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Introduction

A photograph from a family holiday. Two boys in a campsite, sitting close together, but with their attention totally absorbed by the screens of the Nintendo DS consoles in their hands. Framed by trees, they are huddled close to a metre-high post and its electrical sockets, their consoles plugged in via cables, plugs and adaptors, batteries charging after days of travelling without electrical hook-up. They are playing, no doubt, a *Pokémon* game, lost in worlds that synthesize pastoral exploration and adventure that simulate a community of human and monstrous playmates and adversaries. For those anxious about the current state of childhood, this might seem a dark irony – an idealized childhood of open fields, woods and collective, imaginative play mocked in vivid colours, and an impossible ecology of Viridian Forest and Five Isle Meadow (Figure I.1).

Figure I.1 The outdoor adventure of Pokémon

I am reminded of a television natural history programme about barnacles living on thermal vents on the deep ocean floor. The hot, mineral-rich water builds up tower-like protuberances on which these molluscs survive – a few centimetres away from their tower they would perish in the deep cold. They are among the very few species that do not rely on the sun's energy for their life, as the other animals at these depths are sustained by debris drifting down from the sunlit waters way above. The children in the photograph are clinging to their devices and their life-giving cables and plugs, drawing imaginative sustenance from an environment utterly alien to the sunlight, trees, breeze and grass that surrounds them. From the tiny screen flows a bright, but sunless, world of exploration, adventure, play and puzzles.

But it reminds me too of photographs, taken by Fr Damian Webb in the 1950s and Shirley Baker in the mid 1960s, of young girls playing in the forbidding streets of Salford and other northern English cities. An environment ostensibly as inhospitable to play as the icy waters are to barnacles, filled with back-to-back terraced houses opening straight onto the pavement. No grass, trees, no space other than pavement and cobbled street.¹ These generations of girls, though, have transformed lamp posts into unlikely play equipment. Skipping ropes looped around the posts fashion a rudimentary swing. The mechanics of this improvised apparatus do not allow the free backwards and forwards motion of a conventional park swing, rather the girls swing out and round, in tight ellipses, brief flights and a vertiginous thrill. Like life itself, play will find a way.

Even in these two small examples there are numerous worlds in play. We cannot know, just from looking at the photograph, whether the girls' game is simply one of kinaesthetic exertion, or whether they have their own imaginative setting – such as magical flight – for their swinging. They may well have a rhyme or song, learnt from others via the oral folklore of childhood, or improvised in the moment. This may be a competition, a sport, the time of each leap and swing counted out and compared. The boys, though quiet and still, are playing – each in his own world, but perhaps comfortable in the presence of the other, perhaps aware of the sunlight and fresh air at some level. Meanwhile, the videogame software is generating its own dynamic microcosm: stories unfold, battles are fought and monsters collected as the boys click their way through the synthetic environment. The Pokémon universe extends beyond the console, across media platforms from comics to television, cards to toys and permeating everyday

thoughts and conversations; this holiday was characterized by long journeys in which elaborate scenarios and dramas were spoken into existence. Pikachu, Charmander and others by the dozen evoked, summoned, intangible yet present between the children in the car.

Space and time of play

Children's games and imaginations in particular, but play in its broader and adult contexts too, are broadly understood in terms of space and time. Historians and anthropologists of play describe the ambiguous apartness of games in time and space: the marking out of the sports pitch or the microcosm of the game board, the marking out of time by the referee's whistle or the playtime interludes in the work or school day (Huizinga 1986, Caillois 1962). It is also fully part of everyday life, enacted by bodies and technologies, in physical environments and hemmed in by the constraints of more instrumental and practical activities. Playing takes place in the interior spaces and temporalities of the mind as well:

All play presupposes the temporary acceptance, if not of an illusion (indeed this last word means nothing less than beginning a game: *in-lusio*), then at least of a closed, conventional, and, in certain respects, imaginary universe. (Caillois 1962, 19)

