Heterotopic Spaces of Childhood

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Abstract

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The rapid pace of technological change sweeps across the world of children changing current concepts of how childhood should be defined. Contentions that childhood is disappearing proliferate as some childhood theorists suggest that children's increasing exposure to previously withheld information and knowledge erases the boundaries which formerly separated childhood from adulthood. While acknowledging that unprecedented access to information may have changed the experience of childhood, it might be argued that the social artifact of childhood continues to exist. Moreover messages and ideas within the spaces of technology and new media are experienced and interpreted uniquely by children and therefore examining these experiences offers insight into the growing media niche which children occupy.

My project examines the ways in which technology and new media can influence and even create the spaces of boyhood interaction. As media generated notions of public space as dangerous space lead to increasing privatization of space, virtual space becomes an alternative space for childhood play and social interaction. The methodology upon which my research is based is an ongoing two-year ethnographic study of a group of boys who play video games. Using participant observation and interviews, the ways in which the virtual space of the game might serve to shape the social interaction between the boys are explored.

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Chapter One

Introduction

A Glimpse into Postmodern Childhood

It is still dark when they leave the house. As together they scrape the ice from the mini van windows their breath swirls in a cold misty vapor in the early morning air. They load the backpack, curling gear and computer bag into the hatch in order to leave space for the rest of the kids in the car pool. "Hurry" urges Trevor, he's afraid to get a 'jug' for arriving late and rush hour traffic is always a nightmare on Monday mornings. At the private boys' school that Trevor attends a jug is a demerit and seven jugs result in a suspension and a permanent infraction on your academic record, which significantly reduces the chances of receiving any academic awards or honors. A late jug requires staying after school and copying newsletters from the Bank of Montreal and he simply doesn't have the time, every minute of his day is booked. They drive up the lane to the road, reviewing the gear as they go. "Do you have your homework, lunch, keys, money in case of emergency, cell phone, palm pilot, gym clothes, curling gear?" mom asks. "Yes", Trevor replies, after thinking for a few moments, and then reminds her, "I have math tutoring after school and then curling practice, pick me up at six". It is six am as they reach the road; when she picks him up at the rink at six the same evening they still have the hour commute home, dinner, Emily's piano practice and several hours of homework and somewhere in between she has to get Emily to her 'funky dance class'. She concentrates on the drive, careful not to forget to collect any of the children in the carpool.

The story of the mother and son in the minivan portrays the way in which childhood has become increasingly regulated and raises questions regarding when and

where children are able to play. Despite the acceptance of popular culture as a legitimate subject of study in sociology there has been a history of ambivalence towards the study of mass culture. For instance, the Payne Fund studies of mass entertainment in the nineteen thirties viewed movies as a social problem and possible cause of juvenile delinquency (Mukerji and Schudson 1991). By the nineteen sixties the debate came to be referred to as the "mass culture" debate (White and Rosenberg 1957). The debate surrounding mass culture continues today as critics of new media and consumer culture consider the consequences of mass culture. It has been suggested that these traditional divisions between high culture and popular culture are political divisions rather than moral, intellectual or aesthetic divisions (Mukerji and Schudson 1991). The concern about the worth of mass culture speaks to the issue of popular media as low culture versus other more worthwhile pursuits that children might engage in. These concerns regarding the negative displacement of children's time suggest that if children weren't wasting their time with useless media like video games they would be engaged in other more productive activities like reading classic literature. It might be suggested that postmodern childhood provides a battleground where a continuous war between high and mass culture is being waged. Activities which embody middle class values and aspirations such as, piano lessons, ballet classes, art lessons or organized sporting leagues represent activities deemed good recreational pastimes for children whereas activities that children choose to engage in, typically through there own choice and without adult supervision, such as video games, are deemed bad for children. It might be suggested that good activities embody the prerequisites of high culture versus bad activities, which embody mass culture.

The mom in the minivan in the story above is me. I never dreamed that I of all people would succumb to the pressures of 'postmodern childhood'. I specifically avoided suburbia and all that it entailed, steadfastly refusing to become a 'soccer mom'. I chose to raise my family in what I refer to as 'outerurbia', a small town outside the city, past suburbia but not quite country. There was no television in my home for the first nine years of my son's life. I wanted to instill certain values in my children: a love of literature, art, an appreciation for the outdoors and the ability to amuse oneself by oneself. I didn't feel that I could compete with the allure of media. How could building a water garden complete with snakes, frogs and dragonflies compete with mutant ninja turtles and power rangers? I wasn't sure that I was up to the challenge so I didn't even attempt to compete. My media devoid home elicited a mixture of admiration and horror from the neighborhood parents.

When my son turned seven he began to attend a school located in a suburb just outside the city. This school introduced us to a completely new world. These kids were worldly and media savvy and I realized that in order to relate socially my son would need to be introduced to new media – fast. The social lives of these children was highly regulated, filled with organized sports, extra tutoring and play dates organized weeks in advance; however, their self-directed social interaction focused on and through media. On the playground they discussed last night's television show, the newest cool movie, and of course video games. When they had the opportunity to engage in play that was not directed by parents they inevitably chose to play video games. So I made a conscious decision to introduce media into my home, purchasing a TV and Nintendo system. I stepped back and watched, albeit sometimes in horror, as my son began to watch what

other kids watched. I have to admit the whole World Wrestling Federation phase freaked us both out. However, the video games fascinated me. I watched intrigued as my son began to use the Nintendo console and a collection of very 'cool' video games as a social tool, enticing school friends to his house to play. It became a way to break the ice in a new social milieu. Around this time I was taking a field research class and so my fascination with the social interaction that was occurring around and through the video games became my research topic and eventually the subject of this MA thesis. I began to record the ways in which children were using new media, and particularly video games, to create spaces for social interaction that countered the regulated childhood spaces that dominated their time.

At its inception, my thesis was intended to be founded upon definitions of postmodern childhood. Drawing upon the literature attempting to conceptualize postmodern childhood, it might be defined by the increasing control over both children's time and space. The leisure activities that children engage in are as much as possible organized by adults with an eye towards enhancing skills that will translate into future success. There is a pervasive anxiety surrounding postmodern childhood, as public space is deemed increasingly unsafe. As a result, the social interactions and play of children move from public to domestic to private spaces. As children's play becomes privatized it is also " commodified and with this also comes the technification of culture and social communication" (Kline, Dyer-Witherford and De Peuter 244); when children are able to engage in autonomous play they are equipped with technological alternatives to outdoor play spaces and so play often occurs through new media. As children's interactions are increasingly regulated and surveyed they are also contained within enclosed spaces.

Both the experience of childhood and the social artifact of childhood have undergone profound changes as a result of the emergence of postmodern culture. Family structures have become increasingly impermanent and more complex. Childhood has become media saturated and Provenzo (2001) suggests that hyperreality has come to dominate the experience of the contemporary child.

Hyperreality is a term coined by the French social theorist Jean Baudrillard that has been adopted by other theorists discussing media and suggesting that media has created a culture where the hyperreal has taken precedence over the real (Baudrillard 1994). Baudrillard suggests that contemporary culture has substituted the simulation for the real. Provenzo (2001) proposes that the hyperreal has increasingly come to dominate the experience of contemporary children as the real has been replaced by the hyperreal. This concept can be used in understanding the ways in which spaces created by video games can provide play spaces that are in some ways better than the real play spaces in which contemporary children interact. From the perspective of the regulated child the virtual play space of the video game may provide an autonomous play space where the player can experience more freedom, greater intensity of emotions, and as an avatar do more and be more than might otherwise be possible in other regulated spaces of childhood. The original definition of avatar refers to a manifestation of a Hindu deity in human, superhuman or animal form but in the virtual gaming world it has come to refer to an image representing a user in a virtual reality space.

Conceptual Explanation of Postmodern Childhood

Technological change affects the world of children, changing the ways in which we think about and experience childhood. The increasing regulation, surveillance and pressures of postmodern childhood are experienced across social and economic boundaries, as children are required to achieve academically in order to compete in an increasingly competitive marketplace. As competition for seats in the best schools is fierce it becomes more and more important to excel in extra curricular activities. Participation in organized sports, music lessons and extra tutoring become status symbols of the middle class and the most demanding schedule signifies the most committed parents and highest achieving child. There is an increasing pressure on parents to invest in their children's childhood in order to maximize their children's prospects in adulthood (Beck and Beck- Gernsheim, 1995; Jackson and Scott, 1999). What it means to be a 'good' parent is constructed within local communities but typically in postmodern 'risk society', being a good parent is also related to keeping children safe from perceived physical and social risks (Dyck 1990; Holloway 1998; Valentine 1997). Children carry cell phones in order to keep in touch and arrange transportation with busy parents, and agendas are no longer sufficient as palm pilots become de rigueur amongst preteens. Postmodern children are media kids and consumer kids (Del Veccio 1997). They are early adopters of technology and negotiate the virtual space of the video game and the cyberspace of the Internet with the ease of those who have been born into a world of mass media hyperreality. Zinnecker's (2001) model of postmodern childhood portrays children as performing in an adult world with the cynicism usually reserved for older youth cultures. Access to adult knowledge provided by new media has eliminated the

boundaries that have previously defined childhood as children negotiate the same media-scape as adults (Postman 1994). Postmodern childhood is increasingly constructed from ideas that are media generated as parents and educational establishments no longer function as gatekeepers of knowledge. Media assumes a larger role in imparting information, as parents are increasingly less physically present in the lives of their children. For example, the past several decades have seen profound changes in family structures, characterized by high divorce rates resulting in children often living with one parent at a time, the surfeit of working and single mothers and the feminization of poverty. These factors combine to create a situation where children may be spending significant amounts of time alone and expected to take care of themselves. Since the late 1960's the amount of time parents spend with children has dropped from an average of thirty hours per week to seventeen (Lipsky and Abrams, 1994; Galston, 1991). As children are increasingly unable to interact freely in public space, children arriving home and left to fend for themselves may turn to television or video games to entertain themselves (Kincheloe 1997).

Observations gathered from the field research for this thesis support the suggestion that children choose more and more to spend time with media as much of children's autonomous social interaction revolves around and through various forms of media from video game space to the Internet. As a result of this, media increasingly becomes a vehicle through which children acquire information and, in the absence of parents, perhaps develop ideas. Therefore, corporate production of youth culture has a significant impact on children. Agger (2004) suggests that parents have less and less of a role in socialization of children as changing family structures result in parents spending

significantly less time with children. As a consequence of these changes, children form many of their ideas about the world from images and information found on the Internet, television, video games and through socialization with peers who have formed their value systems similarly. Children spend less time interacting with caring adults in the home and more time interacting with media and with peers through media (Agger 2004).

This raises the important distinction of children interacting with media and children interacting through media. Media can be understood as influencing a passive recipient or being a vehicle through which children can interact with others. The interaction occurs through media as children hurry home after school to chat with peers on MSN, boys meet to play basketball in virtual game space as opposed to on traffic laden, 'unsafe' street space and parental control and surveillance is enacted through communication via cell phone. Zinnecker's portrayal of childhood depicts children as participating in the highly organized and stressful urban and suburban life of adult civilization, unable to negotiate public space freely, instead commuting by car as mothers chauffeur children from one organized activity to the next. I would suggest that this portrayal of postmodern childhood depicts a particular type of childhood, the childhood experienced by middle class urban and suburban youth.

When I began my ethnographic study my expectation was that my observations would support these postmodern conceptions of childhood. I expected to find that social interaction taking place in the virtual space of the video game served to distance the individuals from one another, as Provenzo (2001) argues that children increasingly interact in simulations rather than the real world, this inevitably forming a barrier to meaningful connections. I expected the hyperreal content of the game world to dominate

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and take precedence over the real, but less dramatic human interactions. For Doel and Clarke (1999) the real is a fragile place continuously under threat from a more alluring virtual world. I expected the belief that virtual space serves to keep children contained in private rather than community space therefore fostering a generation of apathetic 'mouse potatoes' might be accurate (McCellan 1994). The expectation was that the ideas of children are influenced by corporate values and messages that may be inherent in new media (Steinberg and Kincheloe 1997) and in the instance of video games the expectations tend to be that these are messages of misogyny, consumerism and violence.

What I discovered was that the children used the technology as a tool to develop relationships with their peers. My fieldwork illustrates the ways in which new media can serve as a vehicle to forge connections between people. Through playing the video games the boys felt a sense of belonging to a group. It was about building relationships, while physically playing the game together, that went deeper than the relationships that the regulated and surveyed space of schoolyard and organized leisure activities allowed. The game space was one space amongst many in which the children interacted and developed their social skills. I would argue that, contrary to Provenzo's expectations, the hyperreal space of the game did not serve to diminish the validity of the boy's social interactions. Although, when embodied as their avatars, they were able to engage in activities that they might be unable to experience as their embodied self, they nevertheless bring with them into the game the past experiences and emotions that are wrapped up in their friendships, creating alliances, supporting each other or in conflict with one another. All of these behaviors carried with them into the virtual video game space as they moved seamlessly between spaces. Hence, the adventure that the boys engage in virtual space serves to

develop the same bond as any imaginary adventure that they might decide to embark on. In response to claims that the game playing might result in the boys being disconnected from community and apathetic, my observation was that the privatization of public space serves to disconnect youth from community space and that the social interaction that occurs in video game space is in part a response to a lack of opportunity to engage autonomously in community spaces

Video games versus other forms of Media

There are several reasons for choosing to examine the ways in which video games, played on consoles, might create spaces of social interaction. It may be argued that the mediums of film and television share many similarities to video games. Studies on the effects of violence in film and television have been applied to the medium of video game studies. However, it has been contended that video games are unique in several ways.

The appeal of the video game experience lies in the intensity and immersiveness that game play is able to engender (Kline and Banerjee 1998; Kline 1997). As well, television is a relatively passive medium while video games are interactive. For the video game to proceed the player must actively play the game whereas the television show will proceed whether the viewer engages with the medium or not. The player of the video game has an active role in creating the game play experience. Although the degree to which players are able to have a role in producing the experience is limited by technology and the boundaries constructed by the game designer, children are able to have some participation in creating individual spaces within which to interact.

Notably, unlike television, much of video game play occurs in children's private spaces beyond the surveillance and control of adults (Walkerdine, Dudfield and Studdert 2000). This means that video game space provides an opportunity for children to create their own autonomous play spaces.

Most important for the purposes of this thesis, is that video games provide an opportunity for children to interact through the media, which is not the case with many other forms of media. In the space of the video game children can adopt an avatar and interact though the avatar with other children. Consequently, children can play in spaces they have had a role in creating, with other children, away from the surveillance of adults. This combines to produce a unique situation in which the virtual space of interaction becomes a place where children may engage in social interaction developing autonomous relationships with their peers.

Another distinctive element of the interaction is that in the virtual space of the game the children can interact as avatars of their choosing while simultaneously interacting as themselves, thus allowing children to play with other identities while socializing with their peers. For instance, a twelve-year-old boy can interact with his peers while assuming the persona of a hero from his favorite movie, a sports celebrity, a Samari warrior, Lara Croft (a female adventure hero) or a female snowboarder. This raises questions about how different this type of interaction is, compared to traditional physical forms of play interaction. Specifically, how unique is the interaction that occurs in the virtual spaces created by video games from other spaces of children's interactions, and to what degree does the virtuality of the space influence the social interactions and relationships? The idea of adopting alternative identities has been put forth in discussions

of cyberspace as enabling users an opportunity to 'disembody' themselves, thus escaping limitations such as gender discrimination or racism (Turkle 1995). However, in the case of virtual video game space the players are simultaneously disembodied as they adopt the persona of their avatar and embodied as they remain in the physical space amongst their fellow players. This opportunity to interact with peers through two roles at once in two spaces at once provides interesting points of analysis in the examination of sociality.

The story that begins the thesis provides a portrayal of one boy's experience of postmodern childhood. The regulation, surveillance and privatization of public space that characterizes postmodern childhood is outlined, while the space provided by video games is proposed as an alternative space for social interactions. As a result children increasingly engage in social interactions with peers through spaces created by new media. The focus on video games as opposed to other spaces created by media is due to three distinctive factors: the interactivity, intensity and immersiveness of the medium, video game playing occurs in private spaces away from the surveillance of adults and video games can act as spaces of sociality for children as the experience can occur collectively.

Introduction: Exploring the Spaces of Postmodern Childhood

This thesis is conceptualized around an ethnographic study of a group of boys playing video games and examines how the virtual game space fits into the total context of childhood space, particularly in regards to how social interaction with peers in virtual game space might influence social development and peer relations.

It is important to note that this thesis draws upon literature theorizing childhood in order to discuss the specific experience of a small group of middle class boys. However,

it is interesting to observe that the data that emerged from the fieldnotes did not support the notions of behavior typically expected from a group of boys playing video games. Much of the literature surrounding video games addresses effects of video games, for instance aggressivity and addiction. What emerged from the ethnography for this thesis was that the boys primary motivation for playing video games was to form friendship groups, the social aspect of video game play took precedence over any other motivation for video game playing. In this way literature on childhood becomes relevant because the behaviors that this thesis examines are not gender specific. It is not my intention to specifically examine boyhood behaviors but rather to look at the social behaviors of a group of children who happen to be boys.

The project follows seven boys throughout the course of three years and observes the ways in which they use video games; specifically, how the games are incorporated into their lives, what purpose the game play serves, what the motivation for the play is and how the game play affects the boys social interactions.

