**Video Games and Young Children’s Evolving Sense of Identity: A Qualitative Study**

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**Abstract**

**Keywords:** children, identity, video games, subjective experience, socialisation, family, power negotiation.

**Topic:** Identities in Consumer Culture.

**Purpose**

This paper investigates children’s experience as consumers of video games and associated digital communication technology, and the role this experience may play in their evolving senses of identity.

**Research design**

Qualitative depth interviews and discussion groups with a convenience sample of 22 children of both genders aged 6-12, parents and video games company executives in the South West of the UK. The fully transcribed data sets amounting to some 27,000 words were analysed using discourse analysis.

**Findings**

The findings revealed the heightened importance knowledge of video games plays in children’s strategies for negotiating their nascent sense of identity with regard to peer groups, family relationships, and gender identity. Video games were not only a leisure activity but also a shared cultural resource that mediated personal and family relationships.

**Research Limitations**

The study is based on an interpretive analysis of data sets from a small convenience sample, and therefore is not statistically generalisable.

**Practical implications**

This study has suggested that there may be positive benefits to children's video game playing related to aspects of socialisation, emotional development and economic decision-making. An important caveat is that these benefits arise in the context of games as a part of a loving and ordered family life with a balance of activities.

**Social implications**

The study hints at the extent to which access to video games and associated digital communications technology has changed children’s experience of childhood and integrated them into the adult world in positive as well as negative ways that were not available to previous generations.

**Originality/Value**

This research addresses a gap in the field and adds to our understanding of the impact of video games on children’s development by drawing on children’s own expression of their subjective experience of games to engage with wider issues of relationships and self-identity.

**Video Games and Young Children’s Evolving Sense of Identity: A Qualitative Study**

**Introduction**

How does easy access to video games influence the development of children’s sense of identity? In spite of the ubiquity of such games in the lives of many children in the developed world, relatively few studies have explored this aspect of the role of video games from the children’s subjective experience. Moreover, the question is central to concerns about the effects of video games on children’s development. This paper reports findings from a qualitative study that suggest that video games can play a positive role in children’s sense of identity by providing a resource for negotiating family and friendship relationships, building personal confidence and accessing peer groups. We construe these dimensions of children’s experience as aspects of the child’s self and social identity in order to organise them conceptually as elements of the child’s understanding of him or herself in their social world.

There is a need for greater understanding of the role of video games in children’s lives in order to inform policy and developmental strategies in education and therapy, and children’s own subjective perspectives are strikingly absent from extant studies. This need is acute because although understanding is moving forward, there remains much disagreement. The assumption that easy and early access to video games has potentially negative implications for children’s evolving sense of identity is made when, for example, video gaming is linked with childhood violence, delinquency, or poor developmental outcomes for health or school performance (see, for example, Hill, 2006: Chan and Rabinowitz, 2006). These negative assumptions have given way to a more balanced and nuanced set of views over the past ten years. For example, it has been suggested that playing video games can help children make positive progress with dyslexia (Franceschini et al, 2013) and can enhance children’s cognitive skills (Blumberg et al, 2013) while physically active video games have been tried as a way of encouraging obese children to burn more calories through exercise (O’Donovan et al 2013). It is certainly the case that some negative findings persist, for example, about the putative link between playing violent video games and violent behaviour for children and adolescents (DeLisi et al, 2013). It must be noted though that there is little consensus, since the link between video game playing and childhood violence has been disputed (Ferguson, 2013). Other negative findings include studies that suggested that playing video games can lead to negative outcomes for children on the autism spectrum (Mazurek, and Englehardt, 2013), and such findings can sometimes be interpreted as more generally negative effects by the press in terms of ‘addiction’ to games and association with negative mental health. For example, whilst the press do report the video gaming industry moving to a more female- and family-friendly orientation (Bland, 2013), stories about children becoming more sedentary because of excessive video game playing (Mail Online, 2013), often linked to childhood obesity, are also still common, as are press stories linking video game playing with childhood depression (Martin, 2013), addiction (Donnelly, 2013) and propensity for violence (Shepard, 2012).

