

“Sometimes I Like Killing as a Treat”: Children’s Transgressive Play in Minecraft

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ABSTRACT

Children’s play in digital spaces is often discussed in popular discourse and in academia in terms of what kind of effect it may be having on children. One area of concern is the relationship between ‘violent videogames’ and real-world violence. However, little is known about how children actually play in digitally mediated play spaces including Minecraft which offers sandbox style free-play and does not necessarily involve any prescribed violence. We have collected recordings of 6-8-year-old children’s leisure time Minecraft play and used a taxonomic system of play types to describe the range of play observed. Some observed play did not fit neatly into any of the play types. In this paper we describe one such instance of play which involved unprovoked violence and draw on a range of literature in the process of conceptualizing this play as Transgressive. This paper provides much needed knowledge of children’s Minecraft play as it occurs in situ.

Keywords

Minecraft, children, Transgressive Play, player observation, play

INTRODUCTION

The association of play and violence in children’s media is a topic of concern in popular and academic discourses surrounding digitally mediated play. However, this concern, and the large body of media effects research that exists around it, overwhelmingly focuses on representations of violence and game prescribed violence. This paper looks instead at violence emerging in the contexts of children’s self-directed, free-play in Minecraft. We conceive of Minecraft as a digitally mediated play space that children wield varying degrees of agency over. It is a play space that allows for violence and malevolence just as much as it allows for more peaceful play scenarios and narratives. The data for this paper comes from a larger project looking at how children play in Minecraft. Using a taxonomy of play types designed initially for non-digital play spaces (Hughes, 2002, 2006), we found that children’s Minecraft play involves a spectrum of identified play types. However, we also found some instances of play involving violence that did not neatly fit into past play taxonomies. This paper focuses on one of these examples of Minecraft play.

In this paper we first situate the play scenario of interest within the broader context of the study that it comes from. Drawing on literature about children’s ‘screen time’, their

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videogame play, and wider calls in the field of Game Studies to document in situ play experiences, we demonstrate that there is a need for research which documents children's everyday play practices and experiences. We then present the methods used in this study and describe one player participant and a sequence of play in detail. Our analysis of this play sequence then shows how we initially had difficulty accounting for this form of play within Hughes' framework. Through detailed description of play and drawing on a range of literature from studies of children's non-digital play and adult-centric Game Studies work, we present two arguments. First, that observations of children's free-play in situ yield insights into their play worlds that may be at odds with pre-conceived ideas about what Minecraft play involves. This highlights the need for further ethnographically inspired research concerned with capturing the range of practices children engage with in (and around) their Minecraft play. And second, that the concept of *Transgressive Play* is fruitful in describing this, and similar, instances of Minecraft play. Overall, this paper shows how fine-grained analysis of children's self-directed, leisure time Minecraft engagement contributes to our understanding of contemporary play.

Background and Context

The overall aim of the study was to describe children's play in Minecraft with conscious attention paid to play as the central unit of interest, rather than educational or development trajectories as is common in studies of children's media use in general, and digital play (Giddings, 2014). As Stephen and Plowman (Stephen & Plowman, 2014) observe, this focus on play in utilitarian terms, studied primarily as a means to some other ends, neglects to acknowledge that play and playfulness are valuable pursuits in their own right.

Alongside the instrumental valuing of play in existing literature, scholars have also noted a lack of description of children's digital play practices and have called for more ethnographic, descriptive studies of how children play in digital spaces. Ito & Bittanti, (Mizuko Ito & Bittanti, 2009) note that, "the focus [in public debate and research] has been almost exclusively on what people hope or fear kids will get from their play, rather than on what they actually do on an ongoing, everyday basis" (p.197). More recently, Willett (R. Willett, 2016) reiterates this call, stating, "we need more in-depth research of children's gaming practices in order to understand ways that children's social contexts shape their gaming experiences, as well as ways that gaming texts and technologies shape their gaming and game-related play practices" (p.476). Combined with the observation that for a variety of reasons, "firsthand experience of virtual worlds and videogames is alien to many parents and educators" (Merchant, 2015) there seems to be a situation where knowledge about what digitally mediated play *is*, gets left behind in the rush to find out what it *does*. This is problematic because, arguably, the knowledge claims that form the basis for current parental advice and information are derived from data that does not adequately reflect the actual experience of many children (Mavoa, 2018).