The line of reasoning which guides the progression of the thesis begins with the idea that postmodern childhood is increasingly structured and regulated by adults. The ethnographic data from this thesis suggests that within these spaces children engage in social interactions finding ways to make choices, resisting adult imposed hegemony. There is imagination at play within the bounded spaces of postmodern childhood and the ways in which children understand and experience these spaces is diverse.

The methodology structuring the project begins with a set of questions that drive the ethnography. Specific questions that are addressed focus on why the children choose to interact in the virtual space of video games and how the games influence the social interactions of the players.

The conceptual body of the thesis is divided into three main sections which explore the ways the space of childhood is regulated by adults, the ways in which

children experience the spaces of childhood collectively and the ways in which children experience these spaces individually. The fieldnotes for this thesis are presented in three ways; direct transcription of the data, observational fieldnotes and narrative fieldnotes which are factual events written descriptively. Narrative fieldnotes describing how one boy experiences a typical day introduces the definition of postmodern childhood. The literature review that follows outlines the historical definitions and evolution of childhood that bring us to present day notions of postmodern childhood. The sections on childhood spaces provide support for the observations emerging from the ethnography examining contemporary ideas about childhood space and children's access to and use of public space. The literature review is followed by a discussion of the methodology upon which the thesis was based and an analysis of the role of Parent as Researcher (PARS).

The description of the participants is important as it provides context for the fieldnotes as well as describing the location of their consoles within the home. This becomes significant, as the section that follows is an analysis of the Socio/Spatial location of the console within domestic space. The argument evolves with a portrayal of one of the respondent's encounters in public space and then later in domestic space serving to illustrate the ways in which spaces of childhood are regulated and serve to control youth. The line of reasoning is developed through a theoretical explanation of public space as inhospitable to children and fieldnotes illustrating the dilemma of adults struggling against the massive anxiety surrounding postmodern childhood and media generated moral panics, uncertain as to what actually constitutes safe space.

The thesis proceeds by questioning the ways in which the respondents understand the virtual video game space, either as other separate play spaces, perhaps

spaces that are similar to any other childhood play space or as continuous spaces. How do

the ways in which the respondents use the space help us to understand their perceptions

about the game space? For instance, could the game act as a secret play space in the same

ways that hideouts and forts could be used? Is the game sometimes used as a social tool

in order to build relationships? How do the boys describe the appeal of the space? These

questions are addressed through fieldnotes and conceptual discussion.

Chapter 2

New Media, Space and Postmodern Childhood

New media occupies a central role in the spaces of postmodern childhood as children increasingly acquire information and socialize through new media. New media is used by children to create spaces of social interaction; in this way, notions of new media, spaces of children's social interactions and definitions of postmodern childhood combine to create the argument upon which this thesis is based.

In recognizing that childhood has come to be perceived of as a historical and social construction my thesis will begin by exploring how childhood came to be viewed as a social artifact that is often ambiguous, diverse, subjective and inconsistent as opposed to previous notions of childhood as an inherent, crucial and biological stage of human life. This view of childhood as a social construction implies that childhood is continually changing "inextricably linked to variables of race, class, gender and time"(Mills 2000). In our current historical stage of modernity childhood is also linked to the media culture and information technologies that characterize our everyday lives, influencing work, education and family, shaping the consumer oriented culture in which we live. This portrayal of childhood presents two possibilities, the understanding of children as being vulnerable to the messages and information implicit in new media and the idea of technology as empowering children providing opportunities for creativity and imagination.

Historical Evolution of Definitions of Childhood

The concept of childhood as a social artifact is a product of modernity; historically, childhood has been viewed as a biological state and these two views still

exist within the literature as oppositional. From the traditional perspective of child

psychology, childhood is a necessary and inevitable time of human development.

> Backed by the authority of such researchers as Sigmund Freud, Erik
> Erikson, Arnold Gesell, and, in particular, Jean Piaget, prevailing opinion
> holds that observable stages of child development are governed by
> biological imperatives. Indeed, Piaget calls his studies 'genetic
> epistemology' by which he means the advance from one level of
> intellectual achievement to the next follows a genetic principal
> (Postman 1994).

Traditionally, the developmental model has predominated as the paramount social

psychological framework. The idea of childhood as a psychological process through

which the adult personality developed prevailed (Frones 1995). Vygotsky (1978) presents

a theory of childhood as a progression through a series of critical periods with social

development occurring through social forces. Kholberg (1981) describes the moral

development of children as occurring through a series of three stages.

This essentialist paradigm of childhood as a homogeneous social group defined

by biology is coming to be questioned as the understanding of childhood as a social

artifact comprised of cultural elements such as politics, gender, race or class located

within a historical context is increasingly being explored. Philippe Aries *Centuries of*

Childhood (1962) is generally acknowledged as introducing the idea of 'the invention of

childhood'. Aries asserts that in the Middle Ages younger human beings were viewed as

adults. They were not segregated or sheltered from the realities of daily life. In the

eighteenth century in Europe the idea of childhood emerged, as children became objects

of consumption for the privileged classes. The idea of childhood filtered down with the

advent of the middle class and from the Enlightenment on the idea of child as distinct

from the adult evolved.

However, it has been suggested that the work of Aries is primarily based upon an analysis of the representation of children in medieval and renaissance art. "Ultimately, Aries data may reveal more about changing conventions of artistic representations than they do about social realities"(Buckingham 2000). Nevertheless, Aries introduced the possibility of childhood as a social phenomenon and it is upon this possibility that the premise of childhood as socially constructed is based.

In *Theorizing Childhood* (1998) James, Jenks and Prout discuss the 'new paradigm' of childhood as the awareness that children are social actors and therefore active agents in their own socialization. Children are seen as embarking on a course of individualization that requires that their rights as autonomous individuals be acknowledged. At the same time as children are increasingly gaining acknowledgement as individuals in their own right they are also increasingly being regulated and surveyed. In the current 'risk society' (Beck 1992) children have limited autonomy in regards to negotiating personal time and space; this speaks to the idea that control over children is achieved through control over the time and space of childhood.

> Physical conceptual and moral boundaries circumscribe the extent of children's wanderings. From the closed arenas of domestic space to the infinite horizons of cyberspace, boundaries forestall and contain the child's movement. Erected by a gerontocratic hegemony and policed by discipline, the boundaries are legitimized through ideologies of care, protection and privacy. (James, Jenks and Prout 1998)

So even as our definitions of childhood evolve and as children have greater access to information through new technologies the boundaries used to regulate, control and contain children intensify.

Electronic Media and the Disappearance of Childhood

Central to the argument upon which my thesis is based is the notion that childhood exists as a separate time and space; however, at the end of the century the very existence of childhood comes to be questioned. As media laments the demise of childhood this theme resonates throughout society in government, schools and families. Arguments presented espousing the death of childhood are generally characterized by technological determinism suggesting that technological advancement embodied in electronic media, predominantly television, video games and internet are responsible for the corruption of the innocent child thus destroying the idyllic childhood that distinguished previous generations.

David Buckingham presents a broad overview of the state of childhood at the end of the twenty-first century in his book *After the Death of Childhood* (2000). A significant portion of Buckingham's work focuses on discussions of children's media literacy; understanding the ways in which children experience media. He suggests that an important aspect of children's media literacy has been based on children's ability to understand the relationship between media and the real world. Cognitive psychology has used a developmental approach in understanding the ways in which adolescent children develop an awareness of realism as an aesthetic category. Buckingham asserts that children's determination of which media reflections represent reality is not a solitary psychological activity, but rather occurs through negotiation with others. Children use media to define identity and status amongst their peers. In research on social interactions of boys surrounding video games, a boy denying that a video game is realistic or disturbingly violent might serve to establish a boy's identity as masculine. Boys who

admit to finding the game disturbing might be labeled weak or babyish. The suggestion is that children use media to stake a social position and display media sophistication. Buckingham discusses the ways in which children typically perceive 'media risk' as affecting the 'other'. For example a boy might suggest that a particular video game could be disturbing to a younger child who is unable to differentiate between what is real and what is not real, however, being older and more mature he is able to distinguish reality from media generated illusion. Buckingham suggests that children use the discourse surrounding media literacy to position themselves, defining their social identities in relation to both peers and adults.

Buckingham's research reveals the significance of class distinctions when examining children's media literacy. He states that in his research experience, middle class children view discussions of media literacy as an educational experience, deferring to the interviewer and attempting to display media sophistication. In being critical of media, middle class children attempt to distinguish themselves from the mass audience who are susceptible to media effects. Working class children use discourses surrounding media literacy as an opportunity to define personal tastes and identity. They are more interested in performing for their peers than impressing the interviewers.

Buckingham assumes three central positions in his work. He views children as an active audience rather than as passive recipients of a media experience. He attempts to understand the child's point of view in his or her own terms and he attempts to situate children's media use within the broader context of social and interpersonal relationships. Buckingham expresses concern that in assuming the position that children are an active and therefore critical audience, there is a danger of adopting the romantic image of the

'media wise child,' which dominates the debate in both the industry and the academy. In adopting the image of child as an active viewer there is an implication that the viewer will not be influenced by media content.

Buckingham discusses the challenges inherent in attempting to understand media from the child's perspective, suggesting that while social statistics claim authority they aggregate individual opinions; consequently, the unique and individual perspectives of children are lost. Buckingham uses discourse analysis in his research, viewing talk as a kind of *social action* through which children can construct identities and negotiate relationships. This discussion of research methodology is useful in developing my own ethnography as he discusses the importance of moving beyond the talk. In analyzing fieldnotes I attempt to adopt this methodology by not accepting what the respondents are saying at face value but instead looking beyond what they are saying and attempting to understand how the social interactions and discussion occurring around the video game playing can act as a way of defining identity, performing for peers or resisting authority. This research perspective views children not in essentialist terms but rather as diverse individuals reacting to a variety of circumstances. Buckingham laments the lack of true ethnographic methodology in previous research on children and media.

> Ultimately, however, much of the research has been quite superficial in this respect. Despite claims to 'ethnography', very little media research entails the long-term immersion that characterizes ethnography in the field of anthropology. Much of it is based on a very limited acquaintance with the subjects themselves: all sorts of assumptions are typically made about children, and about how representative they are of particular social categories, on the basis of what is often little more than a couple of interviews. (Buckingham 2000)

Buckingham continues to discuss the importance of applying qualitative ethnographic methodologies in examining children's everyday media activities, thus, understanding children's media use in the broader context of their social and interpersonal relationships. Although the aspect of violence in video games is not a focus of my thesis, Buckingham makes an important point when he suggests that it is necessary to engage in the 'media effects' debate. Dismissing parental and social concerns regarding violence in media as irrational, moral panic can be counter productive to the media effects debate. The existence of the moral panic is in itself an effect of media violence and therefore is worthy of examination (Simon 2004). Buckingham suggests that evolving new media technology presents unique issues in regard to the effects debate, as videogames and Internet are less amenable to parental control than previous media such as television and cinema. The social concerns expressed may be a response to changes in media resulting from evolving technology. Internet and video games remove the control from the state and place the responsibility for monitoring content on parents and as a result of this the debates about media effects have become intertwined with debates about parenting and so to be a 'good parent' is to control and regulate children's media consumption. Centralized regulation becomes a less favored, viable solution as a result of social, technological and economic changes, which reflect increasing diversity of tastes and positions regarding new media. There is a need for parental regulation of media that would accommodate diversity of tastes and morality; however, educating consumers regarding media is not a solution because it perpetuates the privatization of childhood as children's media use becomes privatized and contained within the home.

Buckingham expresses concerns about the way in which the focus surrounding media violence has become reductive, concentrating on whether violence in media causes aggressive behavior in children when perhaps other effects should be explored; such as, whether specific types of representations might generate particular ideas about the nature of crime and authority.

While public debates regarding media violence have been dominated by the right debates regarding consumerism and advertising have been dominated by the left. What these two perspectives share is an agenda of protectionism; protecting children via media censorship and regulation. Concerns revolving around these issues are in actuality reflecting broader social anxieties regarding changing family structures, decline of organized religion, changing nature of literacy and rapidly evolving technology. Focusing the debate around children and media is a politics of substitution. While it may give more credence to the debate it constructs children as powerless, innocent victims of brain washing by capitalist media conglomerates (Buckingham 2000).

Buckingham's book raises important questions as to whether evolving new media technologies will erase the distinctions between adulthood and childhood or whether they will widen the gap further. Two opposing responses are presented, as perspectives of new media as causing the demise of childhood or as empowering children are explored as he examines the possibilities, challenges and concerns presented by new technologies. Buckingham suggests that as oppositional as these two perspectives are they share a viewpoint of childhood as an essential construction: the view of children as inherently vulnerable to electronic media as held by proponents of the death of childhood thesis and the view of children as possessing an inherent aptitude for new technology as perceived

by those viewing new technologies as utopian. He highlights the complexity of the issue of children's use of new medias and offers a balanced précis of the contradictory perspectives in current literature. Buckingham discusses the prevalence of literature surrounding the idea of the disappearance of childhood and the moral panic regarding the negative influence of electronic media as indicative of the growing anxiety about the changing nature of childhood and perhaps symptomatic of broader concerns regarding social change. These anxieties relating to social change are reflected in mainstream media by books such as David Elkind's *The Hurried Child* (1981) and Marie Winn's books *Children without Childhood* (1984) and *The Plug in Drug* (1977). While these works are reflective of popular cultural concerns, examples of academic literature also share anxieties about social change and the blurring of boundaries between adults and children, primarily attributing these perceived problematic circumstances to electronic media.

Neil Postman launched the idea of the demise of childhood as a consequence of electronic media into academic studies of childhood with his book *The Disappearance of Childhood*. Postman uses the work of French Historian Philippe Aries to recount the story of the invention of childhood in the mid-eighteenth century and its subsequent progression. He attributes the invention of childhood to the advent of the printing press, which irrevocably split the previously shared intellectual social worlds relegating the child to a separate space. Adulthood became a symbolic rather than biological state, as it had to be secured through literacy necessitating education. He further argues that electronic media eradicates childhood as it reveals adult secrets to children and renders information uncontrollable. This disclosure of adult mysteries eliminates shame which Postman views as essential for the perpetuation of childhood. Adults can no longer

disseminate information, revealing it incrementally in stages as children are deemed developmentally ready to receive it, and therefore boundaries become blurred and power shifts.

Joshua Meyrowitz's book *No Sense of Place* (1985) also attributes the blurring of boundaries between adult and child to transformations in communication media. He suggests that through these mediums 'backstage' behavior becomes visible to everyone and as a result of this it becomes impossible for dominant groups to keep secrets resulting in their influence being undermined.

Shirley Steinberg and Joe Kincheloe's edited book *Kinderculture* attributes the 'death of childhood' to children's access to popular culture. The argument rests on the premise that it is the access to knowledge that media makes available to children that results in adults no longer having the power previously inferred by being gatekeepers of knowledge. In Steinberg and Kincheloe's argument it is not so much the media who are responsible for the destruction of childhood as it is corporate capital, the media is simply the vehicle used. The media is viewed as manipulating the masses and as a result eliminating capacity for resistance. Children are seen as particularly vulnerable to media manipulation as corporate ideology is perceived as both psychologically and socially damaging.

So, on the one hand there is the idea that childhood is disappearing as a consequence of innovations in electronic media. Proponents of this theory express a sense of anxiety regarding the changing nature of childhood and the resulting restructuring of the power relations between adult and child. Adopters of this theory are opposed to the negative influence of electronic media and view children as essentially good and in

danger of being corrupted by technology. However, there is an opposing perspective that presents a utopian view of new technologies, suggesting that they empower children, enabling them to evade authoritarian regimes and engage in more equitable power relations. New media is viewed as fostering democracy, encouraging diversity of perspectives, communication and creativity. These utopian views of technology oppose the view of new media as responsible for the disappearance of childhood and general social decline and instead reflect a view of them as agents of social progress. As passionately as the opposition to new technology as a negative influence and children as vulnerable is expressed, proponents of new technology view children as powerful adopters and new technology as the means of their empowerment. The 1990's brought a wave of popular cultural books reflecting a trend of thought suggesting that technology would be the device of positive social change and that children would be the means of this transformation. In Don Tapscott's *Growing up Digital* (1998) children are portrayed as having an essential aptitude for technology. He sets up as oppositional the television generation and the net generation suggesting that technology contributes to produce this gap between generations. Technology is viewed as empowering youth, creating new ways of communicating and interacting characterized by openness and this in turn fosters equitable interaction. The postmodern child is viewed as a production of technology. Jon Katz's *Virtuous Realities* (1997) portrays an optimistic vision of new technology and media as empowering children's political rights and proclaims a 'children's revolution'.

Another common theme running through literature on postmodern childhood is the idea that the boundaries between childhood and adulthood are becoming increasingly blurred. Postmodern theorists of childhood adopt a position that because children are not

sheltered or protected from the consumer and media messages that are so prevalent in postmodern childhood, boundaries become blurred and the space that children occupy is no longer separate and distinct from adult space. Kincheloe suggests that "boundaries between childhood and adulthood fade as children and adults negotiate the same mediascape and struggle with the same impediments to meaning making" (Kincheloe 1997).

