CHILD'S PLAY?

Some critical thoughts about childhood, media, learning and play, written for the Media Magazine in 2012.

Play is one of those warm and fuzzy words, like creativity or community. It's difficult to argue against, particularly when it comes to children. We might assert that adults shouldn't be playing about, wasting their time; but when it comes to children, play is almost always seen as healthy, necessary and valuable. Children, it's often argued, have a basic *right* to play.

The idea of play is often used in discussions of media, especially in relation to children, and especially when people want to challenge claims about harmful effects. For many, computer games are synonymous with violence; while the internet is perceived to be rife with paedophiles, pornography and cyberbullying. Describing these media as opportunities for play is a way of challenging these kinds of anxieties, and justifying children's engagements with media. But it also raises some questions.

Play as learning

Such arguments often invoke a particular idea of play as a focus for *learning*. From this perspective, play is seen as an indispensible part of children's development, which helps them to develop important intellectual and social skills. This is an idea of play that goes back a long way in educational theory, to the work of psychologists like Jean Piaget and pioneering educators from the early 20th century like Pestalozzi and Montessori. According to Maria Montessori, play was the *work* of childhood - a means of exploration and discovery and problem-solving, through which children could learn to cooperate with others and to be independent.

This is a view of 'play as progress' – a view that the leading theorist of play, Brian Sutton Smith, identifies as one of the 'rhetorics of play'. Yet as Sutton Smith reminds us, there are other rhetorics – other ways of looking at play, and other aspects that might not meet with such general approval. The emphasis on learning results in a rather safe, sanitised view of children's play, which appeals to adults (and perhaps especially to teachers), but doesn't really reflect a lot of what's important for children.

For example, Sutton Smith also talks about play as frivolous, play as power, play as imaginary – aspects of play that are not about rationality and learning, but about irrationality and subversion, about risk and danger, about conflict and destruction and violence. And of course, it's precisely these aspects of children's media use that alarm some adults: these are the aspects they want to control, and if possible eradicate.

Yet rather than trying to justify children's use of media in terms of learning through play, I think we need to recognise that some of its value comes precisely from the elements of danger and risk that it entails.

Playing games

In the case of computer games, writers like Mark Prensky and James Gee argue strongly for this view of 'play as progress'. Far from leading children to a life of violence and depravity, they see computer games as a wonderful medium for learning. They argue that game play involves a whole series of intellectual skills, such as information processing, remembering, hypothesis testing, predicting and strategic planning. They claim that game play – not just in 'educational' games, but also in mainstream commercial games – produces much more compelling, challenging and authentic forms of learning than traditional forms of education.

It's certainly true that playing computer games does require learning. Indeed, you could argue that being a successful game-player requires a complex set of skills and knowledge – and a high level of self-discipline. But talking about games just in terms of learning ignores all the other things that are going on: the emotional intensity of play, the feeling of sensuous immersion in the game world, the sensation of losing your sense of self, of time and place – not to mention some of the less acceptable aspects, like competition and aggression.

People often make the same argument about computer games that they used to make about chess: learning to solve problems in games will help you to solve problems in life. There's an implication here that learning in the game will transfer to real life. Yet this is pretty dubious – not least because it seems to imply that gamers, or indeed chess players, will have fewer problems than the rest of us.

Online play

Similar arguments are made around children's involvement in online social worlds like Club Penguin, Moshi Monsters and Neopets, which are now massively popular with young children; and about online communication – in the form of social networking, instant messaging, and so on. In these online activities, children clearly have to master the rules and etiquette of quite complicated forms of communication. They can explore aspects of personal identity and relationships in ways that might not be possible face-to-face. And as with games, much of this learning is carried out without explicit teaching: it involves active exploration, discovery and 'learning by doing' – styles of learning that some argue are much more authentic and engaging than most school learning. According to some educators, these online spaces give kids opportunities to learn 'twenty first century skills', which they need to prepare themselves for adult life.

Here again, the idea of playful learning helps to justify something that is often seen as trivial, time-wasting, or indeed positively dangerous. But talking about this in terms of learning means that a fair amount is being left out. In social networks, children may be learning the rules of particular kinds of communication; but it's not all about sensible, well-regulated behaviour. There's also a lot of abuse and frivolity and deliberate outrage and humorous stupidity – which of course is a crucial part of the fun.

Beyond 'play as progress'

This points to the fact that play might have important anti-social aspects. The idea of play as progress – as all about learning – seems to represent it as wholly benign and rational. It ignores the irrational parts of what's going on, the aspects that are unacceptable to adults; and it presents what children do not in its own terms, but as a kind of preparation for the future.