Similar criticisms of a lack of player observation studies have also been made within game studies where textual analysis and theoretical work is common but again may not be reflective of how games are interacted with in practice (Carter, Moore, Mavoa, Horst, & Gaspard, 2020; Oliver & Pelletier, 2005; Schott & Vught, 2013; Squire, 2002). More recently, and more closely related to our interest in children's play, Giddings (2014) states that a key motivator for his detailed microethology of children's play involving digital technologies 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 assumptions about how they are played" (p.10).

With a view to addressing these gaps in relation to Minecraft play, we collected recordings of children's play in Minecraft and sought to describe this play within individual child and family contexts. Minecraft was chosen because of the game's popularity, evident in its continuously large number of active players (Lawver, 2019), including children (Mavoia, Carter, & Gibbs, 2018). Minecraft is also unique for the range of play options it offers, from rule-bound gameplay in Survival mode or on servers hosting a vast range of mini-games, to free-play in Creative mode where actions are constrained only by the technical limits of the software not by ludic bounds (unless created by players themselves, for example in a game of hide and seek within a Minecraft world). In this way, Minecraft is both a 'game' and a space for play. But in emerging academic writing on Minecraft, it is the 'on the packet' description of elements of survival and construction which seem to dominate. For example, Minecraft is described as "a game about breaking and placing blocks" (Hollett & Ehret, 2015); a game where "players construct landscapes using blocks representing materials with different properties" (Burnett & Bailey, 2014); and as a sandbox game which "allows players to create objects out of different resources found in the environment of the game (e.g., castles out of stone)" (Anderson, Walker, Kafai, & Lui, 2017). While these descriptions are accurate there is the possibility that they do not capture the range of activities that children of varying ages engage in within Minecraft. Our analysis describing Minecraft play (within the structure of play type categorization), contributes to a richer knowledge of how children interact with Minecraft, beyond surviving and building.

Through our analysis we found that some play instances, involving violence towards NPCs and commentary about killing, did not neatly fit into any of the play type categories of the taxonomy we used. This paper now focuses on these instances of play and describes how we have drawn on both children's play scholarship and game studies to conceptualize these instances of play as Transgressive Play.

Literature about the kinds of play discussed here tends to focus on the relationship between violence in play and developmental outcomes. Key areas of study in fields such as psychology and education, involve working out whether violent play in childhood relates to later aggression and violence, as well as techniques for reducing violent play in educational settings where it can be problematic for teachers and students (Dunn & Hughes, 2001; Katch & Paley, 2001; Levin, 2003). Children's digitally mediated violent play is almost exclusively dealt with only by media effects researchers and is swept up and swallowed by debates about whether 'violent videogames' cause real world aggression and violence. This debate is dominating current academic and popular discourses such that there is little room for consideration of other aspects of children's digitally mediated violent play, such as investigating the its appeal and describing its actual character.

Conversely, Game Studies scholarship offers detailed accounts and theorization about 'transgressive' play. This scholarship tends to focus on the experiences adult players have when playing transgressively, and how they negotiate it (Carter, 2015, 2020; Carter & Allison, 2019; Jørgensen, 2015; Sjöblom, 2015; Stenros, 2019), drawing on studies of controversies around transgressive play to engage with contemporary media debates about games (Chapman & Linderöth, 2015; Glas, 2015) and increasingly work that has examined transgressive practices from the perspective of ethics (Brooks, 2018; Nguyen & Zagal, 2016; Sicart, 2013). However, with the exception of Mäyrä (2015), this work largely omits the experiences and practices of children, as well as connections with non-game-based, free-play. In our analysis we aim to combine insights from these sets of knowledge, in pursuit of understanding children's Minecraft play.

Research Methods and Analysis

The data described here comes from a qualitative study of 10 families with at least one child aged 6-8 years. Families were recruited through social media and personal networks of the first author. Concerted effort was made to recruit families from diverse backgrounds, however, the sample ended up being rather homogenous, at least in terms of income, with most families having higher than average total income, and ethnicity, with all families identifying as European except one Indian, one Vietnamese family, and one with one Brazilian parent. Given that cultural and socio-economic status differences are likely to shape both parental attitudes towards digital play and play practices themselves (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016; Willett, 2017), this homogeneity presents a possible limitation to the degree to which our findings might be generalizable. However, our purpose is more about framing Minecraft play as play (rather than ‘screen time’) and is an explorative study rather than an attempt at exhaustive cataloguing. Furthermore, we present our findings with detailed description of context which may go some way to countering the limitation in terms of homogeneity. One family lived in a semi-rural setting, about an hour’s drive from central Melbourne four lived in inner-city suburbs, and the remaining five lived in mid-outer Melbourne suburbs. Ethics approval for the project was obtained from The University of Melbourne human research ethics committee, and informed consent was obtained after providing information about the project in both written and oral form including in language that was appropriate to the literacy and comprehension ability of each participating child.