Childhood Space

Ideas of childhood space are central to this thesis as it explores ideas of children interacting in virtual video game space as a response both to a lack of opportunity to interact in public space and regulated childhood space. Academics have an increasing interest in the geographies of space. Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine in their book *Cool Places; Geographies of Youth Cultures* (1998) describe the ways in which 'public space has been produced as adult space'. They suggest that youth use public space as a space of resistance, both conscious and unconscious, to adult power. Moreover, they suggest that because the presence of youth is viewed as a threat to public order therefore adult regulatory regimes of temporal and spatial surveillance are imposed in order to remove youth from public space (Skelton and Valentine 1998). As a result, the virtual space of the video game may provide an enticing space of youth interaction and resistance. Discussions of children's use of cyberspace can at times be appropriated in understanding children's use of video game space. Sarah Holloway and Gill Valentine in *Cyberkids* (2003) attempt to counter moral panics regarding corruption of childhood innocence

through exposure to information not previously accessible to children in discussions of children's sophisticated use of computer and information technology.

In thinking about children in regards to the search for autonomous self-regulated space, possibilities exist in the examination of geographies of childhood space. Authors Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh discuss the significance of bedroom space in their book *Researching Children's Popular Culture: The cultural Spaces of Childhood*. They suggest that in urban post modern society there is limited free space for play. In apartments there are no attics or basements, yards or back lots in which to build forts and carve out private space. Due to notions of public space as dangerous space there is no physical outside space that children can claim as their own. This increases the importance of bedroom space as private autonomous space in which children might exert control. It has become accepted, in Western society, that children need their own private space and so most contemporary children have their own bedrooms, which become rich sites for experiencing and playing with popular culture (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2002). Children's bedrooms are increasingly equipped with televisions, computers and game consoles. This provides children with the opportunity to create 'other' play spaces within the private bedroom space. Children can expand the boundaries of their bedroom space as they socialize with peers on MSN or in the virtual space of the video game.

The ways in which children carve out private spaces within the household, typically but not solely in their bedrooms is note worthy when examined in conjunction with the place of new media in the home. When looking at research that has been done on the impact of console based games on the home, new media academics tend to view the movement as technological innovation and examine technological functionality (Forrester

1993; Haddon 1993; Lubar 1993); social scientists, however consider the movement as an indicator of the breakdown of family and decline in community involvement, with some media effects commentators suggesting that the encroachment of these new media into the home has resulted in a crisis in social relations (Provenzo 1991; Grossman 1995).

Bernadette Flynn (2003) unpacks some key social and cultural meanings of the impact of the game console within the domestic environment in her paper *Geography of the Digital Hearth*. Flynn seeks to understand how gaming within the home has impacted social relationships and how the console in the home has influenced the everyday patterns of socio/spatial dynamics. The radio seventy years ago and the television fifty years ago moved into the living room, displacing the fireplace as the domestic hearth. Flynn questions how the movement of console games into the home might change the existing social dynamic.

In the context of this thesis it is interesting to question whether the video game console will become the new digital hearth and the focus of family interaction or whether it will serve as a means by which children are separated into other domestic spaces, safely contained, surveyed and controlled. What is the significance for children of the position of the console within the home, for instance, having consoles located in private space such as bedrooms where there might be less surveillance and greater freedom of access versus having the console located in living rooms where access is more likely to be controlled? Drawing upon the work of Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) and Flynn (2003) is useful in examining the ways in which the position of the console in the respondents' homes may or may not influence the degree to or the circumstances in which the respondents are able to use the game as a space of social interaction or a separate and

private space. In introducing the respondents in the methodology section, the information regarding the boys' consoles, the consoles' location within the home and how this influences the ways in which the game is experienced within the home, are developed in an effort to consider the link between the spatial location of console and the lived experience of the game.

Childhood Spaces and Heterotopias

Several theorists have used Foucault's (1986) discussion *Of Other Spaces* in their analysis of virtual spaces. Foucault discusses utopias as unreal spaces representing society in perfection or inversion; he introduces the idea of heterotopias as distinct from utopias. Heterotopias are spaces that are unreal and yet simultaneously exist in reality. Foucault's example of the mirror as a heterotopia describes the image in the mirror as a placeless virtual space that allows one to be simultaneously here and there, real and unreal. Foucault suggests that life is governed by a series of oppositions between spaces, oppositions that we take for granted: between private space and public space, between family and social space, between the space of leisure and the space of work. These oppositions serve as controls because the definition of the space influences the perceptions and use of space. For the purposes of this thesis there are other oppositions that could be raised: the oppositions between the space of adulthood and the space of childhood, spaces of regulation and spaces of freedom, and spaces of the real and of virtuality. Heterotopias exist outside of these spaces, although it may be possible to locate them in a real space.

Sara McNamee uses Foucault's work on heterotopias to discuss the video game space as a heterotopia, "an unreal, inverted mythical space is there for the player to control and contest" (McNamee 2000). McNamee portrays the space of the video game as providing children with an 'other space', an alternative space of control and autonomy that may not exist in the real spaces of everyday life. Power enacted through violence allows for a resistance to the regulation of everyday space. McNamee suggests that due to the nature of the controlled and regulated spaces of contemporary childhood the virtual game space provides a space where children can have experiences they are no longer allowed to have and to play in spaces they are no longer allowed to occupy. She offers examples from fieldnotes of children's interactions in game space. "Sam, as do the other children, likes playing games because he can be, or do, things that he is not allowed to do in real life. He finds that his imagination is the one place that is beyond control – the imagination cannot be policed"(McNamee, 2000).

An important focal point of McNammee's work is that these 'other' spaces created through leisure activities are differentiated by gender. While I acknowledge the ways in which leisure space is gendered as being an important research issue and certainly relevant to the study of video games, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to address the gendered aspect of video game play because my respondents were male and in order to draw any conclusions regarding gender I would have required a group of respondents that had female representation. Other distinctions between McNamee's article and my approach stem from the methodology used. While McNamee based her article on a study that took place over a four-year period using questionnaires and

interviews to gather data, my thesis is based upon observations that have been drawn from ethnography and are very specific to the group of children involved.

The conclusion of McNamee's article is that children create spaces of escape and resistance through their use of leisure activities and that these spaces are bounded only by the children's imaginations. This assumption suggests that the 'other' spaces created in video games offers children the opportunity to control the boundaries of their spaces. Although, concurring with McNamme that video games enable the creation of these other spaces, I would argue that these other spaces are as much bounded by limitations of technology and execution of design as any childhood space.

The historical progression of ideas about the nature of childhood is traced as they evolve into a definition of postmodern childhood. Contrasting perspectives of new media are presented, as on the one hand supporters of new media view new media as empowering children. On the other hand, moral panic and anxiety surround the changing nature of childhood and new media is cast as introducing previously withheld knowledge to vulnerable children. Proponents of this perspective suggest that the access to new media will result in the disappearance of childhood. While I acknowledge that new media will change the experience of childhood, I argue that the ways in which children use new media serves to create unique media niches, which are worthy of study. These media niches rather than destroying childhood create other spaces in which children might engage in social interactions. The idea of video game space as creating an 'other' space of social interaction may be viewed as providing opportunities for autonomous and unregulated social interactions with peers but nevertheless as being bounded by the limitations imposed by both technology and design.

Chapter 3

The Methodological Possibilities of Parent as Ethnographer

Introduction

The methodology used focused on an ethnographic study of seven boys. At the start of the study the boys ranged in age from ten years old to fifteen years old and at the conclusion the youngest is thirteen and the oldest is eighteen. The primary participants are three friends, Trevor, Max and Zach who gather regularly to play video games. Secondary respondents include Joshua and whichever friends he is playing video games with, Wade who plays alone and Rowan and Tucker who are neighbors and best friends. Formal interviews were scheduled with all of the participants. The primary respondents engaged in fifteen formal recorded sessions of participant observation. Eight sessions of participant observation were conducted with Joshua and four sessions with Wade. I met twice with Rowan and Tucker. However, the observations that guided the research did not solely occur during the formal interviews or participant observation but would arise at chance moments. Conversation would turn to video games during carpool or while playing PlayStation 2 with a group of kids in the waiting room at the orthodontist. When spontaneous opportunities arose to talk to children about their experiences playing video games I would grab whatever notebook was handy and engage in informal interviews. While this data is not a formally included in the thesis it certainly influenced the process. My position as parent as researcher provided both opportunities and challenges. The position of parent enables the researcher the unique opportunity to study the respondents in domestic settings. This provides both a broader perspective and a view into children's

unregulated use of new media. However, it also raises some interesting challenges, which I will describe later.

The objective of the ethnographic study was to provide an understanding of the role of the video game in shaping the social interactions of children. The study was conducted through participant observation and interviews focusing on the social interactions of a group of boys relating in the virtual space of video games. Research surrounding media has typically followed a pattern. As each new media is introduced there are concerns expressed regarding the social implications. These concerns are accompanied by research focusing on the media's content and usage. This research is generally quantitative in nature and as the media becomes established and accepted the focus begins to shift and the research becomes increasingly qualitative (Livingstone, 2002). In her ten-year review of the research surrounding media use, Susan Villani states that the majority of recent studies emphasize media content and children's usage. Although the quantitative aspects of "video games and computer games" and "computer games and the internet" are well researched there is a need for qualitative research on the effects of exposure on young players particularly in regards to social development (Villani, 2001; Subrahamanyam, 2000; Wartella and Jennings, 2000). The quantitative research on the pervasiveness of video game culture in the lives of boys was comprehensive and had in conjunction with personal observations of moral panic surrounding video games motivated my research interest. I was compelled to attempt to understand what was actually occurring in the virtual game space in regards to the children's social interactions.

The objective of my research is not to tell a sweeping story that can be generalized but rather to focus on the particular and personal experience of a specific group of boys, analyzing potential effects of the video game on the children's social interactions and peer relations, utilizing a combination of methodological techniques with the objective of capturing the most nuanced representation possible. Capturing and attempting to understand particular, personal human experience requires intuitive methodologies and as Ben Agger suggests "sociology is strengthened by the autobiography and ethnography" (2004). So I chose to tell the story of a small group of boys, endeavoring to situate the gaming in the total context of the spaces of their personal experience of childhood. The approach of an ethnographic study "allows a more direct voice and participation in the production of sociological data than is usually possible through experimental or survey research" (Deegan 2001).

Parent as Researcher (PARS)

One research role that has formerly been overlooked is that of parent-as-researcher (PAR) (Adler and Adler1998). Adler and Adler describe the advantages implicit in studying ones own children as providing opportunities for observing children not only in the domestic setting, which has previously been neglected, but also in a variety of settings, thereby acquiring a broader perspective of the research issue. Adler and Adler point to many scholars such as Charles H. Cooley, Jean Piaget, Eric Erikson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau who have combined their personal lives with their research interests, typically in the areas of socialization and development. Mitchell and Reid - Walsh (2002) discuss the potential, as researchers of popular culture begin to recognize

the benefits of studying children away from institutional environments in domestic settings as they experience childhood first hand. Mitchell and Reid-Walsh recount their experiences in drawing upon both their own and their children's insights into poplar culture. They offer numerous examples of contemporary theorists such as David Buckingham, Henry Jenkins, Ellen Seiter, Susan Willis and Henry Giroux using PARS in their work. The role of parent as researcher, while also providing a significant degree of access to the children, as well as an understanding of their backgrounds and circumstances, enables me to gather the depth and quality of data required in order to support my argument.

The advantages of PARS are particularly relevant to this thesis because a premise of my argument is that because of the regulation and control of both time and space which characterizes postmodern childhood, opportunities for unregulated autonomous play are squeezed in between other seemingly more academically and culturally enriching activities; furthermore, it is almost impossible to witness these unsupervised, unregulated playtimes in an institutional setting such as school. As a parent or friend my access to the informants is practically unlimited; unlike other research settings where interviews and participant observation needs to be scheduled, my opportunities occur naturally and continuously. Nor do I need to assume an artificial role in order to access and gain the trust of the group. My presence is generally welcomed and my interest in the activities is natural and expected.

Another advantage of the PAR role is the enhanced capacity to triangulate data in the setting. There are multiple avenues, both formal and informal, with which to access empirical information about the participants. Other parents, friends and teachers are

among the numerous communities who offer information, both solicited and unsolicited, about the ways in which the children make choices with regards to the time and space of social interaction.

Adler and Adler (1998) provide a comprehensive description of their experiences in researching their own children and their children's peer group. They discuss how, when researchers assume dual research/membership roles, their involvement with and responsibility to one role may be stronger than to the other. There is a similar situation in my role as a researcher and my position as a parent. As I observe the regulated time and space of postmodern childhood, I realize that I am complicit in this construction. I have created exactly what I observe and I am torn between wanting to be able to provide a childhood experience that is as free from regulation of time and space as possible, where my children can make their own choices and construct their own identities and the desire to keep my children in a 'safe' space providing the opportunities and advantages that I think might enable them to succeed in a competitive market place.

A benefit of researching my own children's videogame play is that it creates a bond of common interest. My son and his friends have expressed appreciation regarding my genuine interest in their preferences and opinions. The effort that I devote to engaging in discussion with the boys about their interests has expanded into other areas as they share thoughts and information about other aspects of their lives. One of my initial motivations, apart from a genuine interest in the subject, in choosing to research the social interaction surrounding the virtual space of the video game was that it would enable me to devote the time and attention to my children that I might otherwise have chosen to devote to other research endeavors.

Although, my role as 'Parent as Researcher' provided advantages, such as allowing me increased access to the participants in my study and a broader overall perspective, it also presents some particular conditions in the methodology. I noticed a difference in the data I gathered from the respondents in the research group that didn't include my son. When acquiring data from my son's group I engaged primarily in observation. While acquiring data from Joshua's group I was much more likely to hang out and play with the guys. Primarily engaging in observation while researching my son's peer group was motivated by a genuine desire not to influence the social interactions occurring around the game play. In observing my son's group of gamers I truly felt a unique opportunity to be an invisible presence, observing the children without influencing the play in any way. With the other respondents I was always a felt presence. They would interact with me, asking questions, offering me opportunities to play. Both positions were advantageous and combined offered a more extensive perspective than either method alone, which I will discuss in greater detail in the following section.

Parent as Ethnographer; Methodological Concerns

In choosing my methodology, I most often chose to engage in observation over participant observation. By this I mean that I would watch the players play video games and record their interaction rather than play the video games with them. This was a methodological decision and with this choice came both sacrifices and benefits. The majority of the fieldnotes that I documented with the primary respondents were recorded with an audio tape, while observations were written by hand so that I could note what was physically happening between the boys in the room and to a lesser extent what was happening in the virtual space of the game while simultaneously accurately catching the

dialogue. It was surprisingly difficult to capture the conversation occurring between the boys in the room, the interaction in the room and the interaction in the space of the game. There was so much happening so quickly and I wanted to note some of my observations regarding the situation.

While researching the primary respondents I was usually situated on a loft that overlooked the living room and from this vantage point I could clearly see the boys and hear their conversation. I could get a sense of what was happening in the game but when I wanted to clearly see the game play on the television screen I would move down to the living room. When I choose to move down to the living room I would sacrifice my 'birds eye view' of the players and my anonymity because while I quietly recorded my fielnotes on the loft the players would begin to forget I was there; when I sat in the living room they would be very aware of my presence wanting to show me what was happening in the game, showing off for me, performing.

Several times I recorded the game play using a digital camera. With this technique I could watch the game play over and over, each time capturing something new. Moreover, there is objectivity to the analysis that occurs while viewing filmed data that isn't there when the researcher is present at the event. Perhaps that is because the researcher is not seeing the nuances and is missing the social undercurrents. The camera only captures one view so it is more apt to miss the secret look exchanged between two players about to gang up on the third oblivious player. When I am observing and recording fieldnotes I can move around and see what's occurring from other perspectives. For example, when a fight broke out over the controller and two boys were pulling on it I could lean over the railing and see what was actually occurring. Also, while watching the

filmed game play, questions continually arose regarding what was occurring on the tape. When questions arose while I was recording the fieldnotes by hand I was able to stop and ask the respondents what was happening, for example, why they were laughing or cheering or fighting. Despite the limitations of the filmed data, the objectivity of the filmed data provided some surprising observations of the game play that I had missed in my hand written fieldnotes. For example, I was not present for the first digital recording that I made. I set up the camera at a good vantage point and left it running while the boys' played video games. When I went back to review the data later that evening I was struck by the physicality of the boys interaction. Why had I never noticed their physical connection within the space of the room? I had been so caught up in recording the conversation, and the action on the screen that I had missed the striking physical interaction between the players. The boys were never still. They constantly moved and fidgeted, sliding closer to the screen when the action within the game became intense, moving closer to each other and drifting apart in an intricate social dance. What was even more arresting was the touching. Out of the blue, for no particular reason Max would reach over and shove Trevor. Trevor would half smile but not react. A few moments later Zach would reach over and punch Max's arm. It was continuous headlocks, shoves and punches. The recipient of the blows never responded adversely and usually didn't respond at all. I never found out exactly what the physical interaction meant but it raised some interesting questions. Do these boys engage in this physical interaction in other play spaces or while playing other video games? Seeing this on the film caused me to be more aware of the physical interaction that occurred around the game. Does the nature of the game provoke this physical behavior or is it just affectionate touching that is acceptable

between boys and would occur in any space in which the boys were hanging out having fun? I might not have become aware of this unique interaction had I not filmed the game play and this is an example of the advantage of combing several techniques of data collection.