As noted above, there has been relatively little research focusing on the children’s subjective accounts of the role video games play in their lives, and less that attempts to conceptualise the impact of children’s video game use on their emergent sense of identity. This seems surprising, given the strong sense that video games have thoroughly been integrated in children’s world of play and form a major role in their social relationships.

**Purpose**

Digital communications and the Internet are transforming childhood (Berk, 2009), yet the understanding of the effect such changes have on children’s experience remains limited. There is a need to bring together research in disparate fields and to examine the consequences for children’s socialisation and sense of identity. The model of children as passive consumers of technology has been superseded by the ‘active’ gamer model (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013) since even very young children are enabled by the technology to exercise choices not previously open to them. These choices, for example of gaming consoles, games, economic trade-offs, and playing collaborators, have implications for children’s social development, and for their nascent sense of self. Video games, and the accompanying digital communication technology, provide a landscape in which children’s experiences of social affirmation, rejection or accomplishment play out. Identity is conceived here not only as a fixed location in class and gender but also as a dialectical and iterative process of negotiation between the self and the social (Jenkins, 2008) which is especially mutable during the liminal pre-teen years (James and Prout, 1990). This paper, then, draws on 22 depth interviews with children aged 6-12, and with some of their parents, carers and also game industry managers, to explore the identity implications of video games for children from the relatively under-explored stance of giving voice to their own subjective perspective (Marshall, 2010). The paper will now outline a relevant selection of literature from relevant fields that deals with developmental issues in game play that are related to identity, in order to frame the subsequent empirical analysis, more details of which will be described in the methodology section.

**Literature Review**

**The Influence Of Video Games On Children’s Environment**

Generation Z children, as the general term embracing children born around 1995, is the first generation of children to have access, on a wide scale, to digital communication technology in the form of mobile phones, tablets, Wi-Fi and interactive computer games in their own home (Beastall, 2008; Berk, 2009; Abram and Luther, 2004). Video games are often their point of access into this world, as well as the glue that retains their interest. According to Childwise, a leading UK research specialist on children and their families, in their report on children and media consumption in 2013-2014, it is noted that 69% of children aged between 7 and 16 own a smart phone, while 73% of them have their own PC or laptop and 61% of which would go online in their bedroom spending an average of 1.7 hours per day on computers and the internet (Childwise, 2014). In addition to that, it is also noted that 83% of UK children aged between 5 and 16 have a gaming console at home and 60% have their own gaming console on which they play an average of 1.3 hours per day (Childwise, 2014). Hence, the average estimated time children spend per day in playing on games consoles seems to be steadily increasing (Childwise, 2014). Earlier research has suggested that children spend up to six and a half hours per day in front of an electronic screen (Woodward and Grindina, 2000) although one study reported in the press suggested that children access far more internet time than their parents realise and do so from the age of three (Ward, 2013). There is a high order of personal ownership of and engagement with mobile devices amongst children, including access to the internet and exposure to a wide range of information from online and offline adult media (Gunter et al. 2004). Clearly, the ownership and use of advanced communication technology means that children’s sense of self, their sense of identity, is qualitatively different to that of previous generations given the power they can derive from the resources at their disposal.

As part of this digital socialisation, video games, originally designed for young adults, have become an integral part of the lifestyle of many children (Snyder, 2000) to the extent that many prefer them to TV (Griffiths, 1996). Games have historically appeared as a cultural response to stress and socio-cultural uncertainty (Pearce et al. 2007), yet there is clearly something qualitatively new about the appearance of video games in children’s lives, especially since many of these games were originally designed for adults and may, through online networking, entail virtual interaction *with* adults. Children are, thus, given access to an adult world, and may think of themselves as adults rather than as children in some ways as a result.