The work takes a contextualist approach to the study of children’s digital play by situating instances of ‘everyday’ play within layers of context (Tudge, 2008). We followed a similar procedure to other studies of young children’s media use in the home (Plowman, Stevenson, Stephen, & McPake, 2012; Stephen, Stevenson, & Adey, 2013). Children and parents were interviewed, and children took the first author on a ‘Play Tour’ of their house where settings and props for play were noted. Minecraft play sessions were recorded by families over a one to two-week period. In order to reduce some of the problems associated with recording only the child or only the screen that other researchers have encountered (Given et al., 2016) we aimed to capture both screen recording and recording of children’s bodies and as much of the room as possible using one or more cameras and/or screen capture software. Because of the range of devices used for play, recording set up varied across households. For example, families where Minecraft play happened via an iPad with inbuilt screen recording function were able to relatively easily capture screen footage. In families where an Xbox was used for play, two cameras were left with the family – one recording the TV screen and one recording the children. PC play was captured by a camera being placed behind the child in order to capture the screen, and as much of the child’s body as possible. This flexible approach relied heavily on the cooperation of families and resulted in a collaborative research process between participants and researcher (Nansen, Kennedy, Arnold, Gibbs, & Wilken, 2015; Pink, 2007). Where two video sources were captured, the first author edited the videos together in order to give a synchronous side by side view of both the on-screen action and the children’s bodies in physical space (Fig.1). In the analysis that follows, we focus on the 10.5 hours of recorded play sessions, and specifically the instances of play that were not easily categorized using our chosen taxonomy.

We analysed the video recordings for types of play, noting that such taxonomic organization is seen by some as “unhelpful” for the study of play in general (Giddings, 2014; p.41) but also in need of some means of structuring a large volume of data in line with our overall objective of describing Minecraft play. This process of categorisation offers a broad descriptive way of understanding the breadth of play activities, though lacks in-depth analysis of play experiences; a lack we aim to address in this paper with

a detailed focus on particular instances of play. We coded all recorded play as one or more play types described in Marsh et al.'s (2016, 2018) adaptation of Hughes' (2002) taxonomy of play types. Marsh et al.'s adaptation was based on recordings of three to five-year-old children playing with iPad apps. They altered wording of the taxonomy in order to account for the digital environment. We coded our recordings in a top-down fashion, with instances of each play type added as annotations using Elan software (ELAN, 2018). We used Elan software because it allowed for large video files to be analysed. The coding process involved watching and re-watching videos while annotating each discrete observed occurrence of play that could be described by one of the play type categories. Many instances of play involved coding as two or more play types, as play moved freely and often quite rapidly between categories. Some instances of play did not seem to fit with any of the available categories, so were coded as 'other'.



Figure 1: Still image from video recording. Left view is captured by a GoPro placed next to the TV; the right view is captured by a handycam mounted on tripod (visible on far left of image)

Hughes' (2002) taxonomy consists of 16 play types which were collated based on his extensive review of literature dealing with children's play as well as his own observations as a playworker in the United Kingdom. The taxonomy is primarily used by playworkers as a "useful diagnostic tool" to "check the availability of equipment and materials of a play setting along with the opportunities that it provides for diverse forms of play" (Wilson, 2010). While Hughes' taxonomy was initially formed with non-digital play in mind, Marsh et al., (2016, 2018) observed all but two of the 16 play types in their research. The two not found in that study were Rough and Tumble play and Recapitulative play. Although, the authors note that it could be argued that children playing Minecraft in their sample were in fact engaging in Recapitulative play "as they built dens and created civilisations" (Marsh et al., 2016; p.250). Marsh et al., also suggest adding 'Transgressive Play' to the taxonomy, after observing children playing in ways that transgressed the apparent intentions of app developers. We will return to the concept of Transgressive Play in our discussion.