An important motivation for my decision to record my fieldnotes by hand and audiotape was that the digital camera, while capturing the interaction in the room from the perspective of the camera, was unable to capture the simultaneous interaction that was occurring in the virtual space of the video game. This constituted a huge sacrifice in regards to the data gathered because an important aspect of the thesis was attempting to determine whether the social interaction that was occurring between the players in the physical space of the room was influencing or was influenced by the events occurring within the virtual space of the video game

Engaging in observation allowed me to watch the social interaction between the game players, to a great extent forgotten and unnoticed. So I was able to notice the different moods that various games evoked. Engaging solely in observing and taking fieldnotes enabled me to focus my undivided attention on the interaction of the players rather than being distracted by my own game play. The several times that I played video games with the boys my ineptness as a beginner required me to devote a significant amount of attention to the game, therefore, not noticing much of the boy's interactions. The boys turned their attention to me, excited that a mom was actually playing video games with them. This was fun but they weren't engaging in the everyday social interaction with each other, as the main focus of their attention was on showing me the game.

Playing the game myself was useful in making observations as a player and in acquiring a deeper understanding of the boy's conversations about the game but, unlike much of the research on video games that I have encountered, my thesis is not about the game or about my relationship with the game but rather about how the game might shape the spaces of childhood and how the game may influence the social interactions that are occurring in these spaces. Consequently, the best vantage point with which to acquire the information and insights necessary to make some observations or draw some conclusions is as an observer rather than as a participant.

However, with the secondary respondents I was more likely to engage in informal interviews, in directed conversations about the game play, or in playing a game with them. This was because my presence was a novelty and therefore seemed to require justification. The sessions with the secondary respondents usually required some prearrangement so they seemed to have an expectation that some sort of interaction with me was required. If I just sat watching them play video games with their friends they would begin to ask me questions about my research, often asking me to ask them questions. As a result of this I was more likely to engage in observation while playing a game or conducting an informal interview.

Data Collection

Participants

The primary participants in the study were a group of three twelve-year-old boys who gathered regularly to play video games. This is the group whose story shapes the observations upon which my thesis is based. I have employed a variety of techniques

throughout the course of my participant observation in an attempt to gather the most detailed data possible. I have formally observed the boys playing video games over a three-year period. Observations have been recorded in a variety of ways. I have observed the group, while taking hand written fieldnotes, recording as much of the conversation and interaction as possible. I have also used a combination of audio recording while observing and recording fieldnotes by hand. I would then transcribe the audiotape over the fieldnotes, merging the two sets of data in an attempt to capture as much of the detail as possible. I have also observed the group playing while video taping the game play with digital camera.

Primary Respondents

Trevor is a thirteen-year-old boy who attends an all boys private school. He lives outside the city and spends a couple of hours out of every day commuting. He is a serious, highly motivated student and since his school requires a significant amount of homework, most nights he is up late studying. He belongs to the school ski team and swim team and takes art classes on Saturdays. He owns a PlayStation 2, which he plays on weekends when he can gather his friends together. They usually play at his house. The time that Trevor is able to devote to playing video games is limited due to academic demands and by the extra-curricular activities that he is involved in. His space is regulated and structured and his free time is limited. His PlayStation 2 console is located in the living room. The house is very open concept so when Trevor has friends over to play video games the play occurs in the center of the house where everyone sees and hears the play. Family members and their friends are continuously walking into the space

and chatting with the children playing the video games, sometimes watching the play and asking questions or commenting.

Max is also thirteen. He attends the local public school. He is an easygoing student but achieves academically and is an intelligent kid, happy and good-natured. He is both social and popular. An avid snowboarder, he also takes guitar lessons. He doesn't devote much time to his schoolwork but spends a lot of time chatting on MSN with friends from school. He owns a PlayStation 2, which he plays most days after school, alone or with his older brother and on weekends with his group of three friends. He and Trevor are best friends and have been since they were in preschool. Max has the most free time to devote to his video game playing. He is a middle class kid and lives with his brother and parents in a large home in a town just outside the city. Max's PlayStation 2 is located in a game room that was designed specifically for Max and his brother. The room is tucked away at the back of the house and contains the children's computer, television and video game console and the pool table. The room is tastefully decorated in beige and burgundy with dark wood furniture. The space is the sole domain of the boys and their friends. There is a family room with a big screen television off of the kitchen, which is used for television viewing and a formal living room with a fireplace, which is used for the parents entertaining, and typically not a space in which the boys hang out. The game room is where the boys hang out at Max's house, chatting on MSN, playing video games and shooting pool; they rarely venture into the family room and even choose to watch movies on the small television in the game room rather than on the big screen in the family room. The game room is a separate space, private and enclosed away from adult surveillance and intervention.

Zach, twelve years old, is the third member of the group of primary respondents. His opportunities to play with Trevor and Max are limited, due to complicated custody arrangements and his mother's work schedule. He lives further away in an apartment complex with his mother. He attends an alternative high school in the city. He spends several hours commuting every day. Zach owns a PlayStation 2 and of all the boys in the group, he has the largest collection of games. He has the least opportunity to engage in activities such as organized sports because his family has limited resources. The apartment is small and the play space outside is scarce. His PlayStation is a primary source of recreation; however, the time that he can devote to video games is limited due to the extra work required by the alternative curriculum and the extra travel time. Yet he finds some time to play video games everyday and is the most skilled player of the three boys. Zach's PlayStation 2 is located in the small living room in the apartment. There is a television in the living room, which Zach uses to play video games. He has some privacy because he is often home alone and he uses this time to play video games. Zach never invites the other boys to his home to play, perhaps because of the limited space.

Secondary Respondents

Ayden plays with the group occasionally but mostly he plays alone with Trevor. Max prefers not to play with Ayden so Trevor rarely invites the two together. Max accuses Ayden of being a 'cry baby' and a tattletale. Ayden likes Max and would like to hang out in the group. Ayden attends a private school but he struggles academically. He is an intelligent child but doesn't particularly like school. His parents absolutely will not allow video games in the house as they claim that Ayden is addicted. Ayden's time is the most limited, structured and regulated. He is a talented athlete and his parents take his

athletics seriously so he never misses a practice or a game. Ayden always wants to play video games when he comes over to play and it's very difficult to convince him to do anything else.

Rowan and Tucker are both eleven years old and best friends; the boys are inseparable. They live next door to each other, travel to school together, eat at each other's houses and finish each other's sentences. Rowan is a family friend of Trevor's and Tucker is Rowan's best buddy. They live in the city, their apartments next door to each other. They play primarily at Rowan's house because Rowan has a small playroom in the basement where the Nintendo system is located. The boys engage in a variety of types of play of which video game are a part. The playroom is an out of the way private space where the boys go when the weather outside is unwelcoming or when they choose to play alone together.

Wade is fourteen years old and attends a private high school in the city. He spends a couple of hours every day playing video games; usually more on weekends. He is an inconsistent student and doesn't have a close circle of friends. He is a loner, not by choice but due to a lack of social skills. He goes to the occasional party or movie but he spends most of his time home on MSN or playing video games. Wade lives in a large house in a middle-class suburb. Wade's PlayStation 2 is located in his study. The family has a large family room with a big screen television but Wade spends most of his time in the small study on the main floor. Designed for a computer and homework room it is used predominantly for MSN and video game playing.

Joshua is seventeen years old. He attends a private high school with high academic standards. He is an indifferent student unless something captures his attention

and when it does he excels. At the moment he is captivated with Japanese Anime and considers it his area of expertise. He enjoys skateboarding with his gang of friends. He is the most avid gamer of any of the respondents. He takes his gaming very seriously and critiques every aspect of the game from the aesthetics to the sound to the game play experience. Joshua lives in a big old Victorian house in the city with a television in every bedroom, the living room, basement, kitchen and family room. The only room without a television is the living room. Joshua spends most of his time in his bedroom. To reach his bedroom he opens the door at the bottom of the attic stairs, climbs the narrow steep staircase to the top of the house. He shares the top floor and a bathroom with his brother. They each have large bedrooms with funky casement windows and sloping ceilings. Joshua has his computer, Play Station, Nintendo and X-box set up in his room. His book shelves are filled with Japanese Anime and just about every inch of his walls are covered with posters. This space is definitively Joshua. He is extremely private as the signs on his door state. Rarely do adults venture the long climb up to see him and his mother sometimes phones him to come downstairs for dinner. Joshua's space might be close to an adolescent's dream space as he is practically assured of his privacy.

Ethnographic data is the foundation of this thesis. The conceptual argument emerges from observations derived from the ethnography. The combined role of parent and researcher served to create a vantage point for observation that provided a unique perspective into the social interactions occurring around the video games.

Chapter 4

Regulation of Childhood Spaces

As public space becomes privatized and the spaces of childhood move from community space to domestic space, the boundaries surrounding the spaces of childhood become redefined. Adults consider and negotiate what constitutes safe and acceptable space where children can be on their own; children seek spaces of resistance to surveillance and regulation in order to experience their own autonomous spaces. Through this process, issues such as the location of the console in domestic space, the construction of public space as unsafe, and the regulation of private space become significant.

Analysis of the Socio/Spatial Location of the Console Within Domestic Space

The location of the video game console within the home is significant in attempting to understand the place and role of video game play within the lives of the respondents, specifically in regards to social interactions and patterns of use. The digital hearth signifies the replacement by digital media of the fireside hearth as the focal point of collective engagement around which social interaction occurs in the domestic space of the living room. Nostalgic portrayals of family members gathered around the fireplace engaged in social interaction are substituted with images of families gathered around the contemporary hearth, the television. The transformation of the digital hearth continues as gaming technology evolves. Three years ago, when I began researching the ways in which video game playing affected player's sociality, the boys were playing on a Nintendo system and owned a couple of games. With the launch of PlayStation 2 in 2000,

Xbox in 2002 and Gamecube, consoles have evolved from games machines located in bedrooms to home entertainment units promoted as "sexy machines designed to look good in the living room" (Microsoft 2001).

> The design of the console itself has shifted from a computer with gaming abilities in the bedroom during the early 1980s – to a gaming machine in the mid-1980s –to an entertainment unit from the mid-1990s and now in the early 2000s, to a futuristic machine or the living room (Flynn 2003).

Consequently, questions are raised regarding the social implications of developers of consoles promoting the creation of a digital entertainment hub in the center of the house. While Sony and Microsoft are endeavoring to claim the living room as a space of digital entertainment, they are simultaneously conceptualizing the console as a digital portal to another space, thus enabling the user to escape the routine and regulation of domestic existence. This conceptualization is achieved through the ad campaigns that portray video games as enabling the player to transcend the physical domestic space entering into a dangerous and exciting space of speed, action or adventure. The tag line for PlayStation 2 is 'the third space' referring to the idea of console and television transformed into a digital hearth, a portal to cybernetic fantasies, evoking physical bodies leaving constrained domestic space to experience the freedom of cyberspace. So there is an inconsistency in the messages: by designing the console for the living room the implication is that play will occur in the heart of the home, in shared family space perhaps with other family members, and yet the marketing of the console implies the desirability of transforming or escaping the confines of domestic space.

In observing the location of the console in the homes of the participants it is evident that the location of console is significant in understanding the meaning of the virtual game space. There are differences that result from the console location within the

home. Locating the console in public living room space means that game play can be observed and therefore monitored and regulated by adults. The type of games that are played, the amount of time spent playing and the quality of social interactions of the players can all be overseen and controlled by adults when consoles are located in shared family space. The significance of this monitoring is that the virtual video game space might become less of an autonomous space for children's social interactions. If the game play is occurring within mom's earshot, disputes over who gets the controller or the incessant 'dissing' each other will quickly be dealt with by adult intervention. Having the console located in shared family space also requires that the television be shared amongst other family members. This results in the possibility of the space becoming contested space where family negotiations occur that may require adult intervention in organizing time-sharing amongst siblings. Also, adults will likely get primary access to the television, so that video game playing can only occur when adults are not using the television.

When the console is located in private play spaces of bedrooms or children's playrooms out of the direct supervision of adults, the use of the console becomes entirely different. The players have greater individual control regarding which games are played, how long they are played for and the social negotiations and interactions surrounding the game. Out of the view of adults, the players are on their own to define and create the space. Locating the console in bedrooms or children's playrooms also means that the players are safely tucked away, not disturbing the adults in the home. It avoids adults having to deal with noisy video games and gangs of boys playing. The children are not running rambunctiously through the home but are rather contained and out of the way.

Historians argue that children's leisure has been increasingly privatized and subject to adult supervision over the past half century. As public space becomes perceived as dangerous space, play moves from street space to domestic space to bedroom space. Anxiety about public space has resulted in parents equipping children's bedroom space with technologically enticing alternatives to public space (Buckingham 2000). Children have more leisure time in postmodern society but their play is both regulated and commodified, as children's engagement with digital play requires the purchase of "play things" such as video game consoles and video games. In this way, through the marketing of playthings children are introduced to the "attitudes and social relations of consumerism" (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, De Peuter 2003). So it might seem that children's play moves from a public, social activity to a private, individualized and commodified activity. This move influences the nature of social interaction. It appears that as the boundaries of childhood are being expanded through children's access to new media they are simultaneously being narrowed as market forces expropriate children's play spaces. This can be seen in the content of video games as the design of the games imposes content upon the player that may limit the autonomy and choice of the player.

The following portrayal of one of the participants experiencing public space illustrates the ways in which children are increasingly regulated and controlled both in domestic space and in public spaces.

Public Spaces

He runs as fast as he can, heart pumping like crazy. There is a shooting pain in his side. He throws his board down on the sidewalk ahead of him, running to catch up,

jumping on. Pushing off as hard as he can, not wanting to be last. He can hear them

behind him, laughing and yelling as pedestrians scramble to get out of their way. He feels

so powerful, in control, free. He wishes this could last forever, that he could always feel

this free. They skate down the street, a gang of guys. Jonah has the camera. They're

making a flash video of themselves boarding through different parts of the city. They

start off at Westmount Square; this is where they always start. In back there are some

ramps and a staircase just the right height, about five stairs. Josh goes first, he ollies off

the stairs. He lands raising his arms just enough to show he landed it and then scoops up

his board quickly to prevent any unnecessary noise. They have to be quick. They have

about 10 minutes before security comes and they are told to move on. Ten minutes is

enough time for each of them to ollie off the stairs twice. They see the security guy

coming around the corner of the building. It's a routine. He knows they're there and they

know he's not going to run so they hang out for about two more minutes before they take

off. The next stop is Place Ville Marie. The guys are carrying their boards now so as not

to make any noise. They scope out the location; this is the best place to board, lots of

space, ledges and stairs. They make a plan each of them deciding what they will do

because they really have to be fast. As Remi sails off a ledge a crowd begins to gather,

it's so cool being watched. Josh sees a security guy about half a block away. Some guards

will talk to you, even letting you finish a trick or two but not this guy so they take off to

the parking lot behind the IGA. They're just reaching the lot when Josh's cell phone

rings. It's his mom telling him he has to get to Ms W's.

Josh attends a private parochial school. A bright but somewhat sporadic student

he goes to an after-school homework program run by the infamous Ms W. Middle class

kids all over the city shudder at the utterance of her name. Ms W is a retired teacher. She runs a tight ship overseeing the homework for about 40 kids every day from 3:00 to 10:00 at night. She works out of a stark office space furnished only with long tables, file cabinets and a microwave. She specializes in tough cases. If you forget to get your agenda signed by even one of your teachers you have to drop and give her twenty sit ups or push ups. Josh gets plenty of exercise. He finds Ms W terrifying and says that he would begin to panic on the bus on the way to her office "If I wasn't such a 'manly man' I would cry which incidentally many of the boys do."

Josh hesitates; the fall air is fresh and crisp after the stale recycled air of the classroom and the school day has been long and boring. He contemplates blowing off 'Ms W' but the guys are already dispersing. Ty calls out, I have Rugby practice. Wynn has homework and he has to be home to watch his brother until his mom gets home from work. Josh is frustrated. As he walks home he tries to figure out when he can get out again. Not out to practice or tutoring but out with his friends, free.

Josh wearily pulls open the front door of the large Victorian house that is his home. It is 9:00pm and he has just arrived home from tutoring. His mom calls out, asking if he has eaten. He microwaved a pizza pocket at Ms W's. He's hungry but he's too tired to eat, he just wants to get upstairs to the privacy of his room. He replies "Mom, I still have tons of homework, I'm going upstairs to finish" "Did you get your math test back?" He decides to defer the inevitable confrontation. "No," he responds, "not yet". The house rule is 70% or over or he is grounded for the weekend. When his parents saw his last report card they went nuts. They stormed into his room, taking out the computer,

television, CD player and phone; they left his room stripped with no way to relax or communicate with his friends; they even stripped his walls of posters. In Joshua's opinion it was absolutely barbaric. He had to earn back all his stuff; he shuddered at the memory. He climbs the three flights of stairs to his attic bedroom. Tossing his backpack on the floor, he immediately checks his e-mail. Then, he collapses on his bed; grabbing the controller, he can finally relax. He chooses the character that he has created. He feels the tension in his shoulders begin to loosen as he slides into the familiar space of the game. He has superimposed his own face onto the skateboarder avatar that is his creation. He feels a sense of connection to his avatar. After all it is his invention and represents him in the space of the game. He has already beaten the game but he still likes to play it. Now that he has all the levels he has more spaces in which to skate, he is developing a style, perfecting his techniques and creating his signature tricks. He glides through the spaces of the virtual city, totally in control. He is master in this space; he begins to feel the rush as he grinds along the rails.