Games and play are at once material and imaginary. They are real – but they trouble commonsense notions of reality; they offer multiple realities of fantasy, performance and intense experience. The 'gameworlds' of this book's title open up in fields, parks, streets, at home indoors, as well as in computer-generated space. The digital does not mark an absolute redirection of the history of children's play in space: play has always been characterized by some kind of virtuality. Moreover, even the modern virtual forms driven by sophisticated technology are not a clear break. Pre-digital electronic media such as television and video, and pre-electronic media such as cinema and literature have always been understood as worlds within worlds, thresholds to be crossed. Media worlds are playworlds, and these playworlds may appear in the gameworld as I describe it here, or follow their own orbits (Figure I.2).

Figure I.2 Mapping a gameworld

Media worlds

All entertainment media, from books and comics to films and television, whilst not necessarily games, *are* playful. Viewers and readers cross a border into a fictional world and in so doing adopt a playful willingness to accept the characters, action and events as a kind of reality, and similarly to regard the evident artifice of genre conventions, narrative structure, spatial and temporal ellipses, etc., as real, or as *real enough* to warrant imaginative engagement and sustained attention:

The media have the capacity, indeed they entirely depend upon that capacity, to engage an audience within spaces and times that are distinguished – marked off – from the otherwise relentless confusions of everyday life. There is a threshold to be crossed each time we participate in the process of mediation. (Silverstone 1999, 61)

Theatre and comedy are among the popular media forms that most clearly acknowledge – and play with – their own compelling fantasies. As Shakespeare's Theseus puts it,

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them into shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.²

The media spectator's imaginative and embodied engagement with the fantastical realities – the offending shadows – of play, film or sporting event is for Caillois one of the four main categories of play, mimicry or simulation:

Mimicry is incessant invention. The rule of the game is unique: it consists in the actor's fascinating the spectator, while avoiding an error that might lead the spectator to break the spell. The spectator must lend himself to the illusion without first challenging the décor, mask, or artifice which for a given time he is asked to believe in as more real than reality itself. (Caillois 1962, 23)

For Caillois, simulation is the way spectators are placed in relation to entertainment performances, in other words, the playful way they engage with the images and dramas before them. The term also encompasses children's imaginative play with both media and toys, and without. Any imaginative play entails role play or the meta-roleplay of the director of the drama, its staging, props and costumes. But sometimes the playworld is etheric, built on the spoken word, conversation or just thought, with no props, board or cards: airy nothing. Daydreams are perhaps the most ubiquitous moments of simulation, fleeting yet capable of briefly transforming the everyday:

Never shall I, Charlotte Brontë forget what a voice of wild & wailing music now came thrillingly to my mind's-almost to my body's-ear nor how distinctly I, sitting in the school room at Roe Head, saw the Duke of Zamorna leaning against that obelisk with the mute marble Victory above him [...] I was quite gone. I had really utterly forgot where I was and all the gloom & cheerlessness of my situation. I felt myself breathing quick and short as I beheld the Duke lifting up his sable crest, which undulated as the plume of a hearse waves to the wind [...] 'Miss Brontë, what are you thinking about?', said a voice that dissipated all the charm, & Miss Lister thrust her little rough black head into my face! 'Sic transit' &c. (The Brontës [1835] 2010, 156–157)

Children's literature and other media have often been characterized by a 'worldness', shaped as much by the topographical impetus of a plot as by its temporality, prefaced with maps and with narratives following through landscapes, architectures, mythic structures and politics designed for the quest itself (e.g. J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth, Tove Jansson's Moomin Valley or J.K. Rowling's Hogwarts and alternative London), through magical or nonsensical spaces that resist conventional cartography but sustain a powerful sense of place and other-worldness (Lewis Carroll's Wonderland and Looking Glass world, Norton Juster's Dictionopolis and Doldrums in *The Phantom Tollbooth*, Swift's Lilliput and Brobdingnag in *Gulliver's Travels*, the multiple dimensions of both

Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* and Enid Blyton's *Far Away Tree*) or more everyday environments and adventures (the fields and gardens of the small adventures of William Brown or Milly Molly Mandy, the lakes and islands of *Swallows and Amazons* and the challenging and varied environments of Michael Rosen's *Bear Hunt*).