There is, then, a sense that profound cultural shifts are being seen around the conduct and experience of this age group. For example, unlike earlier generations, they are considered by the marketing industry to have a high degree of autonomy as consumers (Ekström, 2010), and they are regarded as having considerable influence in family consumer decision making (Thomson et al. 2007; Tinson and Nancarrow, 2005), not only with regard to toys and games, but also with regard to collective decisions on the purchase of groceries, clothes, holidays, and even cars. However, their autonomy as consumers who have access to extensive marketing and consumer information online may not be matched by their control over when, where and how much they engage with digital technology in the absence of parental supervision (Weir et al, 2006; Burdette and Whitaker, 2005). As noted above, as a consequence of this radical shift in childhood activity, there is a fear that children’s physiological and intellectual development, psychology and socialisation may be different to that of previous generations. For example, some researchers have suggested that today’s children are seen as ‘less’ social and more impatient than previous generations since they may be more likely to spend their free time alone in their room rather than playing outside unsupervised or interacting with their parents (Weir et al, 2006; McNeal, 1999). However, there are also studies that suggest that playing video games can utilise and develop children’s co-operative social skills (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al. 2013). Clearly, video game playing is such an integral part of the lives of contemporary children that it is important for developmental psychologists to understand this context more richly given the potential benefits game playing may bring to various aspects of children’s development (Blumberg and Fisch, 2013). Furthermore, the speculations of researchers on children’s experiences of video games and digital technology must be enriched through the self-reported experiences of children themselves.

*Gender And Video Gaming*

Gender behaviours are inherent to one’s sense of identity, and it is important to note that computer and video games are highly gendered. Boys are said to be more likely to become heavily involved in shoot-em-up and strategy based genres, while females tend to focus more on social networking and other lifestyle based games (Griffiths, 1996), reflecting their offline playing choices (Lucas and Sherry, 2004). It is also acknowledged that many video and computer games are made by males for males (Gutman, 1982) and they demand visual, depth perception, spatial skills and aggression which are more commonly culturally associated with males (Griffiths, 1996; Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974). Much research, though, has failed to distinguish gendered practices, focusing instead on the commonalities around access to the internet, games and social media in general. In this paper we focus on the general shared experience while also drawing attention to gender differentiated issues where appropriate.

**Children’s Social Development and Communication Technology**

It has been suggested that communication technology can become an “electronic friend” to children (Selnow, 1984) or electronic babysitter (Thomas, 2011) for absent parents and carers. Consequently, children are said to have quantitatively less face-to-face socialisation leading to inadequately developed social skills (Bacigalupa, 2005). However, the relationship between video game playing and socialisation is more complex than may appear. Video gaming may be attractive to children on the autism spectrum partly because it need not involve face-to-face social contact (Mazurek and Englehardt, 2013) but many games today are by no means solipsistic activities since they require (online) communication, negotiation and teamwork (Buckingham and Green, 2003; Olson et al. 2008). What is more, this communication need not be confined to voice or typeface media. Visual communication, with the concomitant elements of implicit meaning, gesture, tone and body language may be part of Skyping, iPhone Facetime or video messaging.

In addition, gaming can extend opportunities for peer socialisation since children can discuss gaming experiences, share tips and strategies when they meet in person (Howe and Strauss, 2000). The socialisation of Generation Z children, then, need not necessarily entail quantitatively less face-to-face contact than that of earlier generations, and indeed they may enjoy enhanced opportunities for dimensions of social contact that were not available to pre-electronic gaming generations. Online games and the networking that is entailed in many contemporary games, both on and offline, can be seen as an enhanced and extended play space for children (Jenkins, 1998). They learn to negotiate and explore this space, and it becomes a resource for their identity development since this space is a common experience shared with other children in their peer groups.