FINDINGS

Like Marsh et al., (2016, 2018) we found instances of all but the same two of Hughes' 16 play types in these video-recordings. A full description of each of the play types observed in Minecraft is beyond the scope of this paper, but to give the reader a sense of the range of play observed we briefly outline four play types with examples here. Creative Play, was common and included building houses, shops, sculptures and a range of other structures. Socio-dramatic play involves acting out scenarios from everyday experiences and in our data occurred when children played 'families' in Minecraft. Locomotor Play in this digital context involved parkour courses, jumping off high structures and roller coaster rides. Communication Play took varying forms –

including songs and dancing both on and off-screen, as well as using text chat functions to 'spam' other players' screens with chains of random letters.

However, as mentioned we found some play did not fit easily within either Hughes' original framework or Marsh et al.'s revised version. Below, after a brief contextualisation of the play session, we describe a sequence of play which we then examine in detail.

Vignette: "Sometimes I like Killing as a Treat"

Archie (aged 7) lives in an outer Melbourne suburb with his Mum and Dad and little brother Leo (aged 5). He is described by his mother as an active child who's play repertoire includes Australian football, cricket, basketball, BMX riding as well as indoor pursuits such as Lego, reading, arts and crafts, and playing make-believe with his brother. At school, Archie plays many variants of 'tiggy' – including "Fortnite tiggy" (though, Archie is not allowed to play the digital version of Fortnite himself). In terms of digitally mediated play, Archie's experience up until recently has largely been in educational games such as Prodigy (mathematics games). The family has an iPad but this is only used when travelling, and an Xbox which is in one of the main living areas. This is the device used for Minecraft play. Archie is relatively new to Minecraft having only been playing for about 3 months. Archie has limited time for playing Minecraft, partly because of after-school activities such as Karate and swimming, and partly because there is a household rule that Minecraft can only be played on Fridays after school, and weekends. This rule came into place shortly after Archie got Minecraft and desired to play much more often, and for longer than his mother felt appropriate. Although, his mother stated that this 'rule' is enforced somewhat flexibly and depends on whatever else is happening in the family schedule.

Much of Archie's recorded Minecraft play involved roaming the landscape, interacting with NPCs or structures that caught his attention as he flew or swam. He also spent some time in the Minecraft store, browsing maps and trying on skins; rearranging his "identity" (sic) as well as flying up to "out of space" then free-falling back down: "coming in hot! Waaaaah!"

The play sequence we are interested in here takes place on a Saturday morning. Archie and Leo are alone in the formal dining room which houses the Xbox. On this occasion, he is on a creative world, and Leo is sitting next to him on the couch watching the screen as Archie moves his character through the world. They come to a 'village' and after surveying the area momentarily Archie kills several villagers who happen to be milling around in a house made of lava blocks. He then spawns and kills about 20 villagers inside the house, finding that it "only takes two hits" of his Diamond Sword for them to die (this is possibly also because the villagers keep bumping into the lava walls which sets them on fire and certainly does not aid in any chance of survival they may have had). The villagers flash red when hit and move away from Archie's sword, a few even escaping out the door. During this process he and his brother grin, giggle and mimic the sound that the villagers make when they die: "they're going 'poohaw poohaw'!" says Leo. Archie at one point digs out a water-filled area and Leo says, "this is gonna be a swimming pool...wow the villagers are gonna like this...when they jump in they'll go 'aaaah I'm sinking somebody help me!' [giggles]. Come on villys it's good for you! Sink! Follow meee!"

Play then changes course slightly, still on a path of destruction, but now using fire. Archie alternately uses flint and steel and fire charge to set fire to one of the village houses. At times he does this while spinning around and placing fire as he spins so that his avatar is in the centre of a ring of fire. He spends some time motionless, looking down at the ground as flames move and crackle, while villagers who have succumbed

to the surrounding flames make their death cries in the background. Archie's character looks up and sees a villager in flames, running past the house. "Jump in the water villy!" urges Leo, with a grin on his face. Archie continues setting fire to the house, making sure to place fire up on the higher areas as well as the stone floor (which later he breaks because it does not burn). "I'm burning your house fool!" says Leo, to which Archie, still placing fire, replies "don't say 'fool', it's inappropriate for your age". "Let's see how long I can stay in the fire...look how hot I am in the fire" says Archie, they both smile. This continues until the house is entirely destroyed, and Archie exits the world and opens another.

Archie explores this new world by flying and swimming across the landscape with no apparent goal in mind. At one point while swimming under water a zombie attracts his attention from a distance. Archie swims over to the creature and hits it several times with his character's bare hand (he has no weapon or other item equipped). After each hit the zombie flashes red, retreats then advances forward slightly, until the eighth hit when it turns and begins walking away. At this point Archie's character swims up and away from the zombie and explains out loud that "sometimes I like killing as a treat".