Conceptual Explanation of Public Space

It has been argued that the spaces of childhood have become privatized, as youth are increasingly unwelcome in public space. The trend of public space being produced as adult space is driven by two ideas: the idea that youth are a danger or unruly in public space and the idea that children are endangered in public space. These concerns about children's presence in public space are contained in Dionysian and Apollonian understandings of childhood (Jenks 1996). A Dionysian understanding of childhood views children as bad, "little devils" in need of discipline and socialization into adult

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behavior in order to become "fully human". Apollonian views emerged later and presume children to be inherently good, "little angels" who when socialized to adult behavior become corrupted. These concerns of children threatening adult hegemony in public space underlie the media generated constructions of moral panics surrounding youth gangs. The active construction of public space as unsafe and of youth as contributing to this problem stems from a history of youth studies that evolved from research surrounding delinquency and deviance (Lucas 1989). A group of boys hanging out in public space generates social concern and so Josh and his friends are continuously told to move on, unwelcome in many city spaces. They are discouraged from hanging out in malls as they are suspected of potential theft; they are banned from skate boarding in the parking lot at the risk of damaging a car or interfering with traffic; they are shooed out of parks as they are deemed too noisy and rowdy for the little kids and older people; street space is unsafe due to traffic. Even on the small side street where Josh lives he is unable to board as the neighbors complain about the noise of his board on the pavement, accusing him of causing their dogs to bark.

Previously, childhood was considered a time where youth were encouraged to move freely in public space; notions of the exploration of physical space being beneficial for youth and even necessary for development were advocated in the individualist developmentalism perspective. At the beginning of the twentieth century the idea of freedom in public space as being beneficial for children's development changed and gave way to a massive, collective anxiety about the safety of children in public space (Walkerdine 2001). These fears speak to ideas about risk and safety; the belief in dangerous space versus safe space is influential in the ways in which ideas about child

rearing have been constructed. Keeping children in separate bounded space, apart from

perceived dangers, both physical and psychological, of the adult world ensures children's

safety. The risk versus safety issue is central to the debate surrounding virtual space as

questions are raised as to the safety of children in virtual space and the role of parents in

controlling it. So, we face a dilemma, as children are deemed unsafe in both the public

space of city streets and in the virtual space of city streets in their favorite video game.

The following exert from my fieldnotes catches this no-win situation and the

inevitable struggle to balance contradictory messages.

Safe Spaces

> I am standing in the doorway caught in the cross fire as Wade's mother
> admonishes him. "I told you I don't want you going on MSN talking to
> strangers, you have absolutely no idea what kind of people are out there."
> Wade: But mom, I'm not talking to strangers, I'm talking to my friends
> from school.
> Mom: How do you know it's your friends from school? They could be
> anybody. Haven't we discussed pedophiles?
> Wade: (Wade rolls his eyes in frustration) Okay mom, so I won't MSN,
> I'm going to play video games.
> Mom: You play way too many video games, why don't you go outside and
> walk the dog, get some fresh air before bed?
> Wade: Because I don't want to go outside alone and you won't let me go
> out with my friends.
> Mom: It's 8:00 on a school night. What kinds of friends are allowed out?
> Wade: The kind with normal reasonable parents.
> Mom: Well if you improved your grades then maybe I'd think about it.
> Wade: Oh yeah right, you say that but you'll never let me out. I have
> absolutely no freedom. You complain about me playing video games but if
> I were allowed out with my friends I wouldn't be playing video games; I'd
> be out hanging out with my friends.

Wade's mother is caught between the media generated dilemma of choosing to allow

Wade to play in unsafe cyberspace where pedophiles lurk on MSN waiting to trick him

into divulging his pertinent information so that they can track him down or she can allow

him to wander the streets at night vulnerable to all kinds of trouble (she can't specifically name the danger but she has a feeling it's out there waiting) or she can allow him to play video games and risk the psychological damage that is so well documented on so many call-in talk shows. I wait; curious to see which she will choose. I know that what she really wants to say is "go read a book, preferably a classic" but she is not brave enough to suggest this to an angry fourteen year old. She eventually chooses the video game where at least his physical body is safely contained. There is a struggle inherent in this situation as the mother attempts to determine what constitutes safe space, as massive anxiety surrounds childhood generated by moral panics regarding dangers of public space as well as virtual space.

Constructions of public space as unsafe validates rules regarding the boundaries, containment and surveillance of youth; this, in turn, serves to justify the control of youth as a measure in protecting youth themselves from danger as well as protecting larger society from the dangers perceived from youth itself.

In interviews Wade insists that he is forced to forgo opportunities to hang out with friends because of restrictions imposed by the demands of school work and extra-curricular activities, but primarily due to those limits enforced by parents. Perhaps, there are not as many opportunities for social interaction as desired and the virtual space of the video game is a space in which to engage in a substitute interactive play. Video games offer an experience that is distinct from other media because they offer a hybrid between the passive narrative of television and the interactivity of playing a game. While watching television the viewer remains relatively passive. The only possibility for interactivity is in identifying with a character within the narrative, whereas within the space of the video

game the player has the possibility of managing the experience of the game play, choosing characters and navigating the space independently (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, De Peuter, 2003). The player is required to take an active role in order for the video game to work. If the player doesn't play, the game experience does not exist, whereas, in the case of television, the show will continue whether the viewer is engaged or not. While playing video games Wade may engage in an interactive social experience through his avatar. The game offers a substitute opportunity for sociality although the quality of the alternative experience is limited by the available technology and the choices imposed by the game designers. It is an irony that this use of video games may be viewed optimistically as a response to the passivity, alienation and isolation of youth in contemporary society.

Thus, children's interactions in video game space may be regarded as a response to the regulation of childhood space. Keeping children contained in safe space becomes an objective of postmodern childhood and as a result children's play spaces become privatized, individualized and commodified. Adults negotiate to determine what constitutes acceptable space for children's autonomous play as children seek their own spaces of sociality. In order to understand children's use of video games within these spaces of sociality, these experiences can be categorized as collective group experiences and/or individual experiences.

Chapter 5

Collective Experiences of Childhood Spaces

When the video game play constitutes a shared social experience, the respondents playing the video games together experience some aspects of the game collectively. The following discussion is based largely on observations about the ways in which the group used the space: as a space of resistance, as continuous space, as secret shared space and as social space in which bonding and interactions occur.

Video Games as Resistance

Adults rarely play video games with children and for the children that I spoke to this was part of the appeal of video games. In a childhood situation where adults attempt to organize much of children's free time, directing them to pursue worthwhile activities, the video game space offers a possibility for children to create their own separate spaces of exploration and social interaction. Virtual game space presents an unregulated space in which children are not directed by adults, as they are in other organized play spaces such as sports leagues. In the space of the video game the child can choose who he wants to be, negotiating for positions with his peers. When Ayden plays soccer the coach tells him which position he will play, whereas when he plays FIFA (a soccer video game) with his friends he gets to bargain, attempting to work out his own position on the team. In a competitive postmodern childhood many children experience pressure from parents to 'make the team'; however, while playing NHL video game every kid makes the team. In this space anybody can get a turn to be a star.

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In virtual game space children can experiment with behavior that may be deemed unacceptable or inappropriate in everyday life. In the game *Grand Theft Auto* the player assumes the role of a car thief, driving through the city stealing cars. While watching the boys play the game I noticed that they were not going on missions, they were not even actually playing the game. Through interviews I discovered that for these boys the appeal of *Grand Theft Auto* was not in playing the game but rather in hanging out in the space of the game. They enjoyed driving around in the virtual city, discovering new places listening to music on the car radio. Part of the appeal was that in the virtual city they were able to go to places, such as dance bars, that would be off-limits in the everyday space of their lives as thirteen year olds. They were able to voyeuristically glimpse an off limits adult world. This liberty in the virtual city may generate a feeling of freedom.

The idea that the virtual space of the video game presents a utopian ideal of an 'other' space of resistance to adult control only bounded by children's imaginations as presented by McNamme (2000) is beginning to be questioned. The older children that I interviewed expressed frustrations at the limitations of the virtual video game space, expressing a desire to have more choices. Joshua and his friends are aware that there are commercial interests in game development and express resentment at the possibility of being exploited by game companies who are attempting to maximize profits. There is the perennial debate as to whether video games are created to appeal to the taste of consumers or whether the designers of games are actually active in creating tastes for particular genres of game. Video game designer Celia Pearce describes the most devoted and regular consumers of video games as "the worlds most innocent and maligned victim of demographic opportunism, the ever vulnerable, ever-receptive, ever predictable

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adolescent male" (Pearce; 210). Although the boys express an awareness that some of the game content is violent, misogynist or racist these factors don't appear to influence whether or not they choose to play the games. They appear to choose their games based on a different set of criteria, primarily the choices that the player is able to make within the game, which speaks to the control or the power of the player to shape the play experience within the space of the game. This is something that all the boys mention as of primary importance in their choice of game. While simultaneously expressing resentment at the possibility of being exploited and manipulated by corporate gaming interests the boys are protective of those same interests.

While engaging in a session of participant observation with Joshua and his friends I was first interrogated by the boys as to what my interest in gaming was. Before allowing me to watch them play I was made to reassure the boys that I was not writing specifically on violence in video games and one boy in particular kept suspiciously demanding to know if I intended to sue video game producers because he "didn't want them to stop making good games." This protective attitude towards within the gaming community was quite common as the avid players were allowed to criticize producers of video games but outsiders were not.

Both the conditions that adults don't condone video games and that there is moral panic surrounding the content of the games combine to create an appealing space of resistance. The basis upon which the space of the game can serve as an autonomous space of social interaction is its separateness from sanctioned childhood spaces of adult regulation and surveillance.

Some understandings of childhood spaces are shared as the respondents experience the space of the video game as a continuous space as opposed to understanding it as a separate 'other' space that is experienced in simultaneity with the players embodied space.

Continuous Versus Simultaneous Space

As a parent and as a researcher, I, like others of my generation, have experienced a primary socialization with regards to media culture that is very different from the experience of the children that I study. My conceptions surrounding the virtual space of the video game are based upon my own media socialization. When I enter a virtual game space I have a distinct sense of changing spaces. I am here sipping tea and reading my newspaper and then I consciously choose to leave the 'real' space of my office and enter the 'other' space of the game. Of course, I don't physically leave the office but I choose to imagine myself in an other virtual space of the game. I bring my self into the game world, a space I envision as one of enjoyment, imagination and playful possibility. According to Foucault's model of the heterotopia as presented in his article 'Of Other Spaces' I experience both spaces simultaneously. I bring my life experiences and perceptions of the world into the virtual space where I am able to enact the internal experiences of my dreams, and conversely my experiences in the space of the game serve to shape the ways in which I view the world. In the same way, a powerful work of art, literature or film might alter the ways in which I understand the world or a particular issue.

Foucault suggests, "the present epoch will perhaps above all be the epoch of space" (Foucault 1967). Not the space of linear progression but rather the space of simultaneity and juxtaposition. It might be suggested that that this epoch is ultimately experienced in the virtual space of the video game as the player interacts concurrently in the hyperreal game space and the physical space.

For many academics, the 1990's have been the decade of spatiality (Curry 1999). There has been a rethinking of ideas about spatiality as new technologies are encountered, for instance, the ways in which we generate private spaces in the midst of public ones. When Wade is safe at home, his body is immobile, contained, surveyed, and yet he is actively engaged and experiencing the virtual pleasures of *Liberty City* (the city in the video game *Grand Theft Auto*). For de Certeau (1984) narrative involves the transformation of place into space. Places become meaningful only when acted upon. So, the virtual *Liberty City* becomes a space of childhood interaction as Wade experiences it. Spaces are the locations of narrative events and so in this way as the narrative unfolds and Wade makes choices and takes action within the game a transformation occurs. Another space of childhood interaction is created, as much a space of sociality as any other space in which children interact. There is a pervasive notion that the virtual space of the video game is not a legitimate space and that the social interaction that occurs within the space is not real and therefore doesn't count. Yet, because we act in this place, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes a space, the interaction occurring in it as valid as any interaction occurring in any space. The experiences shape thoughts, perceptions and ideas, as do any other experiences in any other spaces.

The notion of virtual play space as an 'other space' perhaps not unique from, but certainly separate from the childhood play spaces of parks or playgrounds, seems so intuitively clear to me to me and yet I struggle to convey the idea in my interviews and in the writing of the thesis. I search through the fieldnotes from the interviews attempting in vain to find one lucid example that will impart a comprehensible portrayal of the virtual video game space as a separate play space. The transcribed sections of the interviews that address this idea are awkward and confusing. When I ask my respondents questions, which presuppose the virtual play space as an 'other' space, separate from the childhood play spaces of parks, schoolyards or playrooms, they become confused.

'Other' Spaces

Shanly: How is the space of the video game different from other spaces where you might play?
Wade: What do you mean?
Shanly: For example, when you hang out with a group of friends skateboarding in Tony Hawk the video game how is the social interaction different from when you skateboard in the school yard?
Wade: Well it's not really different it's just easier to talk when you're all together around the game but the way we are isn't different.
Shanly: But it's a different type of space.
Wade: What do you mean?
Shanly: Do you think of the virtual game space as another type of space?
Wade: What do you mean other space? Is there another space?
Shanly: No, there's no other space that you don't know about, I just mean that some people think of the virtual space as a separate space.
Wade: Separate from what?
Shanly: Separate from where you are physically at the moment that you are playing in the virtual space of the game.
(He looks at me as if I'm quite dense)
Wade: But you're in the same space, you're in the room playing your game.

No matter how many ways and no matter how many children I have this conversation with, we both end up confused. I have yet to find a way to articulate this

concept clearly. I am beginning to understand that these children have experienced their primary socialization in an environment where cyberspace and virtual space has always been present. They don't conceive of a world that doesn't include play spaces that are virtual. Virtuality is a play space as much as the park or the playroom, the theatre or the amusement park. My concept of the virtual space is so different from that of the youth I research. I wonder if, perhaps, a deep understanding of what is occurring within the virtual game space, and all the implications in regard to social relationships surrounding the space, might require a researcher who has been socialized in a media environment that has always included spaces of virtuality. Yet, perhaps it is the disparity of our perspectives that has made the difference apparent and has inspired the questions that bring our differing perspectives to light. Hence, the respondents have a different understanding of the virtual game space than I do as a result of having being socialized into a media environment in which virtual space has been a component for as long as they can remember. The understanding of the video game space as a continuous space, similar to many spaces of social interaction opposes the idea of the video game space as being an 'other' space. Foucault's definition of a space of heterotopia requires that the space be unreal and yet exist simultaneously in reality. The respondents don't perceive their embodied space as players as being separate from the space in which they engage in social interactions as avatars. These two views of the video game space: as continuous and as a heterotopia provide interesting opposing perspectives in the understanding of video game space.

The space of the game might provide play spaces that are similar to other spaces in which children play. Spaces of children's autonomous social interaction can be places that children create to escape the regulation and surveillance imposed by adults.

Secret Spaces of Childhood

They crouch quietly, huddled close together, scarcely daring to breathe, trying not to move a muscle. The clouds are low and gray overhead. They have been waiting impatiently for what seems like hours. This is a secret place. Safe from prying eyes, it is a place they come to in order to escape. It's a special place that nobody knows about, they discovered it themselves last fall and made it their own. In the winter they build secure fortress walls of snow with which to enclose their space, and now in the spring it's cool and dark where the high grass surrounds them and the wild bushes make a roof above their heads. From this vantage point they can watch the comings and goings in the alleyway that runs behind the apartment building where they live, the objects of their observations none the wiser. It's always been like this for as long as Rowan can remember. He and Tucker are the only eleven-year-old boys living on the alley so they have to stick together against all those girls. They have been waiting for the girls to come out and play so they can spy on them but they have waited in vain and now big wet raindrops are starting to fall. Tucker and Rowan abandon the 'secret place' and run to get their 'portable forts'. They use the portable forts when the rain gets heavy. The portable forts consist of pieces of plywood that they have found and nailed to long sticks. They hold them over their heads running through the rain chasing each other up and down the alley, splashing through the mud, laughing until Rowan's mother comes out and calls

them inside. She hands them towels to dry themselves off and sends them down to the basement to play.

The apartments are rows of old attached duplexes and that run up and down the tree lined streets. Behind the apartments run alleyways, no longer used by traffic; they are the play spaces of the neighborhood children. This neighborhood has been gentrified and is now over run by young middle class families. Part of the appeal lies in the circumstance that parents can survey the back alleyways from the kitchen windows of the apartments. They can let the kids play freely secure in the knowledge that they can glance out the back window periodically and that other parents will do the same. Rowan and Tucker have found a secret place, away from watching eyes, at the end of the alleyway where tall grass and weeds run rampant and wild bushes create canopies the perfect size for roofs.

Rowan and Tucker sit in the tiny playroom that Rowan's father has built in the still unfinished basement. It is a work in progress meant to keep Rowan and his friends and their noisy television and computer games safely out of earshot of the adults. The apartment is small and Rowan's dad works from home so if Rowan wants to play inside, down to the basement he goes. The room is surprisingly bright, painted white with a colorful Picasso poster on the wall, bright blue IKEA sofa and a standing lamp from which two Spiderman action figures are perilously dangling. The focal point of the room is the television and Rowan and Tucker are sitting on the floor in front of it, a bowl of carrot sticks between them. I am sitting on the couch, here to interview the boys about video games. They are excited at the prospect; eager to have the undivided attention of an adult who values their opinions, who regards them as experts on playing video games.

They start off by showing me the Nintendo system and their selection of video games.

They begin to describe their favorite game, *Pikmin*.

