria, Australia, in *New Scientist*, issue 2567, 2 September 2006, <http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg19125671.300-imaginary-friends.html>. Accessed 1st April 2013.
- 2 See David Gauntlett's useful summary of the case against the media effects model, <http://www.theory.org.uk/david/effects.htm>, and Henry Jenkins' attempts to intervene in media and policy reactions to the Columbine shootings (Jenkins 1999).
- 3 Though video games in their interactive and reflexive play and vivid images seem to some to fatally collapse fantasy and reality, or even to actively train children to aim and shoot as a reflex (see Lister et al. 2009, 289).
- 4 As evidenced by home photographs that circulate through social media – for instance, toy cars were given to a young girl by parents hoping to resist gender stereotyping. They later found the cars on their backs/roofs, tucked up in dolls' beds. To cite an example from children's literature (acknowledged by Goldman as an ethnographic source in its own right – Goldman 1998, 1), *My Naughty Little Sister*, a story in which the toys made by the toddler's uncle are systematically transformed – a horse on wheels into a pram, a dolls' house into an oven and then (with the collusion of her friend, Bad Harry) an actual toy oven into a steam locomotive engine (Edwards 1997).
- 5 Rarely so directly or frankly in their popular media resources, however.
- 6 Interestingly, Lilli Peller suggests that the repetitious nature of play may be a process for dealing with trauma.

‘The psychoanalytic interpretation so far has stressed the emotional release gained through play. Children play in order to mitigate, to deny, or temporarily solve a conflict. In play the child recaptures for a while the omnipotence he once believed he possessed. He repeats and gradually assimilates an experience that was traumatic or a narcissistic insult. Play may help him overcome a specific fear. And, of course, play is a source of pleasure ... the playing child *repeats* an experience he has had, or a part of it. *Repeating it, he divests it of its uniqueness.* [...] Play enables the child to reexperience, to remold past impressions and events and their accompanying moods and emotions. *Playful repetition provides essential, possibly indispensable steps toward concept formation*’ (Peller 1971 [1952], 123–124).

- 7 The mingling of bodies on the street, particularly after dark, is in itself a practice that makes police anxious, more so, of course, with adults than children. The effigies and festive costumes of some political demonstrations (note the recent adoption of Guy Fawkes masks in Anonymous protests) overlap with the more playful and performative carnivals of recent years. Last year, Bristol’s ‘zombie walk’ saw a number of zombie Jimmy Saviles – a symbolic invocation as much of the carnivalesque rejection of good taste as of the recently deceased celebrity serial sex offender. Halloween costumes of ‘psycho ward’ mental patients on sale in British supermarkets in 2013 generated complaints from mental health charities. These inversions have political potential, but they are profoundly ambiguous.
- 8 This is my own observation, based on our own dog’s behaviour with puppies.
- 9 All computer and video games are simulations, whether they represent real-world systems and environments or not. Here I am referring specifically to the genre of games, the gameplay of which is driven by the modelling of complex systems – such as the domestic lives of *The Sims* and the urban development of *SimCity* (see Giddings 2014c).
- 10 <http://www.lettoysbetoys.org.uk>, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-20186937>, <http://www.goldieblox.com>.
Sarah Grimes’ Prezi keynote for *Intersections/Cross-Sections* (March 2013) captures many of the issues in a particularly elegant and playful way, <http://prezi.com/v73wy2bp-r-g/politics-of-play-keynote/>