Another instance of Archie's play makes an interesting complement to this sequence. In a later play session, this time with his mother watching on, Archie comes across a village, and goes to great length to explain to his mother that it is his role to "protect the villagers". He explains, both to his mother and us researchers (he looks at the camera, and this dialogue is part of a longer sequence of describing how the game works) that he does this by killing monsters that come into the village and who want to kill the villagers: "cos umm monsters in Minecraft, they like to kill villagers...umm I really like villagers, that's why I don't want 'em to die, that's why I kill all the zombies so the villagers are safe...Is that OK with you mum?" As he talks, he hits several zombies, at times with only one hand on the controller as he uses the other to gesticulate.

DISCUSSION

These instances of play, and others similar which we encountered, are interesting because they are apparently in opposition to Minecraft's alignment with education, and the examples of play given in the growing body of literature examining its association with varying forms of learning and other outcomes (Dezuanni & O'Mara, 2017; Dezuanni, O'Mara, & Beavis, 2015). Minecraft has an aura of virtue surrounding it, that sets it apart in popular discourse from other videogames that appeal to children (Haxton, 2015; Mimi Ito, 2015; R. J. Willett, 2015). These popular discourses are present in the ways that parents construct Minecraft. In our earlier survey of 753 parents of children aged between three and 12 years, we found that parents had generally positive views of Minecraft and most justified their positive views by suggesting that the game fosters creativity, problem solving, planning and design skills (Mavoa, Carter, & Gibbs, 2017). We also found that, while parents had mixed views on the relative levels of violence possible in Minecraft, most parents who mentioned violence, did so by way of claiming that Minecraft was not violent. Mäyrä (2015) notes debate in scholarly and commercial discourses around the defining of games as 'violent', and our results indicate that this ambivalence extends to parents too. Mäyrä (ibid.) writes "what constitutes a violent game and what is violence in a game context divides opinions" (p.85).

During her interview, Archie's mother recounted her surprise when she discovered that Archie was able to kill NPCs in Minecraft, and spent time doing it. She stated that she had bought the game because she had heard from talking to other parents and kindergarten teachers that the game was "...more of an educational game. Yeah, so problem solving, creating worlds, using his imagination. Building." But that her

expectations were out of alignment with what Archie was doing in the game, and the role that his and his brother's imagination had in shaping Minecraft play:

“Yeah, I didn't realize that that [killing] was such a large component of it... Because that seems to be what he's doing each time he's on there. He's killing something. A zombie or a ... I don't know. They [Archie and Leo] were talking about a polar bear the other day that was tracking them that they had to kill. And then some pigs, it gets like zapped and turned into like a zombie pig. So and was chasing him and yeah. So there's lots of things to kill in the game that I wasn't prepared for.”

Other parents in this study had similar experiences where expectations about Minecraft as primarily a game about building, like digital Lego, ended up being contrasted by what they observed their children doing in the game. Interestingly, even when realising that killing and violence were possibilities in the game, some parents still saw Minecraft favourably in contrast to other ‘violent videogames’. One father stated: “It certainly isn't Doom, it's certainly not Wolfenstein 3D or anything like that. Even in survivor mode, it still strikes me as age appropriate.”

These parental insights seem to be informed by popular discourses about ‘violent videogames’ in interesting ways and are evidence that there still exists a “disconnect between anti-gaming rhetoric and people's actual experiences playing games” (Squire, 2002; n.p). Interestingly though, it is not just anti-gaming rhetoric that is out of alignment, but also utilitarian gaming rhetoric. Minecraft is consciously constructed by parents in contrast to other games and as being in alignment with positive child development and educational goals. However, as we see in Archie's case, these constructions may be challenged by the reality of how children interact with Minecraft. As Mäyrä (2015) writes in relation to the oft-made comparisons between Lego (and Lego videogames) and Minecraft: “the freedom of user-created content is a double-edged sword, as it will allow children to use the game for their own fantasies in morally questionable ways, as well as in those do-good ways most parents would prefer” (p. 95). Our observations here are not about passing judgements on play, or about reconstructing perceptions of Minecraft. The point of illuminating these contradictions is to demonstrate how discourses that rely on popular constructions of ‘videogames’ as structured and prescriptive known quantities, which can be assessed based on genre, or age ratings or popular conceptions, are missing very important variables – children and their agency about how and what to play. In the following section we further investigate Archie's play sequence in terms of how it can be conceptualized within a play types system of organization.