Such worlds open up as virtual environments for play beyond the page, along with television, comic and film stories and characters, as resources for play in the playground, the park or the bedroom. They are to be lived in and played out beyond the act of reading or being read to – a stage and a dramatis personae ready for toys and dolls, Lego bricks and everyday objects, more or less faithfully replicated, hybridized with other storyworlds from media and literature or of the child's own construction. An example of this forms a central case study for this book, though it is a replication of the world of a computer game rather than a book or film.

It seems clear that the poetic flow is not one-way as many writers, producers and game designers reflect on their own childhood world-building as a source for their adult work. Fragments in poems and diaries document Emily and Anne Brontë's elaborate and sustained game/worlds of Gondal, Angria and Glass Town (the wellspring for the daydream mentioned earlier), whilst Satoshi Tajiri – the creator of *Pokémon* – cites his childhood fascination with collecting insects as his inspiration. As an adult, H.G. Wells revisited playful worlds by devising thorough rules for an intricate simulation of war with tin soldiers, set out in *Little Wars*.

Gondal and Angria is a classic example of what David Cohen and Stephen MacKeith call paracosms, 'spontaneously created imaginary private worlds, which for a considerable period recur in the child or young person, and therefore tend to become elaborate and systematised' (Cohen and MacKeith 1991, 109). These worlds – sometimes constructed from toys and blocks, sometimes as much talked into existence by friends or siblings or told as bedtime stories – are related to literary fantasy worlds, they suggest, but in play it is the world itself that fascinates, not its character or plot. A paracosm could be logical, governed by rules and constitutions, bedecked with flags and coats of arms and provided with a political history. Or, it could be infused with the spontaneous surrealism of children's play, where toys are animated and objects transformed. For example, the three cities of Petsland – the creation of a seven-year-old girl and her ten-year-old brother – were organized according to the

size of the toys that lived there. Petsville was home to larger toys, Juville for medium-sized and Hamville for the smallest.

Petsland and its activities provided an inexhaustible source of interest for the children. It lifted the restrictions of the 'real' world. 'We were "in charge" of Petsland and could manipulate its destiny.' They had to care for twenty or thirty 'real entities (real to us, that is), that we could devote ourselves to'. (Cohen and MacKeith 1991, 25)

So, for all their marvelousness, these cities and lands had their own reality. On the one hand, the worlds and their denizens had a real presence within the children's lives, shaping their time, relationships and behaviour. On the other, events within them often had to correspond to a certain level of fantastic plausibility. For instance, the creators of Possumbul World, Dan and Peter, were monarchs, not gods:

They could perform no miracles: Plausibility was all. Dan recalls a well-meaning adult moving some toy to what you thought was a 'better' place without appreciating that such a change in location could not be effected by hand stretched out from heaven. Moving a toy would call for a crane, a lorry, and some personnel. Similarly the boys were embarrassed by the gift of a mounted toy soldier painted a uniform gold – until they hit upon the expedient of erecting it as a city statue! Realism was all. (Cohen and MacKeith 1991, 373–374)

The 'as if-ness' or 'sort of' reality of play is a theme throughout this book. Games and play generate their own versions of reality within the everyday, and players recognize (and play with) these rule-bound artifices. The rules of Bearland, for example, written up by two brothers along with its complex history and legends, scale maps and documents state (in 'paragraph 0:11') that 'there is no blaming things on the Bears, they are only alive to a certain extent' (Cohen and MacKeith 1991, 62).