As I have been implying, the idea of play is often used in these debates in a rather superficial and limited way. In trying to move beyond this, we need to think more critically about how we understand play, and how we justify it. There are four broad points I would make here:

1. Firstly, we need to question the idea that play is necessarily a free space for self-expression or creativity. This is an idea that's often tied up with sentimental views of the naturalness and spontaneity of childhood: let children be children – let them play!

However, a great deal of play – perhaps not all play, but certainly all games – involves rules. Rules make play possible; and although they may be negotiated and reinvented (within limits), rules are not wholly determined by children themselves.

Certainly when it comes to media-related play, much of this play is regulated and constrained – and ultimately produced – by adults. It's mostly adults who create the spaces in which children play, and the images and media materials they play with. It's adults who buy the things children need to make play possible, and who observe and regulate what they do in those spaces. Play – and indeed childhood itself – is not just a free space in which children naturally and spontaneously invent themselves.

2. Secondly, there is a commercial dimension to this – although this is one of the things that's often missed out in the general celebration of digital media. It is generally the market that makes these experiences available, and also structures them in particular ways.

This is fairly obvious in the case of games, although it is perhaps less so with social networking and virtual worlds. Yet online interaction on these platforms depends upon you conforming to particular templates or structures that limit how you can communicate or represent yourself. These are often tied up with consumption: we are encouraged to participate by using commercial icons, or in branded spaces. And as we do so, Facebook and others are busily gathering information about us that they can sell on to other companies that are trying to target us with yet more marketing and advertising.

This isn't necessarily sinister, although it is often much less overt than traditional advertising. However, it does suggest that commercial interests often define the forms

of play that children can engage in; and children themselves have relatively little say or control in that process.

3. Thirdly, we need to move beyond a view of play as somehow always a rehearsal or a form of preparation for adult life. We need to look at play as a form of pleasurable activity in the here and now – and to look at children for what they are, not just what we hope (or fear) they will become.

That means looking in an unsentimental way at what children are actually doing – not from the perspective of a worried adult, anxious about what children will become, endlessly concerned that they will be damaged, and seeking to protect them; nor from the perspective of the educator, constantly seeking to assess what they do in terms of what they can learn and hence become better people in the future.

4. Finally, we need to pay attention to the other aspects of play – the other rhetorics that Sutton Smith identifies. In doing so, we need to remember that a fundamental characteristic of play is precisely that it is 'just pretend', that it is not real.

So, in thinking about the risks of violent games, or about stranger danger online, we need to recognise that risk may well be necessary in terms of learning – and that children won't learn how to deal with risk if they are always kept away from it. But we also need to recognise that the irrational, subversive, fantastic elements of play are often what makes it pleasurable. For better or worse, we need to experience these things, not just in order to learn about them, but also because they are exciting in their own right.

That means paying more attention to the pleasure of risk – and, particularly for children, the fascination of sex and violence, which are often crucial for play. And we need to recognise that historically adults' attempts to police that thrill, to prevent it and contain it, have never been, and are never likely to be, very effective.

Adults at play

Play used to be seen very much as a children's domain. Yet adults also play – and it may be that digital media are allowing them new opportunities to do so.

The games industry is fond of claiming that the average age of computer gamers is rising all the time: it's now around 30 – and apparently the largest demographic is middle-aged women playing online puzzle games. There's also a generation – mainly of men - that grew up with Nintendo and Sega and is still assiduously playing games well into middle age. This market of adult gamers is particularly lucrative, because most blockbuster games are far from cheap to buy. Meanwhile, we have also seen the advent of the Nintendo Wii and other games devices successfully marketed for the whole family.

This could be explained purely in economic terms – that the industry has reached the point where its core market of adolescent boys has become saturated; and so it needs

to reach out to new markets if it's going to continue to be profitable. All of this has meant innovation in terms of hardware and software – different types of games, and different technologies with which to play them. This is most obvious with games, but it's also apparent with other digital media. In the case of social networking, there's a continuing chase: as adults move into spaces that used to be dominated by young people (like Facebook), the kids move on.

The US historian Gary Cross describes this in very negative terms in his book *Men to Boys: The Making of Modern Immaturity*. He argues that we now have a generation of young men who are never going to grow up and to take responsibility; and this is particularly apparent in adult men's engagement with computer games.

However, we might ask whether this apparent infantilization of adults (or of adult men) is necessarily new – or indeed especially negative. Certainly, some would see it as a kind of liberation. It's not so much that technology has blurred the distinction between the adult and the child (or perhaps just the man and the boy), but rather that is giving adults permission to play – and in doing so, it may have offered them a temporary means of escape from some of the boring responsibilities of adulthood. Perhaps 'media play' is no longer just child's play…

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