Conceptualising the Play Example

The early phases of this play sequence involve the killing of many human-like NPC villagers who did not pose any threat to Archie. The game is in creative mode, so there is no risk of his character dying, and no game-prescribed need for violence of any kind. All resources are freely available, and character death is not a possibility. The death and destruction in this play is very one-sided. The villagers have no real agency, other than attempting to move away from fire or swords. They do not offer any resistance or defence. However, as Mäyrä (2015) notes, while this play setting does not *require* aggression or violence, culturally informed “pre-existing action scripts” surrounding digital play may be involved in shaping this form of play (p. 86). We acknowledge that Archie's play does not occur in a cultural or social vacuum, and that the availability of swords and weapons in-game potentially *suggests* forms of play.

Rough and Tumble?

We initially had trouble fitting this play into one of Hughes' play types. Rough and Tumble Play was an option, because this involves physical aggression without the necessity for an overarching narrative or story of 'good vs evil'. However, there is the obvious issue that this play was not physical. Rough and Tumble Play is, in Hughes' (2002, 2006) description, often characterized as a test of physical strength and the 'safe' limits of this. In some ways Archie could be seen to be testing the limits of his coded 'strength', or rather the strength or route of effect of his diamond sword, or the destructive properties of fire. Indeed, he did remark that "it only takes two hits" while in a flurry of villager slaying activity. This aspect of his play, however, also fits with Hughes' categories of Exploratory Play and Mastery Play – where children learn about the world through experimentation, trial and error.

Furthermore, another key aspect of Hughes' Rough and Tumble Play is that it is a two-way process. All parties participate voluntarily and on relatively equal terms. The pleasure of physical exertion against an opponent is a shared pleasure – and Rough and Tumble Play ceases to be play when this shared enjoyment stops. In the play sequence described above, the pleasure is shared between Archie and his brother spectating play, but not between him and his 'opponent'. Therefore, Rough and Tumble, while it does involve aggression without narrative, does not seem to be the best way to describe this play.

Deep Play?

Another of Hughes' (2002, 2006) play type categories that may be useful in explaining this play is Deep Play. Deep Play, in this sense¹, is play that involves physical risk to the player. Hughes gives examples such as climbing a tall tree, riding a bike down a slide, jumping off something high, standing up to a bully. In these physical play situations, the child must assess risk and overcome fear of danger and its consequences. In later writing on this form of play, Hughes (2006) elaborates the description in a way that seems to allow for a broader understanding of risk. He states that Deep Play is play in any situation that involves "an interface with death and mortality" and that it "provides a route into contemplating the 'deeper' ideas associated with it: the 'meaning' of life, or better still, 'putting meaning to life'" (p.42). However, even within this broader description, Hughes' focus remains squarely on physical risk.

Marsh et al., (2016) adapted Hughes' category of Deep Play to account for play in digital spaces by changing wording to include risk of character death or injury. From their study of three to five-year old's play with various apps, some more enabling of play than others, they give the example of a four-year-old girl returning to play Temple Run despite experiencing the risk of death of her character as 'scary'. Minecraft can indeed be a very high stakes game of character survival. Keogh (2018) recounts his experience with death in Minecraft, within a self-imposed perma-death framework, as very much like a 'real' experience of loss. Such instances of digitally mediated risk to player characters are well accounted for by Marsh et al.,'s (2016) adaptation of Hughes' (2002; 2006) concept of Deep Play, and its associated contemplation of mortality and power over the environment. But, this element of risk of loss of some sort, whether to the child's own physical body or that of their in-game character, still does not account for Archie's killing spree. He was in Creative mode, killing NPCs that posed no threat. There was no risk that he or his character would lose anything. Archie was not playing with the risk of physical harm to himself or even his character, but he was playing with death. So, how can we conceptualise this series of actions?

Idealising Childhood and Play

Archie's villager killing, and the apparent delight that accompanied this, was striking and somewhat uncomfortable to watch. It is morally unacceptable for people, in

general, to set other innocent beings on fire. When this is done (in a play setting) by children, there is an added dimension of distastefulness. This is because childhood as a construct is often coded as a ‘time of innocence’ and children occupy a protected status in society and are at times shielded from the harsh and sometimes cruel realities of the adult world at large (Messenger Davies, 2010). When we see a child engaging in acts that are at odds with cultural norms around harm to others, even in play, we are faced with a striking challenge to certain idealized, romanticized notions of ‘childhood’.