> Tucker: There's this guy from a planet and his name is Omar. Before he
> left on this journey he went to his wife who made him this soup with these
> carrots and when he left there was this asteroid who hit his ship and he
> lands down on this toxic planet and he finds a carrot and it's red and it's a
> carrot. He has oxygen for thirty days and so he has thirty days to recover
> all the parts of his ship so that he can return back home and so every day
> you finish you get time to picnic so you bring him to these onions and they
> have feet and there are these flowers and the Pikmin will destroy the
> flower so you actually have thirty days...
> Rowan: (Impatiently) So we play now?
> *So they begin to play the game*
> Shanly: What do you like about the game?
> Rowan: It's an adventure but there is action too.
> Tucker: We like to search for the parts of the ship

The planet in the game *Pikmin* acts as a play space for the boys when they are unable to play outside. Their playful interaction on the virtual planet appears to be similar to their play in their secret hideout. In fact at times they have imagined the secret place as a space ship perhaps inspired from their play in the video game. The boys say that they play video games about three days a week, not all day long, but for a couple of hours and usually on weekends. Although they describe themselves as 'playing a lot of video games' when they described the ways in which they spend their time video games are one of many activities in which they engage. I ask them if they play at the park and they respond that they don't usually because the park is full of 'old people having parties and babies'. The street in front of the apartments is too busy with traffic and so they prefer to play in the alleyway behind the apartments where they can run freely and where they can hide in their secret place and spy. The boys report that they prefer to play outside in the alleyway when the weather allows but in the winter or when it is very rainy or in the summer when it is hot and they are bored they play video games. I ask them to describe

their idea of a perfect way to spend their weekend. They are enthusiastic about this question and consider their answers very carefully.

> Tucker: Go to LaRonde, do bike, buy stuff...
> Shanly: What kind of stuff?
> Tucker: Sponge Bob
> Shanly: I have Sponge Bob pajamas. Would you bike around your neighborhood?
> Tucker: No it's too busy. I would go on the mountain. I would play Nintendo.
> Shanly: What games would you play?
> Tucker: *Tony Hawk, NHL*...Can I say Game Cube? (*Games that can be played on a Game Cube Console*)
> Shanly: Hey, it's your weekend
> Tucker: *Hits 2002, Smash Blast* and I would play sports
> Shanly: What sports?
> Tucker: Hockey, soccer
> Shanly: Where do you play hockey?
> Tucker: On ice
> Shanly: Do you ever play hockey on the street?
> Tucker: No
> Shanly: Where do you play soccer?
> Tucker: Behind the school, in the schoolyard... and do skateboard.
> Shanly: Anything else?
> Tucker: No...yeah, I'd do Lego

And so the interview goes on with Tucker describing a variety of activities, which he enjoys engaging in. This was typical of the boys that I interviewed; although they engaged in a wide variety of activities a key way in which they described themselves was 'gamer'. It's interesting to think about why the respondent's consider themselves 'gamers' despite the fact that they don't privilege gaming over other activities they might engage in. Video game space is one among several play spaces the boys occupy, and playing the game with friends is one among several social activities the boys engage in.

Some research suggests that the moral panic concerning gaming is unfounded and that children who play video games don't give up other interests but rather incorporate video game play into their leisure time activities. Findings also show that video game

playing does not lead to social isolation but rather is an activity that children prefer to do with peers (Fromme 2003). My field research supports these findings as most of the children that I spoke to said that given a choice they would prefer to play video games with friends rather than alone. However, they would still choose to play video games if they were alone because the interactive nature of the games makes them appealing. Despite the findings that video games are largely a shared social experience for children, one of a variety of childhood play spaces negative connotations regarding children playing video games remain. In the typical parents view, there is a division between boys who play video games and boys who don't, suggesting that boys who do are missing out on other possible culturally 'superior activities'. If a choice is made to spend time playing video games a choice is made not to spend time doing something else, another perhaps culturally or intellectually enriching activity such as reading or playing outside. A constant theme running throughout this thesis is the notion of public space as off-limits and yet there remains a lingering pervasive notion that children's playing freely outside is a good thing, necessary for proper social and emotional development. Despite the inaccessibility of free play space for many children, due to notions of public space as unsafe or the lack of opportunity, this childhood experience of free outside play is an appealing nostalgic notion of the best things about childhood. In a postmodern childhood it may be deemed risky to tell children to go play outside and as playing video games is not deemed a culturally beneficial pastime for children it's not appropriate to say "just go play in the virtual woods, take your avatar out and go on a quest". Instead, childhood as much as possible is filled with organized activities, often chosen with an eye towards enhancing the child's future career opportunities.

Using McNamee's analogy that the space of the game provides an 'other space' in which children can interact freely away from the surveillance and restrictions imposed by adults, it might be suggested that at times children use the spaces created in video games as 'secret spaces' in the same ways that forts and tree houses are used as secret spaces. In Trevor's' room there is a closet under the eaves between two of the rooms and when he was younger he and his friends would bring blankets and flash lights and toy soldiers and spend hours tucked away in that little space, sometimes pretending to be in a spaceship or a submarine or a cave. Other times he and his friends might go camping in the forest or be Bedouins in the desert, spending hours in tents which they had created by draping chairs and tables with blankets into which they would then drag blankets, pillows and armies of stuffed animals. These are both private places away from adult scrutiny, and are places of imagination. In characterizing the appeal of secret childhood spaces and virtual game spaces there are similarities. Both spaces are concealed, away from adult surveillance. They are both spaces into which one might bring a friend and talk or spaces where a child might slip off alone escaping from daily demands; they are places in which to fantasize and dream, imagining oneself far away in an 'other' imaginary space. They are also places where one might engage in social interaction with peers, strengthening. social relationships.

Another way in which the respondents use the space of the video game is to create a collective space of social interaction in which they are able to engage in autonomous social interaction away from the regulation and surveillance of the social spaces that are supervised by adults. The video game space is unique from the organized social spaces of

swim team and hockey practice because in the video game space the boys make the rules negotiate their positions within the group.

Video Game as Social Space

Trevor continues to use the games as a social tool, particularly as a way to break the ice in new or awkward social situations. An example of this occurred last summer as three of Trevor's friends came over to play video games. The boys had attended elementary school together in grade 6 and met to play video games together every chance they got. This was Trevor's way of forming bonds with the local kids as he had transferred from School in the city to the local public elementary school. This might have been a difficult social transition but Trevor started inviting a couple of guys over to play video games on weekends right away, utilizing the same strategy that had worked so well when he had first started at the City School. He explains that inviting a guy over to play the latest video game is easy because the guy is already excited to try the new game; chances are he's not going to say no. Once he gets to your house you don't have to find something to do, the activity is prearranged, therefore eliminating the awkwardness of finding out that you have nothing in common. You're starting with something in common, the game. Trevor goes on to explain that the game eliminates the need to make conversation because you begin by playing the game.

I witnessed how this worked last summer. The three friends had graduated from elementary school together and were each attending a different high school in the fall. Zach had spent the summer away at camp, Max had gone away to camp in another province and Trevor had spent the summer at the cottage. They hadn't spoken since the last day of school and although Trevor had been eager to invite them over to play he was

nervous about calling them, uncertain as to whether the friendship would survive as they all went off to different schools in different parts of the city. When Zach arrived I could tell he was also nervous but happy to have been invited. What struck me as odd was that as soon as the door opened Zach began talking about the new video game that he had brought with him. Neither boy asked how the other had spent their summer. They immediately walked to the PlayStation 2 and Zach began to show Trevor the games that he has brought.

> Zach: What do you want to play?
> Trevor: 'Onimusha' looks good
> *They set up the game and Zach starts explaining the game to Trevor*
> Zach: You get these orbs, you get secret powers and the orbs are magic
> Trevor: Cool
> Zach: You get souls and you can suck the souls from them. This is the tornado and this is the ice one. Now this one is the strongest magic. Watch it, watch the thunderstorm it has really good graphics – pouf, pouf, pouf that's the thunderstorm. Watch this, it'll turn. Pretty cool, eh?
> Trevor: Wow, he's flying through the air
> *And so the conversation continues, entirely about the game for about an hour, as if they had last seen each other yesterday and not several weeks ago and as if they weren't wondering how their friendship would survive the coming changes that high school would bring. I don't hear the door open as Max walks in.*
> Max: Gee, you lazy Asses are playing video games.
> Trevor: Hey, Max
> Zach: We're playing 'Onimusha'; it's new, amazing graphics. Check it out.
> *And so they continue playing. An hour later the conversation begins to turn away from the game.*

Zach: Where are you going to high school?
Trevor: Names a private school in the city. Are you going to....?
Zach: Yeah
Trevor: Are you excited?
Zach: No, I don't want to go.
Trevor: Well, where do you want to go?
Zach: Where ever my friends are going – public school. Where's 'Need for Speed'?
Trevor: Could be upstairs.
Max: Why do you guys have to go to school in the city? Why can't you just stick with me?
Trevor: Pigs!
Zach: Where do you see pigs?
Trevor: Who's the guy you're shooting?
Max: Help me man! How do you kill that thing?
Trevor: Press circle.

It is evident that the boys are concerned about being separated and going off to different schools. And so the game continues on, as they create a space of social intimacy of their own, using the game to escape into when the conversation touches upon topics that may be difficult to discuss. The space that they create together exemplifies an unregulated space of childhood in which the boys autonomously form a relationship. They awkwardly attempt to figure out how close they choose to become, as there is no adult to dictate their position within the group, as is the case in other supervised childhood spaces. Sometimes the interaction in the game inspires reflective conversations that are surprising in their depth.

Zach: Sorry if we're not as good as you
Trevor: After this one or if you restart again I'll make you do something really cool. Don't hold back, don't hold back awww that would have been really nice.
Zach: I'm coming for you
Max: That's not the same guy
Trevor: You know you get 15 points for superman (*They are playing a bike game and Superman is the name of a trick*) super charge
Zach: I'm right in back of you
Trevor: No, it's the other guy who nailed you

Zach: I'm gonna annihilate you. Come on what's wrong with you? Why aren't you laughing? Max is laughing.
Trevor: That's so dumb. It's not about nailing the guy. Zach is like "I'm going to nail the guy, watch this"
Zach: Okay then do your special little thing
Trevor: That's all you care about.
Zach: I care about myself; I care about my PS2 I care about lots of stuff. What do you care about?
Trevor: I don't know what I care about
Zach: I care about my.... I don't know. What's wrong with you? What's bugging you? You're not laughing today. You know that I was just joking around.

The boys move in and out of the virtual game space; this excerpt from fieldnotes demonstrates the ways in which the boys recognized from Trevor's actions in the space of the game that something was bothering him. They are concerned about his mood. The boys use the space of the game as a conversational tool. They bring to the game their concerns or problems from school or the outside world. The game becomes a place to act out, getting lost in the intensity of the emotions that the player is experiencing during the course of the play, but it is also a social tool the boys use to bring up issues that are bothering them. They might raise concerns about school –throwing out problems or concerns and then withdrawing into the space of the game when the conversation becomes too intense or too intimate. The conversation becomes disjointed as an intricate dance ensues as they raise a topic of concern and retreat back into the game space as it becomes uncomfortable. At the start of the play the conversation is very superficial and then as the hours of game play progress the boys throw out topics such as school or friends or home life, exploring issues of concern the game providing a backdrop of safe space which they can choose to retreat into.

Material and Game Space Interface

In reviewing my fieldnotes I had a sense that the interaction occurring in the physical space of the room was linked to the interaction in the virtual space of the game. While playing some games the guys encouraged each other, offering help and advice but at times the interchange could turn pretty adversarial. I asked Trevor what caused the differences in player interaction. He responded that it is related to the degree of stress that the players are experiencing in the game space. He explained the differences in the social interactions between himself and his friend when they play Grand Theft Auto in Liberty City and when they play Grand Theft Auto in Vice City.

Game Description

Grand Theft Auto III takes place in Liberty City, which is a gritty, corrupt, crime ridden, fictional city. You as the player are a small time crook who gets set up by his girl friend during a robbery. You escape from the police, eventually getting involved with the Mafia and engaging in a series of drug deals, thefts and hits, which constitute the missions in the game. You must accomplish the missions while avoiding the numerous rival gangs who make up your enemies in the game.

Vice City was released after *GTA III* but is a prequel set in 1986. *Grand Theft Auto Vice City* is set in a fictional city very much resembling Miami in the eighties. You as the player are Tommy Vercetti and you have just served 15 years in prison for the mob. You are sent on a drug mission in Vice City which goes sour and you have to find out who betrayed you before the mob finds you. As you are attempting to accomplish missions and acquire wealth you have to avoid getting involved in a turf war between the Cubans and the Jamaicans, not to mention the biker gang. The game uses humor and

popular culture references from the '80's and is reminiscent of the popular television show of the time *Miami Vice.* Some of the compelling features of the game, mentioned by the respondents, are the degree to which the game feels real and the freedom of choice and movement in the game.

The game is designed as a single player game; however, it is often played in groups. Trevor explains that although there is only one main character in the game, whom the player assumes during game play; the boys take turns with the avatar cooperating in order to move through the levels, acquiring wealth and accomplishing missions with the goal of beating the game. Despite this cooperation there is sometimes conflict in the players out-of-game interactions. Trevor discusses how the two versions of the game evoke different responses in the players and how this shapes the social interaction between the players.

> Until you beat the game there is pressure and the exchange can get pretty intense. Once you beat the game, like we beat Vice City, we can just hang out. Like in Vice City we own a car dealership so we can just take a car, crash through the window and drive it into the ocean. Or we can take a car and rig it with a bomb and just detonate it on the highway. Or you can take a big truck that transports cars near the shipyard in the industrial area of town and watch the cars drive off the ramp. One time this cop car went off the bridge right into the ocean. Max has cheats so you can use cheats so like if you wanted you could just go rob a hardware store shoot the guy in the head, take the money and then use a cheat so the cops won't even chase you. In Vice City you are more respected in the society so you don't have any bosses you are own boss. You have houses all over the city. It's just less pressure. In Liberty City there are three Islands and a lot more gangs it's a lot more stressful, because if you do work for one gang you are automatically enemies with every other gang. You always feel like you're in danger where ever you are you can just be stopped at a light (in a car at a stop light) and a rival gang member can walk by drag you out of the car and beat you up, maybe even kill you. You are always doing work for one gang or another, its a viscous circle, and in the end you're gonna end up in the center of it with everybody out to get to you. In Vice City you can be more relaxed. There's only two gangs and we've kind of earned our place in the community. In GTA it's a one-player game so we

take turns with the controller trying to help each other accomplish the goals. But we can get pretty mad and dis each other like if I know that he makes a bad decision or like if he's in a race and just quits for no reason then I'm gonna dis him. We get a lot more intense in Liberty City just cause there's so much pressure, you're always on edge but in Vice City it's more relaxed. We've beaten the game so we can just drive around hanging out listening to music doing funny stuff. And Vice City's really beautiful, the graphics are really nice but like Liberty City is all dirty and ugly and dangerous. In a two player game you can get pissed at each other cause the competition gets intense. (Trevor)

From Trevor's description it is evident that the design and subject matter contained in the game influence the social interactions occurring between the players. In *Vice City* the boys can relax and fool around enjoying the play experience whereas in *Liberty City* the boys have not yet mastered the space of the game therefore the experience is stressful. So why would they choose to play in *Liberty City* at all? Max explains that part of the play appeal is in the frustration. The game elicits the boys complete and undivided concentration as they attempt to overcome the challenges required to beat the game. This is one aspect of what makes the game engrossing. The boys collaborate in order to beat the game, negotiating who gets the controller and in doing so engage in the kind of give and take and autonomous problem solving that might occur in other unregulated childhood play, as is portrayed in this excerpt from fieldnotes in which they boys are negotiating control of the controller.

> *Max is driving a tank through the streets of a city in Grand Theft Auto*
> Zach: Now you have the FBI
> Trevor: Let's check your watch
> Max: I still have six minutes
> Zach: I'm next 'cause I called it
> Trevor: Change the station this music is really bad. Want me to take the cops off you 'cause I left you with cops?
> Max: Yeah
> Trevor: Want me to show you? It's right beside you
> Zach: Why do you want this big ugly truck?
> Max: Because it's the only truck around

Zach: Go in the water. Go in the water.
Trevor: You died
Max: I don't care. Can I get extra time?
Zach: why?
Max: 'Cause I'm not doing anything it's not my fault I die all the time.
Zach: Well Trevor told you that you'd die if you went in the water
Max: But you told me to do it!
Trevor: You have four minutes
Max: Six minutes
Trevor: Okay

This is the type of interaction that occurs when kids play without adult intervention.

There is no adult to tell them how much time is left in the game, who plays which

position in the game, what the rules are and what constitutes fair play. They have to

negotiate the game play themselves determining who gets the controller and for how

long. It might not always be fair or nice but it could be argued that negotiating ones own

place in the group is a valid part of discovering who you are and who you want to

become. Trying out different means of getting the controller through hounding,

persuasion or charm and watching the consequences offers information about what works

in the group and what doesn't. A particular type of socialization occurs around video

game play and as cultural critic of virtual media Allucquere Rosanne Stone (1996)

observed "it is entirely possible that computer-based games will turn out to be the major

unacknowledged source of socialization and education in industrialized societies before

the 1990's have run their course." (Stone; 27) It might be suggested that her prediction

has transpired as children increasingly spend time interacting through computer and

video games. However, the ethnography for this thesis reveals that the focus of

socialization, rather than being by the messages inherent in the game as might have been

expected, is that the players are socialized through the game as the appeal of game play

appears to lie in the opportunity to interact in unregulated play space which the children

describe as 'free'. Engaging in unrestricted interaction with peers would seem to be a primary appeal of video games. Video games provide one of a variety of opportunities for children to play with friends in private space. Furthermore, as the postmodern childhood movement towards the privatization of space and the regulation and surveillance of youth occurs, the virtual space of video games provides an accessible space of social interaction and autonomous imaginative play.

