What makes young children active game players; ethnographic case study

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ABSTRACT
Young children's digital game play tends to be discouraged and policed, and controlled by adults, who nevertheless give their young children mobile phones and hand held game devices to keep them occupied. The purpose of this study is to uncover the tactics used by three-year-old children as digital game players and the strategies used by their parents to put limits on this play. The method is an ethnographic case study of six families having a three-year-old child playing digital games on a daily basis. This study shows that three-year-old children are active, avid digital gamers, and also adept at employing a range of tactics to gain access to opportunities to play.

Keywords
young children, digital game, de Certeau, play, strategy, tactic, active player, family life

INTRODUCTION
Along with technical developments, digital games become popular in early childhood. While traditional children's plays are celebrated by parents and educators, young children's digital game play tends to be discouraged and controlled or even policed by adults. And yet, at the same time parents give their young children mobile phones and hand held game devices to keep them occupied, a form of digital game as baby sitter. Much more research has been conducted on adolescents' and adults' game play than on preschool aged children's game play (Verenikina and Kervin, 2011). There are few empirical digital game studies of young children, and most of these focus on digital game contents and devices rather than on young children's digital game play (Aarsand and Aronsson, 2009a).

This situation reflects the assumptions that young children do not have much freedom or power in their game play and the perception of young children as passive digital media consumers. (see e.g., Dominick 1984; Loftus and Loftus, 1983; Provenzo, 1991). In other words, children's digital game play is given by others, and children cannot control their playing, which makes young children's digital game play seem less important and renders it more invisible. However, young children's digital game is becoming increasingly a

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feature of young children's everyday life. According to the 2006 survey of the Kaiser Family Foundation, 83% of the children in the U.S. between 6 months and 6 years old use digital devices on a daily basis (Funk, et al, 2009).

Everyday digital game practices as young children's tactics

Michel de Certeau introduced the distinction between strategies and tactics. According to de Certeau (1984, p. 36), a strategy is used by the powerful; it seeks its own place, "that is, the place of its own power and will, from an environment". On the other hand, a tactic is used by the weak; "The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus, it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power." (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37). Following de Certeau, digital gaming can be seen as a battle contested between the weak (children) and the powerful (their parents).

Parents are able to "produce, tabulate, and impose these spaces, when those operations take place." (de Certeau, 1984, p. 30) For example, parents create the gaming opportunity in the first place by buying game devices for their children. They also determine the time and the place for children's game play (Aarsand and Aronsson, 2009a). Children must operate within the spatial, temporal, and material environment their parents create for them.

The strategies by the more powerful produce the context for the everyday practices of the weak. However, the everyday practices of ordinary people are creative and resistant. In the case of media, we can saw that children and other media consumers do not just consume, but also produce, by making media products their own (Silverstone, 1989; Jenkins, 2012). Even young children have tactical power to resist parental strategies. Their digital game environments are provided by their parents, but it does not mean that they do not have any power over their game play.

Riderout, et al (2003) point out that even toddlers and preschoolers are able to find ways to use digital technology themselves. In this study with 8-year-old children, Aarsand and Aronsson (2009b, p. 1573) show that children can form and sustain their games "as a collaborative activity" by using their response cries, which are vocalized sound invoking one's emotions (e.g., 'wow', 'opps', and 'ouch') while they take charge of the game controller.

Children play digital games their own ways, and not always as the game designers intended. Children as consumers have their own ways of resisting the plans of game marketers. As Joseph Tobin writes in his introduction to the book *Pikachu's Global Adventure*: "Children (like adults) are vulnerable to media manipulation and to clever marketing plans. But for each carefully orchestrated product launch that succeeds, many others fail. Children may be prone to consumer crazes, but they choose which crazes and they decide when a craze is over" (Tobin, 2004, p. 10). Following de Certeau, Henward (forthcoming) points out that children create their own spaces for pleasure although they are surrounded by consumerism constantly constraining them with rules, strategies and practices.

In this study I identify the tactics used by children as game users and consumers, and the parental strategies affecting and controlling this play, which leads to understand the meaning of the family negotiations on young children's digital game play. According to

Kallio (2008), the play tactics of very young children can best be accessed not through interviewing, but rather through attending to their everyday lives in their families.