Cohen and MacKeith's definition of paracosm is to some extent an artefact of both their research method and the nature of children's imaginative play itself. Asking adults to recall their childhood worlds will largely return the more sustained world-building events, those archived in maps and documents or simply persistent enough over time to lodge in the memory. Looking back from the viewpoint of adulthood the traces and products of play are visible, but the moments and activities of world construction – their being played into existence – are less accessible. These accounts of paracosms are memories, fixed

and retold decades later. They may hint at the processes of play, but do not capture its dynamism, the deployment of toys and drawings in the generation of worlds in the distinct temporality of play. Like dreams, most play events are vivid and all-encompassing in their time, but immediately forgotten. Moreover, if children are preoccupied with play they are nearly always left to it by adults. School performances and competitive sport may be watched and photographed, but in their play with toys, words and worlds, children are generally left to it.

Most of the main examples in this book have something of the *worldness* of the paracosm but are more fleeting and ad hoc, without constitutions or written records but still compelling and engrossing for the players in the moments of their existence, transformative of everyday objects, media sources, bodies and environments. In fact, they may be repeatedly remade, sometimes in different contexts and with different media, and often media sources provide a connecting thread, stitched through successive playtimes, reminding, seeding and mutating.

Gameworlds

Play as an aspect of culture, popular media or mode of everyday lived experience is undertheorized in media studies, cultural studies in particular³ and the humanities and social sciences in general. It troubles previously reliable distinctions between, for instance, production and consumption, the everyday and the remarkable, the active and the passive, the obedient and the rebellious, the adult and the childish, leisure and work, even the human and the animal. The new interdisciplinary field of game studies has begun the task of seeking out and articulating thinkers and concepts that have taken play and games seriously, from Jan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* in the late 1930s to more recent scholarship in disciplines from anthropology and psychology (Sutton-Smith 1997) to performance studies (Turner 1982).

Though influential theories of play, as we have seen, assert the apartness of play and games in time and space, this apartness is actually quite ambiguous. Whilst any particular imaginative children's game is intense in its fabulation and in the attention and concentration of its players, it can at any moment spin into a different game, or a player may leave, another be pulled in or it may fizzle out altogether, perhaps re-emerging minutes or days later. Video game play in particular is characterized by its immersive hold on the attention of rapt and near-motionless players. And yet, the case studies and examples in this book describe

a flow between these rapt and passionate states and other playful activities. There are no obvious boundaries in time or space, but the players know when they are in the middle of a gameworld – there is a centripetal force that both draws in, but can then spin out, and ejects as well. (This dynamic is discussed further in Chapter 6, ‘Playgrounds’.) Gameworlds, virtual and actual, overlap and nest within one another, or butt up against others, allowing or inviting transition and transformation.

This book is not a comprehensive study of play then, but an articulation of notions and descriptions of ‘free’ imaginative or fantasy play, with the rule-bound, mediating structures of digital media. Rather than classifying games, it pays attention to the transitions between games and transductions between the virtual and actual domains of play. This flow and these transductions are as characteristic and constitutive of play, as discrete rule sets, winning states or world boundaries.

Whilst all media engagement has a playful aspect, historically – as now – children’s media have also taken specifically ludic forms – the rule driven, abstract structures of board games and puzzles – as opposed to the narrative form of books, comics and moving images. Video games are a hybrid of playground and tabletop games, pinball machines and card games, along with the narrative or symbolic traces of books, films and comics. ‘Gameworld’ is a term common in the description of video games, particularly those games that involve exploration of, or orientation in, a simulated topography (adventure games, first-person shooters, platform games, ‘sandbox’ and simulation games).