*Video Games And Children’s Family Socialisation*

Changes may be occurring in family dynamics as well as in children’s peer socialisation as a result of digital communication. Children are often more familiar with and skilled at using online information than their parents, and as a result they enjoy a sense of power because their knowledge is superior to that of their older family members, parents and carers (Tinson and Nancarrow, 2005; McDermott et al. 2006; Ekström, 2007; Sutherland and Thomson, 2003). Children who enjoy this authority may become used to a form of interaction with parents and carers that is characterised by a subtle shift in tone which invests the child with greater confidence and power within the family. They may seek to exercise a voice in decisions that affect them (Sutherland and Thomson, 2003; Thomson et al, 2007) because they have grown used to expressing their opinions and preferences on social media. The experiences they gain through gaming and the subsequent communications gaming entails give them a confidence that they may be unwilling to cede when interacting with family members on issues that affect them This shift in expert knowledge from the older generation to the younger has been seen in studies conducted on Generation Y children (Ekström, 2007; Tyler, 1989) and has been characterised as reverse socialisation (Ward, 1974) or retroactive socialisation (Riesman and Roseborough, 1955: in Ekström, 2007). Children’s economic power within the family has shifted from ‘pester power’ (McDermott et al, 2006) in which they ask parents for the things they want, to ‘expert power’ (Ekström, 2007; Quortrup, 1994; Lee, 2001) in which they negotiate from a position of some authority on certain purchase decisions.

Another factor in the shift in the power balance in family dynamics for Generation Z is their increased access to monetary resources. This can partly be attributed to general rises in affluence, and partly to a greater tendency for older family members to give monetary gifts to children, a phenomenon usually referred to as the “six pocket children” (Foot and Stoffman, 1998; Sutherland and Thomson, 2003). Children now constitute a distinct and widely targeted market segment, reflecting their increased economic autonomy and offering them an identity subject position of consumers, as opposed to child. Accordingly, the children’s constitution as consumers in marketing initiatives further validates and gives support to their sense of being participants in family decision-making (McDermott et al. 2006; Ekström, 2007). Changing family structures are also facilitating greater childhood independence, as children are expected to deal emotionally with divorce, second families and single parent families, as if they were an adult, and this can afford them leverage in economic negotiations within the family group (Acuff, 1997; McDermott et al, 2006).

**Children’s Emergence As Autonomous Consumers**

Children’s emergence as autonomous consumers is reflected in the growth of research studies into their consumption practices (Cook, 2012). A rising proportion of 5 to 16 year olds now research and/or buy products online (Greenfield, 2004) whilst a 2008 industry study suggested that 70% of UK children knew the sites their parents used to shop online (Skinner, 2008). According to one report, more than half of American young children have access to an iPad, iPhone or other touch screen devices (Wall Street Journal, 2013). Through these devices they are able to access a panoply of dedicated entertainment, retail and gaming websites specifically designed for and targeted at young children, such as the Mickey Mouse Clubhouse, Moshi Monsters, Club Penguin and countless other branded sites.

The emergence of children as a key group for social media marketing and website and gaming design might be seen as exploitative, but it also exposes children to commercial realities which some of them at least, are able to negotiate in ways that render them more commercially aware than earlier generations (Tinson and Nancarrow, 2005) or, at least, they sometimes view themselves as more commercially aware (Haynes et al. 2002). Video gaming has brought children into the digital era, and it is central to their emergence as autonomous consumers since they are drawn into all kinds of ancillary activities as a result of their gaming, such as purchasing and evaluating purchases, evaluating and comparing gaming experiences, and communicating on and offline with peers and strangers about gaming experiences.

**The Liminality of Children’s Identity**

The review above, then, suggests that children’s experience is being transformed by access to digital technology through video games. Their sense of identity then is highly likely to be impacted. This paper therefore needs to offer a little more on conceptualisations of identity, in addition to the general definition offered above.

Liminality is a term made popular by anthropologist Victor Turner referring to a transitory and transformational phase of experience in which the old identity is left behind but the new one not yet fully assumed. Adolescence is a liminal stage of ‘fruitful darkness’ (Turner, 1995: 94) at the threshold of adulthood. This phase is characterised by experimentation and open-endedness, and, indeed, many young adolescents have explicitly reported using the internet and online gaming for identity experimentation (Gross, 2004; Maczewski, 2002; Valkenburg et al. 2005). Online, identity experimentation is perceived by children as less risky than in physical encounters (Turkle, 1995) since online identities can be changed and adjusted without social penalty. Digital communication appears to children to allow identities to be forged that are “seen and not seen” as Baudrillard noted (1994 in Hegarty, 2004:114). Although this sense of privacy is an illusion and children may forget to factor pretence and subterfuge into their calculation of online risk.