Children's Use of Video Game Space

The children interviewed prefer to play outside with friends rather than play video games indoors. A study on the *Video Game Culture: Leisure and Play Preferences of B.C. Teens* confirms that the most popular pastimes for youth are social and physical activities and when youth do choose to play video games they prefer to do it with friends. This is also the case with the use of computer games as was concluded by Holloway and Valentine (2003) who suggested that children's use of computer games was very much seasonally determined, with children choosing to engage in game play when they were unable to go outside because it was late at night or the weather did not allow. Concerns are expressed that children's use of technology is displacing the time that children previously spent outdoors engaging in physical activities and interacting with the community. The conjectural result is a generation of children who are physically unfit and disconnected to community, unable to develop friendships with neighborhood children or engage in the imaginative outdoor play experienced by preceding generations. Holloway and Valentine's findings oppose these concerns, suggesting that children's use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICU's) didn't subtract from time that they would otherwise be devoting to outdoor play or even other indoor activities such as

home work or reading but rather cut into time spent watching television or occurred at times where the children suggested that they would otherwise be doing nothing, slipped in between other activities, for instance in the empty twenty minutes between the time homework is finished and dinner is ready. It was found that rather than isolating children ICU's were a common link around which friendships could be formed (Holloway and Valentine 2003).

In examining the social dimensions of play, researchers have found that there are two types of 'heavy gamers'. For one group, gaming was a social activity as friendships were formed around and through the gaming culture; and for the other gamers; the game was a way to spend time when friends were unavailable (Kline and Botterill 2001). This is similar to the ways in which game consoles are used, as is exemplified by the friendship groups, which form around video game playing with the respondents in this thesis. For Zach, Max and Trevor the console is a shared activity that allows them to engage in social interaction with other kids. For Josh it's an opportunity to express identity and individuality as he defines himself to peers through his selection of genre; for Tucker and Rowan, it's an alternative play space where they might engage in imaginative play as they might in any other outdoor play space. In Wade's case, the game becomes a way to kill time when he is unable to hang out with friends. One commonality amongst the respondents was that they all used the video game play as a kind of 'down time'. Many of the kids I interviewed engage in many activities as was suggested by the model of postmodern childhood as was described by Zinnecker (2001). The highly regulated, stressful, postmodern childhood schedule allows very little time for unproductive activities. There are demands for children to perform in school, and after school to

perform in organized activities; the expectations of some adults that children perform as mini-adults can position the virtual play space of the video game as an appealing space in which to retreat. The kids used the video game as a space in which to unwind after a stressful day, a space in which they could become immersed in an effort to forget the problems and pressures of everyday life. In response to the allegation that video games cause children to be sedentary, I would argue that at times this might be part of the appeal. When the children were physically exhausted from a week of organized activities and sports the virtual space of the video game provided an opportunity to play with friends while remaining physically immobile.

Chapter 6

Individual Experiences of Childhood Spaces

However, even in this small group of respondents it is evident that, although much of the game playing experience is shared; they each have their own purposes for playing video games. Thus, while the autonomy can be collective, players' motivations and responses can be individual.

The Appeal of Video Game Space

At the inception, an objective for this thesis was the examination of the social interaction occurring within and around the virtual space of video games. During the course of the ethnography it became evident that the social interaction that was a consequence of game play was often linked to the larger social situations of the children that I was studying. The strength of ethnography is that it enables the researcher to be aware of the broader context within which the respondents operate. The interviews and participant observation revealed that the regulation and control of postmodern childhood had influenced how, when and why the participants chose to play video games.

Childhood has been defined not as a space but as a set of restrictions defined as what one cannot do or be.

> 'Childhood' is thus a shifting relational term, whose meaning is defined primarily through its opposition to another shifting term 'adulthood'. Yet even where the respective roles of children and adults are defined in law, there is considerable uncertainty and inconsistency. Thus, the age at which childhood legally ends is defined primarily (and crucially) in terms of children's *exclusion* from practices which are defined as properly 'adult', most obviously, paid employment, sex, drinking alcohol and voting. (Buckingham 2000)

All of the participants are limited in the time that they are able to devote to game play by particular restrictions. Part of the appeal of game play might lie in resisting or evading adult imposed restrictions. Trevor's free time is restricted by the demands imposed by his academic requirements: the private school he goes to requires hours of homework; this, combined with math tutoring, art lessons, swim team and ski team, leaves him with very little free time. He lives in a small town so he has to make special arrangements to get together with friends. For Trevor, video gaming is a purely social experience; it's a way to connect with other guys his age. Trevor is a unique child; an individualist gifted both artistically and academically. He has difficulty finding children his own age who share his interests. As he describes it "video games are a way to connect, it's something that you can do with anyone no matter what. Like with Max, we're different people, we like to do different things but we're both gamers." I ask Trevor why he never plays alone – ever – but he and Max seem to play video games continuously for hours at a time. Trevor responds, "I have better things to do. Max is really good and I'm not. I don't want to spend the time getting good. I'd rather spend my free time reading, working on my book (Trevor is writing a book) and my art. With Max it's a way to connect, a way to hang out."

For Trevor, the virtual space of the video game is a space in which he can connect with kids his own age, relax and hang out: it's a social space. He obviously has no desire to devote the amount of time to the game that would be required in order to become a very proficient gamer because, for Trevor, playing video games is less about the game play and more about the social interaction and personal connections that he is able to form within the space of the game. The video game is a social tool; also, the virtual space

of the game is a space in which to build relationships and bond with other kids in ways he might not have the time or opportunity for in other spaces of socialization such as lunchroom or school.

The quality of social interaction that occurs during sports practices and organized activities seems to appear superficial to the boys. It is confined to brief periods of socialization that are wedged in between activities. They might trade a few minutes of conversation in the locker room while getting ready for practice but the exchange is public and most of the interaction is surveyed by adults, either by parents or coaches. From the perspective of the boys, the space of the video game offers an unregulated space where sociality is unsupervised and free from adult intervention.

Max has the most free time, and yet his choices of recreational activities are also limited. He lives in a small town and going to play with friends requires a lift from his mother or long walk. He occasionally plays with friends after school but typically he comes home and chats on MSN, listens to music and plays video games.

Zach spends significantly more time in the virtual space of the video game than either Trevor or Max. Zach's free time is limited due to a long commute into the city to an alternative school. His school friends live in the city so he hangs out with Trevor and Max when he can. His parents share custody; therefore, he spends alternate weekend at his dad's apartment which is in the city but not near his school. He complains that there are no friends his own age to hang out with when he is at his dad's. When he's with his dad he spends much of his time watching television or playing video games; he says this is because there is nothing else to do. Zach is predominantly at his mom's apartment but he complains that he has no friends nearby and that there is no place to play outside. The

building is located on a busy highway with no green space. Zach spends much of what free time he has playing video games and, when he has the opportunity to play with Max and Trevor, he is eager to show off his skills. The time that he spends with Max and Trevor is special to him and he is very excited when they get together. He takes the game seriously and becomes frustrated when Max and Trevor fool around.

For Ayden the social space of the game is representative of the social space he feels excluded from. Perhaps if he were able to access this space it would no longer hold the same mysterious appeal for him. He is excluded from the group of boys whom he wants to be friends with because from his perspective they are 'gamers' and he is not but he is further excluded from the larger culture of media that gaming is a part of. A significant amount of conversation at school revolves around video games; what's new, what's good, what's not so good, who's playing what game. As Trevor is fond of recounting, every boy in his class owns a console and I would imagine in Ayden's also. What is significant about this is that it bothers Ayden. Trevor is not very interested in team sports and doesn't follow them so he doesn't participate in conversations surrounding sports and this is his choice; he is not banned from participating in or watching team sports, and the fact that he doesn't participate in the general conversation about sports doesn't bother him. However, Ayden is forbidden to play video games and this bothers him to the degree that he has lied about owning a console. The interesting aspect of this is that for Ayden the culture of gaming is so alluring, the appeal of participation is so strong; it becomes about wanting to belong to a group. For Joshua the games allow him to form a distinct identity, but for Ayden the appeal of the game is in the desire to be exactly like everyone else.

Wade rebels against the restrictions imposed upon his time and space; he says the space of the video game is not a space that he chooses but rather a space that he resorts to when he has no other choices. Wade blames his parents for the time he spends playing video games, insisting that he has no social life as a result of their restrictions.

For Joshua the space of the game is a compelling space. He of all the respondents is most interested in the space of the game. He says that he chooses to play Japanese Role Playing Games most often because of the commitment they entail. He comes to love his characters and he cries when they die; the quality of the game experience is very deep. Where as, Luca, Joshua's friend prefers fighting games because as he says "You can jump in anytime, play for a short time and get a quick fix." Joshua likes a game with a strong narrative that the player follows. When asked how much time he spends playing, Joshua responds that he snatches time whenever he can, for instance in school when classes are boring he'll play Game Boy but that's not really his dedicated time. He tries to maintain a minimum of one to two hours of dedicated time per day of concentrated play with no distractions. This is not easy to do; from Joshua's perspective it requires both ingenuity to carve the time out of a demanding schedule, and discipline, sometimes sacrificing sleep in order to devote to game play. When he gets a new game he might spend weekends playing for seven or eight hours straight. Joshua despises mainstream commercial games like Grand Theft Auto; he speaks scathingly about the ignorance of players who choose to play this type of game. In Joshua's opinion these games require no commitment or intellectual or emotional dedication.

> Joshua: Okay, I want to tell you a little story about my youth and how I
> started playing video games. I went to a private school with a bunch of
> rich kids who had to figure out how to spend their daddy's money so they
> bought lots of video games and I guess I saw that so I did it too. I would

just buy a game because like everyone was buying that game. Then I began to realize that I didn't really like these games and I was wasting my time and my money so I started to buy the stuff that I like, different from everybody else.

Luca: You waste a lot of time and money Josh. You don't do the research to find out.

Joshua: No, I don't go around asking everybody what's good, like you do. I try and find out on my own. I'll admit, at first when I got into Anime I bought a lot of really bad stuff but then eventually I discovered what's good but that's how you find out, by trying different stuff on your own, not by following the crowd, like some people.

Joshua does not derive his self-esteem from academic or athletic achievements. He defines himself as an innovator, an independent thinker. He does not want to be told by a gaming magazine or a web site or by his peers which games are good or cool. His pleasure is in finding out for himself what's cool; he wants to create cool. He devotes a significant amount of time and energy searching for the unique anime whether in literature, animation or film but mainly in video games. Although he plays the mainstream games, it is typically with disdain in order that he might later derisively critique the game for his peers. The genre of game that Joshua chose to master and identify with is obscure amongst his peer group but perhaps therein lies the appeal. It is unique and slightly exotic and therefore Joshua's mastery of it makes him appear unique as well, there is also no one to challenge his knowledge or skill; Joshua is master of this game space.

Each of the boys has different motivations for interacting in the space of the game. For Trevor the space of the game is a social space, for Max a space of recreation. For Ayden the space of the game is a forbidden space; perhaps much of its appeal lies in the fact that he is prohibited from entering the space. It seems to Ayden that everybody else is playing video games or talking about playing video games except for him. For

Zach, the space of the game is a play space, perhaps not of choice, but as a response to a lack of choice. But it becomes a space in which he has the opportunity to excel in front of his peers. They admire his knowledge and ability. For Rowan and Tucker the space of the game is simply another childhood play space in which to interact. For Josh the space itself is compelling, the motivation is purely the love of the medium.

The boys experience the space in various ways; sometimes, the video game provides an 'in-between space' in which to fill in empty time, for example, those moments between homework and dinner or between organized activities. At other times it becomes a therapeutic space as they each discuss the appeal of playing so as not to think about everyday pressures as one might use a gripping book or a good film in order to lose oneself in the experience. While each of the respondents has unique motivations for choosing to play video games, they share some commonalities. All of the boys interviewed expressed that they preferred playing games with others. The game playing is best as a social, shared experience. They talked about the virtual game space as compelling: the exciting, stimulating nature of the space presented an opportunity to lose oneself and become immersed in the experience, for a time forgetting about perceived outside pressures.

The video game space represented a space that was free from adult control and supervision. It represented an autonomous and unregulated space. An important means by which the space is understood by the boys to serve as a bounded 'other' space is the idea that adults do not sanction the space. If adults approved of and used the space it would lose its appeal as an alternative space of escape and resistance. So, the moral panic surrounding the video games affords the space a certain 'coolness' or cache.

There is diversity in the ways that the boys experience the game and skill at the game is one way of distinguishing the individual gaming experience.

Gaming Skill

At times the game becomes a space of discipline and commitment as when players discuss the conscious commitment required to 'get good' and beat the game. Developing skills appears to be intrinsically rewarding. However, there are also both social rewards within the play space that derive from being a skilled player and social rewards outside the play space of the game that arise from being known as a 'good gamer' within ones own gaming peers. Finally, identifying with, mastering and being knowledgeable about a particular genre of game appears to provide a sense of both identity and self-esteem. Devoting the time required to develop skill and knowledge about the game can be an investment in increasing social capital as with Joshua whose social identity as an innovator is wrapped up in his persona of 'video game expert on Japanese anime'.

For Zach, social capital is also acquired through his mastery of the game. Zach spends many hours playing his PlayStation 2 and he is admired for his skill in the game. The game space provides an opportunity for Zach to excel in front of his peers and this appears to increase his self-esteem. Zach enjoys performing for the crowd.

> *The other boys want a turn to play for the group but the girls want Zach to play because he has already beat the game therefore possesses superior knowledge and ability, he becomes an 'expert'.*
> Max: Can I try?
> Amy: No, he's trying to do something
> Trevor: It's making you funky. I'm a funky guy.
> Emma: Yes you are
> Trevor: Before, the squirrel was break dancing
> Max: You can hardly see

Trevor: Before you can see
Max: Don't you get those little Easter eggs?
Amy: They're not Easter eggs, they're just little eggs
Trevor: Do something funky. I like funky stuff. I like when he break dances
Emma: *(To Zach)* You are really good at this game
Amy: Better than Trevor
Trevor: Thanks a lot
Emma: Well you're second best
Max: Thanks a lot
Emma: Well he already beat this game
Amy: Yeah
Zach: I don't have enough money
Trevor: You have enough. You only need 120
Emma: See now you can go
Zach: I'll do that
Emma: But I want to beat the troll, yes! Yes!
Trevor: Are you ever good at this. I couldn't do that!
Max: Purple! Blue Eagle! Cool
Amy: Calm down Max
Trevor: How did you do that sir?
They all clap for Zach
Max: Okay, now everyone bow, everyone bow to him
Emma: Okay, now beat the races

Through his mastery of this game Zach gets to be a hero for a short time. It's the social pay off for the time spent mastering the game. Because of Zach's complicated schedule he doesn't often get the opportunity to play with a group of kids and so the opportunity to be the focal point of the group for a while is particularly valuable to him.

Some of the concerns expressed regarding video games are that they may impede children's social development. However, it has been my observation that for children whose social skills are, for whatever reason, less well developed the game can provide an alternative space. This is the situation in Wade's case, where he continually complains that he plays video games because he is not allowed out. He insists that if he were allowed out he would have an active social life. The game becomes a primary play space because he lacks the social skills to interact with his peers in other spaces. He longs for

social interaction with his peers and the game becomes a substitute when he is unable to be a part of other social situations.

Each of the respondents has individual motivations for playing video games and the space holds a unique appeal for each of them. The space of the video games can be a space for building friendships, a space of interaction as a response to a lack of friendships, a space to define individual identity, a space with which to define ones identity as part of a group and a space in which to negotiate ones place within the group. How the individual player experiences the game is distinctive; the ways in which each of the respondents determine which perceptions and experiences to bring with them into the space and which to leave behind is based upon individual choice.

Transpositions of Space

Notions of the virtual space of the video game as separate 'other' space have been portrayed throughout the progression of this thesis. However, it might be argued that many spaces can act as separate 'other' spaces of imagination in the same way as the boat acts as a heterotopia in Foucault's *Of Other Spaces*. In this same way the secret space hidden in the tall grass at the end of the alley or the hideout under the eaves or the planet in *Pikmin* or the city streets of *Grand Theft Auto* might all serve similarly as spaces for children's autonomous social interactions. Throughout both the research for and the writing of this thesis I was reminded of my own childhood experiences of 'other' spaces. Inspired by a popular television show of the era, all the children in my neighborhood would gather in the spare lot down the street and play *Shipwreck.* We would imagine ourselves as characters in the television show dividing the space of the vacant lot into

ship and island. Castaways, our ship adrift we would eventually safely reach shore and begin to set up a camp. Gathering twigs and sticks for our campfire and building shelters to protect ourselves from tropical storms, we would create feasts of berry salads served on leaves from the huge oak tree with mud pie for dessert, ever watchful for headhunters played by the boys across the street.

