

Baby gamers? Theorizing the ‘Haptic Habitus’ of Very Young Children, Parents and Touchscreen Technologies

Darshana Jayemanne

Abertay University
School of Art, Media and Computer Games
Bell Street, Dundee, Scotland DD1 1HG
d.jayemanne@abertay.co.uk

Bjorn Nansen

School of Culture and Communications
The University of Melbourne
Parkville, Melbourne 3000
b.nansen@unimelb.edu.au

Keywords

Mobile technologies, touchscreens, infants, toddlers, haptics, habitus, interface, ethnography

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Very young children have not often been considered by game studies scholars, which is perhaps odd given the centrality of play to learning and development at early ages. Babies and toddlers are obviously unable to comment on their own experiences in an ethnographic sense, and they are difficult to fit into the common notion of a videogame ‘player’. Devices and games are, historically at least, not designed with them in mind as potential users, or even more explicitly they are excluded through stated minimum age suitability. Expensive devices that occupy static places in the domestic space (televisions, game consoles, PCs) are typically positioned out of their reach.

This situation is however, changing rapidly as mobile and touchscreen devices become more prominent in the spaces through which toddlers and babies move, learn and act. Mobile devices are often left within reach of very young children, and touchscreens are more amenable to gestural manipulation by small fingers than keyboards or controllers (Buckleitner, 2011; Hourcade et al., 2015). In this paper, we report on the findings of an ongoing study into entangled relations between very young children, mobile touchscreen technologies, play and parenting. The study operates at the intersection of internet studies, digital ethnography and childhood studies, utilising different methods and approaches to the medical and education discourses typical in the field. Key findings and methodologies will be presented that can help game studies account for the earliest stages of digital play. First, the paper will report on the ‘haptic habitus’ of infant’s interactions with mobile technologies as found through ethnographic interviews, ‘technology tours’,

Proceedings of 1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG

© 2016 Authors. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

and observation within family homes. These findings will then be placed in theoretical framework through the notion of ‘parental intermediation’.

Haptic Habitus

The study has gathered information on the broader cultural sharing and shaping of an infant and toddler ‘haptic habitus’ in domestic space through ethnographic methods. Data has also been gathered on everyday practices and norms associated with children’s media tactility by analysis of video and postings on streaming, video-sharing and social media platforms. This mixed methods approach builds on established traditions of media and ethnographic research on domestic technology consumption and use, including household technology tours and interviews, as well as participant observation and demonstrations of children’s media interaction. In combining the domestic research with the collection of online data, the paper presents the cultural context of and content shared about children’s tactile media use. The analysis will extend to technology toy ‘unboxing’ and review videos, as well as videos and images of young children’s tactile media interaction as shared on YouTube and Instagram.

Parental Intermediation

Drawing together these lines of inquiry, the paper will then theorise how an emerging haptic habitus is being configured through the ways very young children encounter, experience and enculturate touchscreens in their embodied life; how parental bodies and attitudes are shape and are shaped around this habitus; and the ways representations of these playful interactions are collectively distributed and consumed across digital networks in everyday life. Our understanding of haptic habitus builds on recent media and technology oriented discussions of habit from cultural studies (Highmore 2011) to think about the ways it is assembled through dimensions of mediation and materiality.

The paper will introduce the concept of ‘parental intermediation’ as a key theoretical notion in accounting for the haptic habitus. This concept builds on insights from critical interface studies (e.g. Hayles, 2005; Galloway, 2012) as well as cultural industries literature (e.g. Deuze, 2007; Nixon & du Gay, 2002), to help conceptualize the expanded dimensions of digital parenting associated with mobile technologies. Referencing the dynamic role of parents in the infant-touchscreen encounter is, we suggest, particularly important in understanding digital play by infants insofar as it moves away from one-sided notions of ‘governance’ and towards a more entangled set of playful phenomena. This allows us to identify three broad categories of digital play among infants, touchscreens and parents: accidental, assisted and automated.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Buckleitner, W. (2011) "A taxonomy of multi-touch interaction styles, by stage," *Children's Technology Review* vol 18, no. 2, 10-11.
- Deuze, M. (2007). "Convergence culture in the creative industries," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* vol. 10, no. 2, 243–263.
- Galloway, A. (2012). *The interface effect*. Cambridge: Polity Books.
- Hayles, K.N. (2005). *My mother was a computer: Digital subjects and literary texts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hourcade, J.P., Mascher, S.L., Wu, D., & Pantoja, L. (2015) "Look, my baby is using an iPad! An analysis of YouTube videos of infants and toddlers using tablets," *Proceedings of CHI 15*. New York: ACM Press (2015): 1915–1924.
- Nixon, S., & du Gay, P. (2002). "Who needs cultural intermediaries?" *Cultural Studies* vol. 16, no. 4, 495–500.