Furthermore, it is not only children and childhood that tend to be idealized, but play itself (Stenros, 2019). As Stenros (ibid.) argues, “not nice” (p. 15) examples of play have largely been left out of accounts detailing the nature of play (cf. Kelly-Byrne & Sutton-Smith, 1984; Mäyrä, 2015). Indeed, while Hughes (2002, 2006) argues that children should have access to a full range of play including play that allows the taking of risks, risqué humour and so on, his taxonomy does not easily allow for accounts of play that are risky on cultural and/or social rather than physical levels. In the following section we use the lens of Transgressive Play as a way to perhaps help account for such cultural dimensions and interpretations of children’s violent digital play, expanding Hughes’ (2002, 2006) description of children’s Deep Play.

Transgressive Play

Transgressive Play is often described within game studies as play that operate at the bounds set by the game itself. In early game studies accounts of Transgressive Play, Aarseth (2007) for example describes it as play which involves actively subverting the role of the ‘ideal player’ by way of creatively exploiting bugs in software for example or finding ways into parts of in-game landscape meant to be inaccessible. Play with game ‘rules’ was also noted by Marsh et al., (2016) who added Transgressive Play as an additional category to Hughes’ play types to account for play they observed such as a child dragging blocks in an alphabet game off screen then saying ‘peek-a-boo’ when they fell back into view. In another publication based on the same study Marsh et al., (2015) give the example of a child’s desire to play a game with content that the parents disapproved of and note that the parents suggested that part of the appeal was the disapproval itself. From this second example we can see how Marsh et al.’s (2015) description of Transgressive Play as “pleasure in breaking rules” (p. 27) extends beyond in-game ludic rules to *social* rules.

However, these examples are based on play in structured, rule-bound games with limited scope for free play. The kind of play that Archie engaged in, and indeed a large amount of play we observed in Minecraft was, however, better described as ‘free play’ rather than strictly ‘game’ play. Free play is play which is: intrinsically motivated; child-led; not goal-directed; and lacking external rules or structure (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, & Sleet, 2012). Children in our study invariably favoured play in Creative mode, and while the game software impacted the nature and course of play in important ways, we found that the sheer diversity of what children got up to in Minecraft led us to see Minecraft as a play space rather than a singular ‘game’. Seeing Minecraft as a play space allows us to consider comparisons with non-digitally mediated children’s free play.

Specifically, for our purposes here, we can see parallels with documented instances of similarly malevolent play in non-digital spaces. In addition to bullying, teasing and cruelty (arguably playful in some cases and not in others) children also engage in play with moral norms and expectations for ‘good’ behaviour, particularly in spaces away from adult gaze. Children have long enjoyed play scenarios that revolve around some in-group/out-group conflict often involving dramatic depictions of warfare, weaponry and sometimes callous acts of nastiness. For example, renowned child folklorists, Iona and Peter Opie (1969) recount a 9-year-old girl’s description of a game called ‘The

Invisible Man' which involves one player catching the others and placing them in a pot to 'cook nicely'. Being cooked is not the worst of it though, as the girl adds: "when the people in the pot are supposed to be cooking nicely the Invisible Man does all kinds of horrid things to you like hanging you or putting you in a fridge at freezing point." (p. 343). More recently, Katch & Paley, (2001) describe varying instances of play by the five and six-year-olds in Katch's preschool classroom, including 'The Suicide Game' where a child is given a plastic apple to pretend to eat then learns that it is actually a hand grenade not an apple, and that by eating it he has 'committed suicide to himself', so he 'explodes' into pieces on the floor.

However, scholarship concerned with this kind of play in children most often conceives of it as something to be related to developmental outcomes including identity formation, or as a problem to be solved. There is however potential for this line of enquiry to be complemented by game studies work that takes a more illustrative and explanatory approach to morally precarious play. Recent work on Transgressive Play within game studies has expanded the range of play actions that are conceived of as transgressive. In an edited collection of work on the topic (Jørgensen & Karlsen, 2019), game scholars take a much wider lens to play that exists on or around boundaries, drawing on Jenks' (2003) definition of transgression in general as: "to transgress is to go beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment or law or convention, it is to violate or infringe" (p.2). Transgressive Play in this sense encompasses play with and around moral norms. In Mortensen, Linderoth and Brown (2015) the term "dark play" is used to similar ends.