Recent studies have suggested that digital game play begins around age three (e.g., Liberman, et al., 2009; Ostrov, et al., 2006; Vandewater et al. 2007; Verenikina, and Kervin, 2011). For example, Plowman, et al. (2010) describe three-years-old as the age by which children can control a computer mouse and to use two hands simultaneously and "identify their favorite games from icons and manage the symbols on a remote control" (Plowman, et al., 2010, p. 38). Gaming and edutainment companies market a variety of digital games targeted at preschoolers (e.g., LeapPad and Leapster Explore games).

METHOD

This is an ethnographic case study with six families of different sociocultural backgrounds who each have a three-year-old child who plays digital games on a daily basis. I used participant observation, interviews, and collecting documents. I studied children's game playing in their family context. I did not study game playing in preschool settings, but instead tracked young children's game playing at home, and in the course of their daily family activities (e.g, at the grocery store, a doctor's waiting room, the back seat of the car, etc.). My total observation time is 156 hours, spending six days in each home. In each visit, I spent over 4 hours with the children.

During my observations, my focus was on the three-year-old children, but I included their conversations with family members, peers, and visitors. I also interviewed the children with their parents, and had informal conversation with the parents and the children during activities, asking questions such as "Why did you do that?" and "Can you explain what you are doing now? All of my observations and interviews were video-taped, transcribed, and coded.

FINDINGS

Strategies of parents as powerful

In this study, I found that parents apply various strategies to control young children's game play. However, their strategic controls are not used only for limiting young children's access to digital games but also for encouraging their children to play games to achieve certain goals in the ways to manage their children's behavior. For example parents, especially mothers, sometimes use their lack of knowledge of digital games to put off a child's request for help starting a game, by saying "I don't know how to do it." or "Wait until your daddy comes home." But this lack of familiarity with digital gaming can also be frustrating for mothers who are looking for something diverting for their child to do, as a mother told me: "She is so attached to me. I tell her 'Mommy doesn't know about this stuff. Go find Daddy.' I need a chance to eat, go to the restroom."

Schlesinger describes how digital media can occupy a small child, allowing mothers to have time to do housework:

> Television has the amazing ability to occupy a small child for just long enough to do a load of laundry or prepare the night's dinner. Anyone who has witnessed a toddler stop dead in his tracks when he hears the opening strains of his favorite video

> knows that children are drawn to, and often seem mesmerized by, this particular medium (Schlesinger, 2000, p. 22).

The strategy of the mother using television is very simple; she needs to turn on the television and let the child watch it until she finishes her housework. However, Lin's mother's motives are complex. If her only goal was to keep her child occupied, she could just turn on the television, like the mother in Schlesinger's example. But Lin's mother also wanted to encourage Lin to play more with her father, and his greater familiarity with the *IPad* than hers serves this goal:

> Interviewer: I think you play with your children a lot.
>
> Lin's mother: Mothers are always busy. You have to make time to play with your child. It's not easy. You are just so tired.
>
> Interviewer: When does your husband come home?
>
> Lin's mother: After 5:30.
>
> Interviewer: Does he also play a lot with your children?
>
> Lin's mother: Yes, when he comes home. Sometimes, she like, says, "I want some games." Then I say "I don't know how." Then, she doesn't bother me. She gets used to play with her father. From my experience, if your child is so attached to you, you can just act like you don't know anything. Lin used to say, "I want Mommy!", "I don't want Daddy!" Now she only plays games with her daddy. She kind of looks forward to it. She waits for her father to come home. When her father comes home, she screams, "Daddy! Daddy! Open the door!"
>
> Interviewer: Does he like to play a game, too? Your husband?
>
> Lin's mother: Yea...
>
> Interviewer: What kind of game does he play?
>
> Lin's mother: Now…He doesn't play that much these days. He used to play with his *PlayStation*, but since we had kids we don't have a time for that. Sometimes he plays with Lin. If you play with her, she can play a long time, but if you let her play alone, she doesn't play that long because she doesn't know how. Sometimes she says, "Daddy, I need help."

Frustrated by Lin's dependence on her and lack of connection to her father, Lin's mother uses game playing on the *IPAD* as a father-daughter relationship building tool. She uses her claims of not understanding the *IPAD* (whether true or fabricated) to both prevent Lin from playing during the day and to encourage her to play with her father in the evening.

Another mother, with a three year old named Mike, relies on her older daughter and son to turn on the *Wii* so Mike can play. By claiming not knowing how to turn on the *Wii* she

gets the older siblings involved in playing with Mike. I see these mothers's lack of knowledge of digital games as a strategy.