In the physical social world, individual and social identities are mutually necessary- the self is defined through social interaction, and vice versa (Jenkins, 2003). Playing video games allows children to enter online communities of gamers in which the sense of collective identity and shared community values can be powerful, even extending to in-group private languages (Fayard and DeSanctis, 2010; Friedman and McAdam, 1992). This may entail interacting with older people, since the age range of many game communities is wide, thus extending children’s social world beyond their peer group and family to strangers, they will never meet in person (Griffiths et al. 2003). Knowledge of video gaming and, more generally, digital communication platforms, has become a new form of cultural capital (Bordieu, 1984) much as advertising was for the previous generation (Willis, 1990; O’Donohoe, 1994). The knowledge of and expertise in the digital world offers children a source of power and authority and a tool for negotiating identity amongst peer groups who value this knowledge. Engagement with digital media can, then, enrich face-to-face interaction rather than merely acting as a substitute for it. Identity is the timeless imperative that links changes in children’s experience through digital technology with their offline experience. The paper will now move to the findings of the empirical study, in order to enrich the above perspectives with children’s own self reported experiences of the role of video games in their lives.

**Methodology**

A pilot study was conducted that entailed two interviews with industry practitioners, and several informal interview with children of the first author’s extended network. This helped establish a baseline of knowledge about the industry, and set the parameters for the scope of the main study. The participants of the main study were 22 children of both genders aged between 6 and 12 interviewed in focus groups and, in one case, in a family setting, all with full parental consent, between June 2nd and 14th 2011 in South East UK. The sampling was based on convenience, since access to children as research subjects in the UK is subject to strict legal requirements and ethical approval. Approved access was gained to an after-school club attended by local children, and additional interviews were obtained through networking with a mother and her children. The children who took part were those whose parents were willing to sign the legal approval required by the club owners. There were a few parents who demurred, but the main limitation was time and availability of parents. The researchers construed the children to be from relatively affluent homes, although no information was obtained on family socio economic status. The family background the children described in the discussions demonstrated access to resources, material goods and sporting/leisure activities that would not necessarily be available to children from homes in the lowest quartile of median income. For the purposes of the study, it was only necessary that children have access to video games and digital communications technology.

All data sets were obtained by audio recording and fully transcribed. The semi-structured interview schedule included questions such as

Do you play video games and how long have you been playing video games?

Which genres of games do you prefer playing and why?

If you have a day off school and you can do anything you like what would you do and why?

How do you get your new games and how do you find about new games?

How do your parents feel about you playing games that are age restricted?

Do you talk about video games with your friends at school? What exactly do you discuss with them?

The main data sets consisted of approximately 27,000 words of focus group transcripts and interviews. Discussion groups were conducted in the setting of the after-school club, and moderated by the lead author of this paper, while the interview with a parent and her children was conducted at the family’s home. Interviews and focus groups lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. All focus groups and interviews were conducted according to a flexible, semi-structured, protocol, because the researcher wished to allow participants to freely express the role of video games in their lives. The semi-structured interview approach was also pragmatically suitable for children whose attention would wander from time to time.

In addition to the formal data, there were informal exchanges that assisted in giving contextual understanding. For example, the proximity to games consoles in the after school club setting meant that the children were able to demonstrate some points to the researcher, whilst the informal setting also meant that the researcher could see the social interactions taking place around the game-playing, as an accepted observer. In addition, casual conversations and iteration of points raised was possible, and this enabled a more rounded understanding of the children’s experience. Finally, the lead researcher’s own subjective reflections and observations were also considered as part of the data set in order to assist in building an ethnographic context for more insightful data interpretation. Data triangulation was attempted by collecting information from different participants from both genders and with varying age brackets as well as roles. Five focus groups were conducted on children between 6 and 12, four of whom were male based and one female based. Three in-depth interviews were also conducted with boys aging 12 and 5, and a 9-year-old girl, in addition to the interview with their mother.