What kind of gameworlds are built in the current era of digital media though? Video games at first glance collapse the media/literary world with the paracosm and other modes of imaginative play. The Harry Potter games, for example, not only provide, like the books and films, a fully realized environment with characters, histories, laws and rules, but they then furnish the player/reader with visually and audially immersive, navigable, virtual instantiation of that world. Play is directed, it seems, in this imaginary world by the logical and coded spaces, behaviours and algorithms of computer software (Figure I.2). A sense of horror at this mediatization – or even industrialization – of imaginative play permeates parental concerns and journalistic and academic responses to children’s video game and digital media culture. The compelling, ‘addictive’ pull of video game worlds, it is feared, shifts play indoors and away from the physical and mental health giving activities of outdoor play. Play at computers and consoles

is presented as solitary, anti-social, engineering a perverse intimacy with the synthetic and machinic at the expense of the natural and sociable realms of an ideal childhood.

The direst claims and predictions for the current and near future state of childhood are predicated on a misrecognition of the peculiar reworkings of reality that have *always* characterized play. Children's generation of imaginary and imaginative new worlds within the everyday is now valorized as natural, healthy and developmental, providing a psychic foundation for adult life. It is worth noting that this view of play is a relatively recent historical one – educators and moralists have also regarded play as something frivolous, wasteful and morally suspect to be tamed and channelled into edifying and educational activities (and echoes of this are evident in some contemporary work on play and education). But, by and large, imaginative, preferably outdoor and/or social, play is today seen as central to a healthy childhood. However, when uploaded or augmented through the artificial intelligences and virtual spaces of digital media, the 'healthy' play between fantasy and reality seems threatened. The photorealistic imagery and intense interaction not only outsource imagination, it is assumed, they so fully capture children's attention, for such long periods of time, that the 'more real than real' nature of play replaces any understanding of a world – natural or social – beyond the screen and controller (see Lister et al. 2009, 286–289).

Most of the dire claims made for children's game and Internet culture are founded on assumption and not on research.⁴ A key principle and motive force of this book is that we can only learn about play (about technology and culture) through observing and describing it. The meanings or effects of digital media forms such as video games cannot be read off from their images and scenarios, from the quality of their images and sounds, nor from assumptions about how they are played. This said, description and observation, whether scientific or anthropological, are not straightforward, unmotivated or unmediated activities (see Haraway 2004 or Latour 1987 on the former, and Clifford 1988 for the latter). The book is driven by descriptions and analyses of children's play with and around virtual media – and the creative and critical processes of description as an empirical approach. Chapter 3 ('Microethology') explains the concepts and methods I deploy in this ethnographic – or ethological – research.

To talk of digital gameworlds in the same breath as the imaginary spaces of children's literature and the everyday fabrication of paracosms is to assert a strong continuity of this worldness through children's imaginative play and

media culture and across centuries. It is to see video games – and play with and around video games – as a particularly vivid and relatively new instantiation of this continuity. However, as I will argue throughout this book, there are significant differences too. I want to complicate any straightforward cultural-historical dialectic of continuity and change. Attention to children's literature and classic studies of everyday play help us to think about the *newness* of video games and virtual media, but the newness of video games and virtual media culture offers – I will argue – new ways of thinking about play and everyday reality before and after digital media.

Sim you later

The video recording captures a close-up of computer monitor screen. An alien arthropod, something like a short-bodied stick insect, but with four legs and a jointed tail, writhes in the centre of the screen, and at the centre of a nearly empty world consisting only of a chequered floor that stretches to a near horizon, and a small red bump that seems to be exerting a directional pull on the creature. The grey and white squares evoke both the rigid Euclidean geometry and visual aesthetic of early 3D computer-generated imagery, and the sequence in *Alice Through the Looking Glass* where the world is transformed into a giant chess board (Figure I.3). The monster's flailing limbs and bouncing gait inefficiently

Figure I.3 Constructing a Zook

but doggedly find traction with the virtual physics; it is – slowly – making its way through the abstract world. The video's audio track captures children's voices: two boys, one clearly at the keyboard of this computer application, the other – a younger, higher pitched voice – observing, commenting, on the creature's progress, and then riffing on the terminology of the application and other playful virtual worlds it brings to his mind.