During my observation with the six children I found that contrary to my expectations, their parents do not apply many rules to their children' game playing. One explanation is that these children are so young that their game playing rarely lasts very long. For example, Mary contrasted the game playing of three year old Amy and her older brother:

> We don't set a time for Amy because she doesn't really play that long. I think probably the longest she plays is ten minutes. The noises cannot be too loud and then on this one [holding up her mobile phone] she can't press the off button because, because it messes up my phone. So that's basically it. Her older brother has a lot of rules for his game playing. He has a time restriction. He can't play a game that is inappropriate. He has to take turns with his friends.

The fact that very young children play many of their digital video games on their parents' mobile phones gives parents a simple excuse to interrupt their children's play. For example, when Mike resists giving his mother's phone back to her, his mother can stop Mike from playing instantly by saying "This is my phone!" Several of the three-year-old children in my study begged to have their own game players or phones, which their siblings already possess:

> Amy has a DS (*Nintendo DS*), but she pretends to play, because she doesn't really read, so she doesn't know what she is doing. She just really wants what her older brother has. And she will play one game on my phone. It's called 'Angry Birds' (Rovio, 2009). But that's it. She doesn't have any devices of her own.

Because three year old children are less likely to have their own game playing device than their older siblings, they need to get permission from their siblings or parents to play. As Amy's mother purchases *Nintendo DS* for Amy, Amy can claim ownership of her

All of the parents in my study allowed their young children to play games if they obeyed certain conditions. For example, a parent can say: "You can play a game if you clean your room". This is a kind of a negotiation between a parent and a child. Aarsand and Aronsson (2009a) in their video ethnography of children's game play in home contexts show that parents apply temporal restrictions to their children to control their game time and place. For example, a father might tell a child to move his game play out of the family room, so he can watch a golf tournament in peace, offering the alternative of taking the game to the kitchen or bedroom.

Another strategy that parents use is to provide alternative games to their children to control their game playing. If children want to play games which parents considered inappropriate, parents can suggest they play more educational or age appropriate games. This strategy is noted in many other child game studies. Kerawalla and Crook point out that parents do "endeavor to orchestrate a predominant use of educational material," but their child tend to find ways to do what they want to do out of the parents' sight (Kerawalla and Crook, 2002, p. 765). Lin's mother, in my study says: "I think if you let her play an educational game, I think she learns a lot of things." This is her strategy for Lin's learning, not for Lin's pleasure. Parents exercise power over their children's game

selection. However parents' power is limited by the difficulty of knowing the content and educational value of the games they purchase.

Parents relax their control over the length and content of children's game playing when they feel the greatest need to keep their children occupied. In situations where the child has no alternative way of entertaining herself, such as in a grocery store, back seat of the car, or waiting room, parents often give their child their mobile phone for game playing or let them play whatever is handy on a mobile game playing device. Such transitional times have special characteristics compared to other game playing situations. Parents tend to set firmer rules for play during routine times at home, where parents dictate specific times and game space for their children's game play. For example, they can place a computer in a family room to makes children's game play visible. Also, they can limit their children's playtime to a set number of minutes. These parental strategies reported in many studies (e.g, Aarsand, and Aronsson, 2009a; Eklund, and Bergmark, 2013)

However, in mobile game play of the three-year-old children, while I am not saying that they are completely free from the time and space restrictions at home, the three-year-old children cannot be as easily controlled by a set of fixed rules. Play ends up being determined by the flow of life, by traffic jams, office waiting times, and unexpected phone calls. During children's mobile game play, the context is fluid, requiring that parents renegotiate restrictions on their children's mobile play. In these situations, parents employ relaxed versions of their strategies to control their children's game play. Or we can say that outside of the home, faced with the challenges of negotiating errands, appointments, and public space, the parents and children together employ video games as a tactic to cope with a situation not of their own making.

Tactics of children as weak

Young children's play is highly mediated by their parents, and yet young children employ tactical tricks. I have identified seven types of young children's tactics in their digital game play. I call the first tactic "*playing surreptitiously."* A mother told me a story of such surreptitious play:

> One day, I could not find Chan. He was nowhere to be found. I searched his room first. He was not there. I freaked out. But, fortunately, I found the garage was closed and the front door was locked. It meant he was somewhere in my house. I looked around every place again, but I could not find him. Then, I took a deep breath and started my search over. In the hallway I heard some game sounds. I thought, "Where is this sound coming from?" It was from his room. He was playing a computer game with my laptop under his blanket. I was so shocked. I think he knew what he was doing is wrong. I asked him, "What are you doing?" He said, "Game" I said, "Who told you that you can play games?" He said, "I am sorry."