The data were analysed through discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Schwandt, 2001; Fairclough, 2003), which is an interpretive method from qualitative psychology that focuses on analysing structure and function in talk and texts. Structure refers to patterns of repeated themes or tropes in speakers’ accounts, while function refers to what these themes achieved for the speaker’s social positioning. The focus on language in social interaction is important since it reflects the ways in which participants make sense of their social world and orient themselves within it (Hackley, 2003: Easterby et al. 2008). The transcripts were sorted, coded and grouped according to key themes. The research stance is that these findings offer qualitative insights that cannot be generalised, but which, nonetheless, constitute a new and important contribution to understanding to this rapidly evolving topic area. The researcher’s perspective is not presented as definitive, but is informed by contextual considerations. As Banister et al. (1994) note, interpretations of qualitative data sets should not be seen as an “unchallengeable ‘truthful’ view” but, rather, offer “a particular understanding in process” (p.157). The findings are presented as new and original but by no means definitive insights on a multi-dimensional topic. To aid clarity and focus, the findings below are drawn mainly from a selection of the focus group interviews and revolve around themes of identity. A fuller account of the analysis and findings is available from Bassiouni (2013), the PhD thesis from which this paper is derived.

**Findings**

Findings will be outlined here with the help of selective illustrative quotes. For clarity and simplicity, the findings will focus on three key themes pertaining to children’s developing sense of identity emerged from the data analysis. These will be grouped as ‘video games and group identity’: ‘gaming and cognitive or physical ability’: and ‘role within the family’.

*Video games and group identity*

An important aspect of self identity is given by membership of social groups. Playing games was seen as a valued activity within children’s peer groups. Importantly, the general impression formed from the sampled group was that video games were indeed very important in the lives of these children, especially for boys. Video games were viewed in a very positive light both as sources of entertainment and for learning facts about the world. One eight-year-old boy declared that “we love video games” and all were very keen to talk about them. In one exchange the boys spoke of their games consoles:

J.T.’ Male 10 yrs.: I have xbox, wii, DS, Nintendo 64=

‘B.R.’ Male 11 yrs.: =this is cool=

‘J.T.’ Male 10 yrs.: yeah I know they are cool”

It was clear from the outset that the topic of video games galvanised the children and constituted a significant part of their lives. Games were seen as ‘cool’, and hence ownership of the right consoles earned prestige and attention for the owner.

Boys and girls liked different games, and there was a different dynamic in the social role of games in their respective identity strategies. One twelve year-old girl was incredulous when asked if she played video games with her younger brother “No [laughing] noooo (.) we play completely different games (…..) so I play on the computer the treasure island games and he plays Pokémon and stuff like that (.) yeah so we don’t really play together”. Another girl, of 9 years of age, declared that “boyish” games were “really boring”. It emerged that it was important for children to be able to talk about video games, since they served as a resource for negotiating entry to friendship groups. One 11 year-old boy explained that he felt he needed a game console for social reasons: “I kinda felt a bit left out so I had to have it to be part of the group and everything”. This was one clear indication that playing video games was a means of entry to peer groups, with the implication that not playing them debarred the individual from entry. Importantly, although it was important for the participants to play video games in order to be included in game-focused peer group conversations and friendships, the common fear that video games displaced physical activities was not born out. Boys also tended to be selective about which games or consoles were ‘cool’, and which were not, as illustrated in the following exchange:

 N.G.’ Male 8 yrs.: we love them (.) we love them [video games]

‘C.W.’ Male 7 yrs.: not as much as I like Lego star wars

‘N.G.’ Male 8 yrs.: come on (.) number 3 on the Wii?

‘C.W.’ Male 7 yrs.: no not on the Wii

‘N.G.’ Male 8 yrs.: ohhhh come on!!”