Watching the boys interact through the virtual space of the video game was evocative of my own childhood play. The same simultaneity and juxtaposition exists in both the virtual play space and the imaginary island. Shipwrecked on that deserted island we simultaneously interacted as the characters from our favorite television show and as our embodied selves in the same way that Rowan and Tucker interact simultaneously on the virtual planet in *Pikmin* and in the physical space of the playroom. So it might be argued that the play and social interactions occurring in the virtual space of the video game are similar to the social interactions occurring in other play spaces of parks, street space or spare lots. Perhaps the experiences are simply transposed from one physical space to another virtual space. The implication of this argument is that the transposition of social interaction from one space to another would not alter the quality of the interaction. Thus the social interactions occurring in virtual spaces are just as valid and just as real as the interactions occurring in other material play spaces. The idea of virtual space as providing an alternative space of play and social interaction to the physical play spaces runs counter to idealized images of childhood. The possibility of social life shifting into virtual space without being altered in some way raises challenges. The counter argument arises that the content of the game space is dramatically different as the children are in control while creating the imaginary space of the island whereas the

producers of video games are in control of creating the virtual space of the video game. However, the children playing *Shipwreck* in the spare lot have been inspired by their favorite television show; the characters that they adopt are not of their own creation but rather produced for them. The children's role is in negotiating who gets to play which character and in making choices regarding the character's actions and the narrative of the play. In the space of the video game the same negotiations occur over who gets to be which avatar. There are also choices and room for creativity as the respondents suggest that the most pleasurable games to play are those in which they can create goals and interact outside the explicit objective of the game, whether they are just skating around the city perfecting tricks in *Tony Hawk* or driving through the city catching the sights and listening to music in *Grand Theft Auto*.

Opposition to the argument that the interactions occurring within the space of the video games are similar to interactions occurring in any other childhood play space is often couched in the language of moral panic. These opponents suggest that the space of video games is much more realistic than spaces of children's collective imagination and therefore more immersive. This makes the experiences occurring within the video game space more powerful in influencing children's perspective and behaviors. Also, given that the content of many of the video games is violent, misogynist or racist it is argued that the messages implicit in some of the games will affect children's social interactions adversely.

Provenzo (2001) suggests that there are significant differences between playing fantasy games, such as Cowboys and Indians, in the real world and playing violent video games in a virtual world. In the real word the children experience the physical

consequences of their play: when they run they get tired and when they fall they get bruised. Provenzo argues that in the virtual world "there are no boundaries or limits". I would suggest that in both spaces it is perhaps the players who impose the boundaries or limits. The children playing Cowboys and Indians make up their own rules deciding what is acceptable and what constitutes fair play. When the boys play video games they also negotiate what constitutes fair play. Choosing to cut a fellow player some slack because he is new to the game or offering up the strongest avatars because the other player is at a disadvantage are ways in which the players actively redefine the game.

The boundaries are also imposed by the design of the game and it is within the players' control to make choices regarding which games they will play. All of the respondents participating in this study voluntarily avoided the most violent video games. They, for whatever personal reasons, were not drawn to genres of games that were defined by violence. That is not to say that they never played violent games but rather that they didn't only play violent games. However, the question of whether violence in video games will teach children to behave or view the world differently is a valid one. The concerns are that the immersiveness and interactivity of games are becoming so compelling that the virtual space of the game can feel real. It is perhaps the degree to which the boys perceive their experiences within the virtual space of the game as reflecting reality that may have an impact on their behavior. I asked the boys whether the spaces of the game were similar or different from real life spaces.

> Shanly: Sometimes designers make games that may appear very
> realistic and sometimes they design games that are not meant to be
> realistic. Can you give me some examples of games that you think
> are like real life and games that you think aren't at all like real life?
> Max: Oh yeah, you mean like *SSX 3*?
> Shanly: Is *SSX 3* like real life or not like real life?

Max: Oh god, it's so fake. I mean it's fun and everything but *SSX 3*
is not as good as *TRICKY* because like in the first one it was fake
and everything but not so much. I mean you could actually imagine
that someone could do some of the tricks but like I'm a boarder
and I could never do the tricks in *SSX 3* It's just impossible or like
you'd kill yourself or something.
Shanly: So you prefer *TRICKEY* to *SSX 3* why?
Max: Cause its not as fake.
Shanly: So what's the game that you would say is most like real
life?
Max: *Grand Theft* of course.
Shanly: Why do you think *Grand Theft* is most like real life?
Max: Well everyone knows it's like real life.
Shanly: Sure, but can you give me an example of what would
happen in *GTA* that happens in real life?
Max: Like how the cops are...
Shanly: hmm...
Max: Like when they arrest somebody, a bad guy, they chase him
down and when they catch him they beat him up before they arrest
him.
Shanly: And this is like real life?
Max: Sure that's how cops are...

A Glimpse into Max's Town

It's 7:00 on Sunday morning and the sun is already warm on her face. You can

tell it's going to get hot by noon but right now the temperature is perfect so she leans

back, soaking in the warmth. The town is still quiet, only the birds are up and about. Soon

there will be neighbors out walking their dogs, stopping to gossip with her but at this

moment as she sits curled up with her coffee on the porch it is peaceful. Max and his

brother Sam are still upstairs fast asleep and it will be hours before they straggle down

stairs demanding pancakes. She can hear a car in the distance; as it comes into view she

recognizes the town's one and only police car. The car slowly passes by then stops

abruptly and backs up pulling into her driveway. A tall, gangly, balding police officer

emerges from the car and walks up to the porch. "You're up early," he comments, sitting

down on the top step. "Any more coffee?" It's a small town with no coffee shop so rather than head all the way back to the station to make a pot for himself it seemed sensible to simply stop at Kate's when he noticed her on the porch with her coffee cup. She owes him anyway. He saved her last week when he passed by her house at midnight and saw her standing outside in her pajamas. She had locked herself out of the house while putting out the garbage and didn't want to ring the bell and wake the kids. He had boosted her through the laundry room window so she doesn't mind getting up from her cozy spot in the sun to get him coffee and exchange the latest news. It seems like the least she can do.

This is Max's town and this is the only 'cop' he has ever known. The local police officer is the guy you call when the cat gets stuck up a tree or you don't recognize the stray dog on your lawn or you're going away on vacation and you want him to do an extra drive by your house. This friend of Max's, this 'cop' who always stops to chat with Max and exchange fishing stories, is he the same as the 'cop' from *Grand Theft Auto*? Where did Max's perception that the cop in *Grand Theft Auto* reflected reality more accurately than the cop from real life come from?

This possibility that the experiences within the game may be perceived as reflecting the truth more accurately than the experiences of everyday life is one of the aspects of children engaging in a significant portion of social interactions in video games that may raise concerns about the content of the games. However, it raises interesting questions about how the children choose which truths to adopt. The snowboarding in SSX 3 was perceived as not reflecting reality because in contradicted Max's real experiences as a boarder and yet the depiction of the cop in *Grand Theft Auto* was

accepted as reflecting reality even though in contradicted Max's personal experience with the neighborhood police officer.

This inconsistency of the perception of truth may be one of the reasons that video games can generate moral panic. As children interact more and more through new media, the nostalgic play spaces of childhood are exchanged for the sometimes hyperreal play spaces imagined by video game designers. As the social interaction of the children is transposed from the traditional play spaces of streets and parks to the virtual video game space of postmodern childhood, concerns are raised regarding how the spaces of the game might influence the perceptions of the children.

As I began the research I had a lot of ideas about how my thesis would turn out. I imagined an organized set of questions that would be resolved conclusively in a well-structured argument. I had imagined a sense of closure as questions were answered and problems neatly dealt with, solutions proffered. That was the plan. However, I am left with new questions and contradictions. Many of the authors of the books that I read for the literature review seem certain that new media has resulted in the disappearance of childhood, that we have crossed a bridge and burnt it behind us, never able to return to a previous age of innocence. Or conversely, others appear certain that a new digital age of empowerment is dawning as children's unrestrained access to the knowledge enabled by new media will release them from boundaries, rectifying previous social inequities, enabling children to participate politically, as independent citizens and active consumers. The insights that emerged from my research seemed much more contradictory and multifaceted and the conclusions less irrefutable as the space of the game was revealed to be reflective of other material spaces and therefore distinctively influenced by what the

individual brings to the space. How the individuals use the space shapes their personal

gaming experiences within the video game space.

The Importance of Individual Choice

This thesis explored the reasons why boys choose to socialize in the virtual spaces

of video games as opposed to other possible spaces and how the video games influenced

the social interactions of the players. The exploration began with a discussion of

postmodern childhood because the topic of the thesis was inspired by general

observations of the changing nature of childhood, such as the ways in which children are

increasingly regulated and surveyed and the move towards the privatization of public

space. The literature reviewed for the thesis both supported and informed these

observations. However, it was through the ethnography that the meanings of these

changes emerged. Some observations from the argument and the literature were

supported, as certainly the definitions of postmodern childhood as regulated and surveyed

were experienced in the lives of all of the respondents. As I watched the perseverance and

planning that went into the boys' attempts to organize times to get together, coordinating

their busy schedules, I realized the degree to which their childhood was regulated. And

yet, all of the observations from the literature were not categorically supported. As public

space becomes perceived as dangerous space and the social life of children moves from

public to domestic to private space, there are examples of children resisting this

movement in order to either experience public space, to evade regulation, or to transpose

public space social interactions into virtual space. Despite challenges, Joshua found

places to skateboard with his friends throughout the city. Perhaps, part of the appeal of

skateboarding through city space is that it is prohibited. It can provide a space of resistance; evading and defying authority can feel liberating. In this same way, Rowan and Tucker found ways in which to create their own secret space within the surveyed space of the alleyway, thus evading the watchful gaze of adults.

Joshua carving out slices of time to devote to the video game can provide an act of resistance to the regulation and control of his time by adult imposed activities. Playing GameBoy when he is bored in class, secretly sacrificing sleep to beat a new PlayStation 2 game, devoting hours of research to discover the coolest Anime game, are all ways in which Joshua devotes time and energy to his own interests rather than the interests imposed upon him and through this evades and resists the regulation of postmodern childhood. Trevor manages the demands of a complicated schedule and yet he still manages to find some time to use the space of the video game to create his own personal space of sociality where he can interact autonomously with peers away from the dictates of adult imposed social conventions. These are examples of ways in which, despite the notion of postmodern childhood as restricted and regulated, there are still opportunities for children to experience public and virtual spaces and therein, to engage in autonomous social interactions.

The pressures to succeed, moral panic and anxiety around public space are genuine aspects of contemporary childhood and yet how they are perceived, experienced and responded to differs significantly within the group of participants. Even notions of the video game space as a unified space were quickly dispelled as it became clear through the respondents' perceptions of the game and use of the game space that there is great diversity even within the small group of respondents.

What is perhaps most significant is the degree to which the children shape the space through their individual choices, for example, the possibility of using the choice of the game to define the identity of the player. Joshua's choice of Anime signifies his gaming sophistication in opposition to the mainstream games of his peers. The point of Joshua's game choice is to define his identity as unique, as an individual, as part of the gaming community and yet slightly outside of the norm. Given the opportunity, Ayden would prefer to make a choice that opposes Joshua's, choosing to play the same games as his peers. For Ayden the point of the game is to fit into the group, to be exactly like everyone else.

The choice of whom to play with also shapes the space, enabling the creation of social groups, as Trevor, Max and Zach use the game as a space of social interaction while Wade would perhaps like to use the space of the game as a space of social interaction. However, because of what Wade brings to the space in terms of competitiveness and inability to negotiate with his peers, Wade is forced to experience the space alone. Rowan and Tucker use the space simply as an alternative play space, choosing to explore an alien planet on a rainy day.

The choice of where to locate the console further defines the nature of the space. Locating the console in separate private spaces of children's bedrooms or playrooms influences the way in which the space can act as a space for autonomous social interaction in which children can engage in behavior that might not be condoned in adult supervised spaces. Through analyzing the use of virtual game space in domestic settings, and particularly children's spaces, I was provided with a unique opportunity to research

the spaces of childhood as children experience them autonomously, away from the order and control that was so often imposed by adult regulation.

Conclusion

Throughout the thesis several questions arose from the ethnography that remain unresolved. Foucault's work on spaces of heterotopia suggests heterotopias as being spaces that are unreal and yet exist simultaneously in reality. McNamee's use of heterotopias in understanding video games implies that the children are simultaneously present in the physical space of the room and the virtual space of the video game. This understanding is similar to Flynn's understanding of the virtual space of the game as being mapped onto the domestic space of the living room, which implies a disjunction between the virtual and the physical spaces. The respondents in this thesis have a different understanding of the spaces; while they recognize the difference between the video game and everyday spaces, they don't mark the disjunction. The spaces of imaginative play are fluid and continuous with other play spaces and they move between the spaces seamlessly.

The role of the game in shaping the play experience needs to be explored further. While playing video games there are common properties that shape the experience, however, there are particular aspects of individual games that also shape game play. For instance, playing a game like *Pikmin* might result in a very different imaginative play experience than occurs while playing *Grand theft Auto*. The particularities of the game shape the play space and influence the play experience in much the same way that

playing *King of the Castle* might result in a different type of play experience than

playing *British Bulldog* or *Blind Mans Bluff.*

Despite suggestions that the space of video games share many commonalities

with other childhood play spaces there are some aspects of playing video games that

appear to be particular and unique and warrant further study. The corporate context of the

production of the game shapes the play experience. In much the same way as the physical

aspects of a play space impose limitations and boundaries on the nature of the play; the

technical limitations of the design and the content of the video game also impose

limitations on the play, influencing and shaping the experience.

I would suggest that further research might focus on how the content of virtual video

game space influences children's notions about other spaces. This type of research could

best be done qualitatively through ethnographic study. Asking the players to answer

general questions about how they use and understand the space of the video game

resulted in superficial answers. The diversity of the ways in which the boys experienced

the game space emerged during the course of in-depth interviews, guided conversations

and participant observation. For example, it was through asking a series of questions

repeatedly while trying to find out how the boys perceived the game space as separate

space that I finally realized that the problem wasn't the way I was asking the question but

rather that they had a different understanding of the space. This type of realization can

only occur through ethnographic research; it would not have emerged on a questionnaire.

During the preliminary interviews for this thesis, the respondents and their friends all

denied being gamers or playing video games extensively or enjoying game play. They

responded that they only played when there was absolutely nothing else to do. The denial

of the space is part of the story because it is through the contradictions and inconsistencies that the researcher is lead to uncover the respondents true experiences. The respondents' denial of the space is part of what makes the space appealing. The moral panic surrounding the space is what makes it work as an 'other' space, a space of resistance. If the space was adult sanctioned it would not serve as an escape from adult imposed regulation. The contradiction between the boys presenting themselves as 'gamers' to each other but denying being gamers to the adult researcher emerged through the ethnography. If I had only engaged in a couple of interviews I would probably have accepted the story that they were not gamers and walked away.

Towards the end of the research for this thesis the respondents began to play console games with other gamers over the Internet. It remains to be seen how this might change the nature of game play. Trevor, Max and Zach still gather to play video games but now they play and socialize with children across continents. Wade finally has others to play with as he uses his network adapter to play with a variety of children. He now plays *Final Fantasy* online and has joined a guild. Further research into the ways in which children socialize in cyberspace is required as the gaming world grows and evolves.

Throughout the research for my master's thesis I became cognizant of the dearth of qualitative research analyzing potential effects of new media on children's social development and peer interactions; however, it has become a vital research area as evidenced by the increasing research projects and publications. Current research on Internet trends and environments for children and youth is rapidly increasing in number (Holloway and Valentine 2003; Turow and Kavanaugh 2003; Livingstone 2002;

Livingstone and Bovill 2001; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2002; Montgomery 2000; Selwyn 2003). As the use of multiple media increasingly becomes a reality in the daily lives of children, researching the role of media in the total context of children's lives becomes important. Researching the ways in which new media is assimilated into the lives of children and youth requires a unique perspective due to the perennial social anxieties regarding the protection of children and youth. Researchers are continually required to re-examine previously asked questions, pointing to ways in which the new medium is similar to or unique from mediums that preceded. This encourages researchers to situate the examination of new media in the larger context of children's general media use. In this same way, further research might situate the use of new media in the general space of childhood, examining ways in which children's use of new media changes childhood spaces, creates unique spaces of childhood social interaction or serves to transpose children's social interactions from previous childhood spaces into spaces created by new media. This perspective would assume that children actively use media to create social spaces and environments.

The idea of leaving the material space of the present and traveling to a space of imagination is a recurring theme in children's play and also in children's literature and film. As Alice falls down the rabbit hole landing in Wonderland, Dorothy gets swept away to the magical land of Oz and Lucy walks through the wardrobe emerging in the enchanted Narnia, the idea of entering a portal and emerging in a space of imagination is timelessly appealing. The respondents in this thesis experience some of these magical adventures in material spaces as they create secret forts and hideouts and other adventures are experienced in the virtual spaces of video games.

The regulation of postmodern childhood might result in a lack of spaces in which children can engage in the daydreaming and imaginative play which characterize the romantic perceptions of past childhood; notions of childhood as a transient, fleeting time which one passes through, a desirable time in which individuals have greater opportunity to imagine and dream. Children are defined as in the process of becoming but if we are lucky we are all in the process of becoming. Perhaps the autonomous interaction that children engage in amongst peers serves to help in the choosing of whom to become. Perhaps, children yearn for spaces of imagination alongside the spaces of piano lessons and hockey practice. Many children no longer have the lazy luxury of walking home after school with a group of friends, chatting and dawdling along the way, instead scooped up from school and chauffeured to the next scheduled play date or activity. Perhaps children crave spaces in which they can just hang out with friends, thinking, dreaming imagining and becoming. It is through playing with friends that the child can determine his own place in the group, the type of individual he wants to be. Whether the autonomous playing with identities occurs on city streets, on virtual city streets, in secret spaces created in back alleys, in the deserted islands located in spare lots, or on the alien planets in virtual space, this playing with identity in spaces of imagination is integral to children's social lives.

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