The screen displays the name of the application, *Bamzooki*, along with the logo of the BBC. The software encourages children to construct sophisticated virtual animals from a set of malleable virtual shapes and forces. Once adept, children can work out which relationships of body parts, shapes, joints and behaviours can be assembled into an entity that can effectively race or fight those of other players (Figure I.3). These competitions could be conducted online, but also featured in a television series in which children could showcase and compete with their creations.

The older child has just exited from the 'Sumo' feature of the application. The name is apt as the ritual combat of these Zooks is won by one creature ousting the other from a small demarcated arena in combat characterized by momentum, timing and leverage rather than straightforward violence.

J: That makes him go faster doesn't it?

A: Yeah

J: It gives him more balance

A: Let's keep the Push!

J: See, he's going towards that red thing... pretty fast!

J: Do you know what Follow means? That means we follow it... it follows... we follow it... it's going quite fast isn't it?

The Zook reaches the red marker

J: ... he just hops right over it. That's a good thing about it... that it can hop over things

A: Look at its legs! Look how long its legs are

J: So it gives it a bit of an advantage... if it's Sumo... if it's Zook Sumo, doesn't it?

The boys seem to have collaborated on the design of their Zook and share their admiration for its capabilities. Push and Follow are key variables, determining the forward momentum of the Zook and the behaviour of the application's virtual camera, respectively. Jo has a moment of confusion over whether 'Follow'

determines the virtual movement of the players as instantiated by the virtual camera ('we follow it') or whether it is the creature's instruction/instinct to follow the red marker.

J: Let's quit, exit from this one

The screen goes blank for a second, then a Windows desktop appears, cluttered with file icons and folders against a Pokémon wallpaper. The cursor clicks on an icon.

J: Right, Simulator ...

The screen goes blank again, then a loading screen appears, with the CBBC (Children's BBC) logo, the title Bamzooki in capitals with the subtitle 'Simulator'.

A: (yawns) What's this one called?

J: Bamzooki Simulator

Alex begins to play with the word:

A: I thought it said ... 'Bamzooki Sumo-lator'

J: (laughs) No (enunciating clearly and slowly) Sim-u-lat-or

A: See ... Sim ... (sing-song voice) Sim-U-Lator!

A: Hey, that's good, that's The Sims, when they say goodbye ...

A: Sim You Later!

This tiny event, taking up around one minute and forty-five seconds of video, encapsulates many of the themes, objects and behaviours that will be explored in this book. Numerous worlds overlap, encircle or nest within each other. The Zook writhes through its 'micro-world' (Sudnow 2011 [1979]), immaterial yet real in its effects both within its synthetic environment and in the excitement and behaviours of the children. The boys have built it, and along with the software breathed sort-of life into it – it is, like the Bears, alive to a certain extent. It is certainly real, it is experienced, it affects the virtual and actual space and bodies within and without its own geometric landscape. The language and media form of simulation itself (here in its contemporary sense of computer modelling as well as in Caillois' categories) is adapted, translated and played with. It looks very different to the humanoid Sims but is for Alex of the same species. Like the Sims it is a kind of toy, but also like the Sims it is a kind of robot, its movement set in train by the players in their tweaking of the software variables, but conducted with a range of non-linear and autonomous behaviours that hint at an emergent

sort-of life. Whilst we might study the game within the bounds of the screen, it loops out from the screen and through the eyes, nerves and fingers of the players, a cybernetic circuit of information feedback. These are media worlds too, designed and produced by media corporations, for non-profit edutainment (BBC) and for commercial ends (Maxis/*The Sims*), one sector of a sophisticated and global media culture for children.