Therefore, we can see Archie's anarchistic play, and the apparent delight taken in this, as play that transgresses common understandings of what is morally acceptable, within an environment where no-one is really at physical risk. By enacting this violence within a digital play setting, Archie is able to experience the intense emotion (which seems to be largely positive, given the giggling and commentary) associated with moral transgression without the consequences that would follow if this took place outside the realm of play (Jansz, 2005). However, the idea that this play is happening in an entirely separate space where behaviours that are usually unacceptable are accepted, does not account for the way that Archie, in later play, consciously accounts for his actions, by explaining to the camera (as representative of the adult researcher gaze) that sometimes he 'likes killing as a treat'. This aligns with other observational studies of play in-situ, which challenge conceptualization of the "sealed nature of the game-world and its immunity from real-world consequences" (Richards & Burn, 2014, p. 20; see also Consalvo, 2009). The fact that Archie feels the need to provide specific commentary on this activity (killing the underwater zombie who has not thus far shown any threat to Archie's character) indicates that even within play, he must reconcile his actions with the social expectations and norms that he is growing up immersed in and being enculturated into. The description of killing as a 'treat' seems to show that Archie constructs it as something pleasurable, but unwholesome.

Further evidence of the complexity of the relationship between play and social norms comes when Archie's interaction with the villagers is completely flipped around when his mother is in the room and taking interest in his play. In this case, Archie still engages in killing but this time has constructed a narrative around the killing that makes it more morally acceptable – he is killing the monsters as part of his duty to protect the villagers. This becomes a much more palatable presentation of good triumphing over evil, where violence is in service of some ultimate 'good,' and therefore purposeful and less problematic than cold-blooded and senseless killing. Notably, he also adds changes his play in response to his mother asking, "are you gonna build something or just wander around? I thought we got this so you could do building?" In response to his mother's framing of 'wandering around' not being desirable play, Archie also explains that he

must build houses for the villagers that do not currently have houses – a very different frame of play than in earlier encounters with villagers.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER WORK

In this paper we have provided a detailed description of one sequence of Minecraft play captured using ethnographic methods. Our analysis here has been quite sharply focused on categorising the play observed. However, we note that there are many other avenues of analysis possible which could produce a more holistic reading of Archie's play. For example, in the sequence investigated here, further analysis could look at the role of performance (Goffman, 1969) in Archie's play. We noted the way that play actions and meanings changed when Archie's mother was present and observed social power dynamics in play between Archie and his younger brother (e.g. Archie telling Leo not to use the word 'fool').

There is also scope to look at our data with the assumed gendered nature of children's play in mind. While we have discussed in detail here the aggressive play of two boys, across the entire set of recordings such play was not strongly associated with any gender. In another family's recordings we observed two male cousins engaged in an extended sequence of 'families' play, with one boy pretending to nurture babies while the other set about constructing shops and other buildings. We also saw a brother and sister pair engaged in a similar villager massacre to the one detailed here.

Another element that we have not been able to address here is the sensorial aspect, particularly in the way that there was an almost rhythmic, kinaesthetic quality to the repetitive swiping of sword and placing of fire. This sequence involves sounds (the crackling of flames; cries of villagers) and images (shades of orange and yellow presenting as pixelated flickering flames) which appear to be central constitutive actors in the production of the experience for the players. A cybernetic assemblage level analysis, like Gidding's (2014) would be valuable in furthering our understanding of the multi-layered complexity of this play.

Nevertheless, drawing on a range of literature we have shown that this play can be conceptualised as Transgressive Play involving moral norms within a broader context of family and cultural expectations for behaviour around those norms. Transgressive Play in this sense augments and extends Hughes' (2002; 2006) Deep Play category. We have demonstrated that studying "Bad Play" with a "close descriptive attention" through the lens of Transgressive Play and connections with children's emerging sense of moral positioning in a socio-cultural world, offers a "sense of the complex interplay of fantasy, imagination and fear – or excitement- about real violence in the world" (Giddings, 2014; p. 140). Through this process of description and categorisation we illuminate one snapshot of the nature of children's 'everyday' leisure time free play in Minecraft. Such presentations of the 'reality' of children's experiences in Minecraft serve to enrich our understanding of contemporary play involving 'screens' beyond aggregate measures of time spent playing or engagement with adult-prescribed in-game tasks.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Hughes’ (2002) category of Deep Play is different to the Deep Play described by Geertz (1973) as play with such high stakes that it appears irrational and, in the Balinese Cockfight context, is significantly meaningful. Hughes’ Deep Play is play which involves physical risk and rationally assessing physical limitations in interactions with environment.