In this episode, Chan purposely hides from his mother to play games surreptitiously. This is a trick, not power. Comparing to parents' strategies, his trick cannot change or control his mother's action. It is a deception and a camouflage to make him invisible. Chan failed because he was found by his mother, and yet it was a half failure because he succeeded to create his own game space and time getting out of his mother's sight. Chan's mother

places her laptop on a dining table to make Chan's game play visible, but Chan resists her strategy by hiding by bringing the laptop to his room.

Ignoring parents' commands is another way for children to resist parents' power (Aarsand, and Aronsson, 2009a). The children cannot escape from the physical space monitored by their parents, but they can create their own space as they selectively give their attention to the game, not to their parent's voice. Also, by pretending not to hear, children can prolong their play until their parents stop them. Here is another example.

> Chan's mother: Let's go get your sister in a minute. Ok?
>
> [no answer]
>
> Chan's mother: Chan?
>
> [no answer]
>
> Chan's mother: Chan? Look at me.
>
> Chan: Yes.
>
> Chan's mother: After a minute, turn the computer off. You've been playing games for almost an hour.

Chan's eyes stick to the screen and he does not change his posture when his mother calls his name. His bodily gestures and eye movements indicate that he ignores his mother's voice or at least pretends not to hear. This is very common tactic I found in my observations. For the children it has a lower risk of being scolded compared to other, more directly insubordinate tactics, and it does not require any special actions or efforts. Children just keep playing without answering their parents.

Young children's desire to play their games away from the gaze of adults is sometimes undermined by their desire to have others see them play, and approve of their skillfulness. For example, as David wins a race on his PSP game, Cars 2, he shows me his score:

> Researcher: Wow. You did a great job! High five!
>
> David's sister: Mom! David is the top. First place!
>
> David's mother: Oh… Yeah! We've been practicing.
>
> [He turns the screen towards us and points at his racing car on the screen, showing he came in first.]

David is very shy, and he does not talk much when he is with someone he doesn't know well. However, he is willing to show his game score to me. His gesture is one of his ways to communicate with others, and it helps him draw others' attention to his game play without saying anything. This one gesture makes not only me and his sister but also his mother involved in his game play. This tactical movement creates an emotional engagement, and draws us in to his game space.

When she faced some difficulty on her game play, Lin often slumped her shoulders and looked at whoever was near:

> Researcher: Ok. We have this one (IPad game, *Where's My Water* (Disney, 2011). He wants to take a shower, but the water is here right? So, you have to make the water go.
>
> [Lin makes the water flow to the alligator by making a road.]
>
> Researcher: He is here, and the water is there. He needs more water. Water is here. The water is too low. The water needs to go this way but. . . .
>
> [Lin slumps her shoulders, indicating she doesn't know what to do.]
>
> Researcher: Go this way.
>
> [Lin slumps her shoulders again and again.]
>
> Researcher: Do you want to try again? The water needs to go this way. Yes! yeah!
>
> [Lin starts to dig the road.]
>
> Researcher: And we have to go. . . Here is the water. Yes!!!

Lin needs help from others in her game play. For Lin, because of her limited language ability, it is difficult to explain her situation and to make requests verbally. She did not explicitly express what she wants, but her gestures communicated that she needed my help. The tactics that the children used to draw others' attention were not limited to bodily gestures. The children also applied various vocalized emotional expression to achieve their goals. According to the study of Aarsand and Arronsson (2009b), "response cries" also is one of communication tools used in children's game play. "Response cries" is the term introduced by Goffman (1981) to refer to vocalized modes of displaying one's emotions in public. It is fundamentally self-talk, but with a social goal. For example, most of the three-year-old children often narrated their game playing by saying, "Yeah!," "Oh!," and "No!." They spoke to themselves, but their words functioned to draw others' attention to their game play.