They are *games*, for all their vivid imagery they are fundamentally abstract, structured by rules, motivated by ritual conflict (*Bamzooki*) or a more complex and open-ended set of goals and winning-states (*The Sims*, *Pokémon*). As *media* games, they operate or unfold less through the broadcasting or communication of messages from media producers – distant in time and space, and much more through the immediate and contingent instantiation of images, sounds and behaviours in intense events more akin to profane ritual or communion.

These worlds are nested within the everyday time and space of domestic life, and through the imaginative and personable cooperation of two siblings, but they also open up to each other (*'Sim U Later!'*) and to other contiguous domains (the *Pokémon* universe). Later that day, Alex will draw a series of colourful monsters, a bestiary of his own design – a practice continuous with children's playful mark-making presumably since the origin of our species – but inspired by the artificial/natural forms, fictional and ludic attributes and algorithmic behaviours of Zooks and *Pokémon*.

The book is concerned with describing and conceptualizing play in the contemporary moment, a moment in which children's culture in the developed world is thoroughly suffused with the patterns and practices of digital media. It tracks the transduction of images and forms from the virtual gameworlds of video games across actual spaces of the home and playground, and their shaping of new games. The gameworlds in the central case studies discussed in this book cannot be separated into video game and actual play, rather they loop around and through both the virtual and actual domains. These gameworlds have a sense of their own universe but are not bounded by the edges of the virtual environment or TV screen. Obversely, the actual worlds of play with toys and in playgrounds, whilst ostensibly continuous with pre-digital games, are also unbounded – and must be understood as extensions of, and/or precursors to, play in computer and video game worlds.

This book, in part, explores the passage of long-established worlds of play and games into the digital age – the heterogeneous, yet completely continuous worlds of play: the body, toy worlds, physical environments and imaginative or psychic realities, out to the macrocosms of collective play,

playgrounds and media environments and newer material and intangible spheres of virtual media and video games. As I will explain in Chapter 7 ('Real Worlds'), virtual media now suggest to us that play has always been something like virtual reality.⁵ Thus, a clear conceptual distinction between transformation and continuity can't capture the dynamic of contemporary children's technoculture. Rather, this book will attempt to rethink children's play and media cultures from the perspective of virtual media. I will begin with two sets of questions:

1. What is the nature of play today in an environment saturated with digital media devices, networks and applications? In what ways are longer-established games and play patterns erased, sustained or transformed by newer computer-based media?
2. How might the virtual worlds and characters of the video game suggest new ways of thinking about earlier or longer-established patterns of play, for example, imaginary, literary and collective gameworlds with toys, books and outdoor spaces? Play has always inspired reflections on the membrane between fantasy and reality, imagination and the everyday, the material and the immaterial. In recent decades, technologies of virtual reality and the new communications and entertainment media of the Internet and the video game have posed similar questions. What is the relationship between the fantasmic images, characters and dramas of video game worlds – conjured from intangible flows of data and shaped by algorithms and feedback – and the vivid, immersive, often visceral, experiences they generate in players' bodies and minds?

A central concern throughout the book is to track play between and across the virtual and actual domains in everyday life, accepting Shanly Dixon and Sandra Weber's assertion that contemporary play is characterized by a 'flowing exploration through the permeable boundaries of the digital and the analog' (Dixon and Weber 2011, 487). The next chapter, 'Virtual and Actual Worlds,' will begin this exploration.

Notes

- 1 There is, however, one characteristic of this forbidding environment that is more conducive to play than streets today: the absence of motor vehicles.

- 2 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act V, Scene 1.
- 3 There are a few notable and useful exceptions in media studies, for example, Fiske and Watts 1985, Silverstone 1999.
- 4 See, for example, Ben Goldacre on Professor Susan Greenfield's assertion that games and social media can be linked to autism and dementia (Goldacre 2011).
- 5 Or perhaps that ideas about play (and related biocultural phenomena such as dreams and language) have proved a resource in the construction of the technological imaginary of virtual reality itself, and its popular descendants the video game (Lister et al. 2009, 275).