Obeying parents seems to be diametrically opposed to *ignoring parents' commands* in terms of its purpose. If parents say stop, children have to stop immediately. This is the common rule found in the six families. If they did not stop, the parents often said to their children that there will be no more game in the future. It seems odd to call *obeying their parents* a tactic, because this ends rather than continues children's play time. I call it a tactic because it is deployed to guarantee the children will be able to play their game video games, not now, but in the future. I see this as the children's tactic because it at allows them to get game play tickets for future play for being a good boy or a girl.

Crying is one of the most powerful and important communication skills of early childhood. Young cannot express their feelings and needs precisely with words. However, this weakness is often used for appealing for what they want. Crying or whining can be a powerful tactic for children in their game playing. For example, when Mike starts to cry as soon as his mother takes her phone from him, his mother suggests that he play games instead on his *V-tech* game player. Comparing to other tactics, this tactic is an explicit resistance to parents and sometimes to siblings.

This tactic is especially effective when the children are in public or with people who are not immediate family. Mike's mother often makes Mike promise to behave if they go somewhere in public. Also, Chan's mother said to her son that "a big boy does not cry," before she allowed him to play games with a smart phone while she met her friend. In these situations children did not even try to use crying as a tactic.

Sometimes, children take advantage of stressful situations to play video games. I call this *"using busy mom."* Like other tactics, children cannot create the situation, but they can take advantage of the situation in which their mother is very busy. Lin's mother gives Lin her *IPad* so she can prepare lunch. This is a tactic for Lin, but this is also a strategy for Lin's mother at the same time.

Another tactic children use is one I call "*over the shoulder learning*." Young children pick up skills they can use to make their game playing less objectionable to others. Chan's mother explained to me how Chan picks up technological skills without his parents' direct help:

> I turned down Chan's game sound once, and said, "Chan! It is too loud." Then one day I found that he was turning down the game sound like I did. I was so surprised and said "Wow! You know how to turn down the sound by yourself?" It happened like this. My husband asked me "Did you teach him?" and I said "No, I didn't. But he saw me turning down the sound." If he needs to know something, he watches me very carefully. So, sometimes, I tell my husband "Honey! Chan is watching you" when my husband is doing something with his computer

From this conversation, we can see that Chan's mother and father are ambivalent about their son learning over their shoulder. They are proud of their son who is smart enough to learn something on his own, but at the same time for them it worries them because it means that their son is gaining skills which will allow him to access games and eventually to surf the Internet away from their surveillance. Plowman, Stephen, and McPAKE (2010) of preschool aged children show that some mothers feared their children becoming independent computer users. Parents cannot control their children's informal learning acquired through their various game experiences. This is directly related to what de Certeau argues about ordinary people's everyday practices. What is controlled is not the way of using.

Strategies of parents	Tactics of children
Using their children's developmental weakness ownership of a mobile phone Providing alternative games Under certain condition Time and space restriction Using situations Not knowing	Playing surreptitiously Ignoring their parents' commands Using bodily gestures and emotional expressions. Obeying their parents Whining or crying Using 'busy mom' situation Over the shoulder learning

Table 1: Seven types of young children's tactics and parents' strategies on game playing

In my study, I found the seven types of young children's tactics and parents' strategies for game playing. As young children are actively battling with their parents for access to game play, parents create and set rules for their children in an attempt to protect their children from what they see as dangers of game play.

The battle never ends

Digital games are part of contemporary family daily life. Even many children under aged three play digital games on a daily basis. They use a variety of tactics to gain access to mobile devices and particular games, and to play as long as possible. I do not mean that either that young children's tactical tricks are something to celebrate or that parents are wrong to try to control their children's game play. My point is that even very young children are active and tactical in their game play. Even three-year-old children who have limited language skills and lack of game knowledge attempt to create their own time and space for game play in their politics of everyday life, and they are able to clearly express specific game preference. They seem to have no power to choose what to buy or what to play, and yet they have power to resist playing games produced by others. Many so called educational or learning games seduce young children and their parents to consume them as they are everywhere and transformed in various ways (through advertisements, mouth of others, and other games). Yet, young children can get bored with these games and refuse to pay them.

Young children's digital gaming is now a fact of family life. Digital games are a site for family power struggles as well as shared activity. Mobile games help young children and their parents cope with the demands of daily life, as the back seat and the shopping cart become key sites for hand held gaming. Negotiating over what games to play, where, when, and for how long is a never ending battle between children and parents, but also a form of social connection and power sharing in the family and for both parents and children, evolving practices of everyday life.

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