Here, ‘N.G’ is expressing incredulity that ‘C.W.’ could prefer one game to another. There was an element of cultural capital to be earned from displaying the ‘right’ taste and discernment by liking the ‘cool’ games. Games and consoles confer status, but which games were cool or current was contested:

 B.R.’ Male 11 yrs.: (…) we all love Pokémon

 ‘J.G.’ Male 11 yrs.: I have the latest one

 ‘J.T.’ Male 10 yrs.: I don’t play it much anymore

 ‘B.R.’ Male 11 yrs.: yeah but you traded it (.) you traded it with me

 ‘J.T.’ Male 10 yrs.: yeah I traded it today

 ‘C.T.’ Male 10 yrs.: you outcast!!”

In this exchange, one the implication is that the older boy has traded his Pokémon game because it is now too young for him, and the others recognise that they must either defend their fondness for the game, or step up and learn which games are appropriate for older boys. As noted below, games had implications for gender identity, especially for boys, because they were one means of negotiating age and masculinity since playing certain games became a rite of passage, as suggested in the following conversation about games the boys preferred to play:

 F.F.’ Male 8 yrs.: Fifa, the Simpsons, James bond =

 ‘L.S.’ Male 9 yrs.: =what, James Bond?

 ‘R.S’ Male 6yrs.: James Bond!! You are not allowed to watch that (.) you have to be double your age to watch that

‘V.R.’ Male 7 yrs.: double your age! It’s 12?=

‘K.J.’ Male 7 yrs.: yeah 12

‘R.S.’ Male 6 yrs.: yeah well you are not 12, it has a lot of blood

[RS, KJ, VR yukkkkkkk]

‘D.B.’: so it’s not your age but=

‘F.F.’ Male 8 yrs.: =it’s okay [calmly smiling]”

‘F.F.’ seemed a little smug and was clearly proud that he was allowed to play a game designated for older children. He was a subject of awe from his peers, and his status was enhanced. In addition, the association of the game with violence cohered with traditional male gender stereotypes. For older boys in particular, admitting to enjoying playing the kinds of games that younger boys and girls played would be highly challenging to their perception of their age and gender norms, and would seriously undermine their peer group status. Boys had to negotiate age-appropriate game-playing carefully. One seven year-old boy admitted that his older brother would not play games with him, explaining that “...he would play on DS and I would go on mom’s computer and play club penguin and miniclip”. In a liminal stage of development pre-adolescent boys used the more violent games to negotiate their ideas of male-ness. Finally, the status conferred by advanced knowledge of games was referred to by ‘J.L’. (aged 7) when he claimed that “sometimes my friends ask me to help them with their games…the advanced levels”. Gaming expertise was clearly a marker in the boys’ identity strategies.

With some exceptions, girls generally played video games less than boys:

F.G.’ Female 7 yrs.: I normally do it [play games] for 15 min

‘A.D.’ Female 8 yrs.: I (2) I play twice a week (3) I get to play on the computer about 10 min and a half

A 12 year old girl said playing video games “passes the time if I’m really bored”. There seemed little evidence in these data sets of an increase in increase in video games amongst very young females.

*Gaming and cognitive or physical ability*

In spite of more positive research findings emerging about the developmental implications for children of playing video games, it remains important to substantiate such findings, In this study, one example suggested that, in fact, playing video games could be therapeutic for children with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The mother of a child interviewed explained that she bought the games for her son because his ADHD meant that “...there are also aspects of his ability with social interaction (.) because he finds it more difficult to make friends (.) so as his friends were all playing computer games we made the decision just to buy every console so we bought the Xbox, we bought the Wii and we bought DSi and that was the first they had any exposure to it and he had to keep up with that because of friendships”. In this case, playing the games not only improved the boy’s social life, his mother explained that they also developed his motor skills and attention and his school performance benefited. This served as a powerful example of how video games could enhance confidence and self-perception through improved cognitive skills and greater social acceptance even for a child with a diagnosed developmental medical condition.

Importantly, playing games did not seem to displace other more traditional physical activities for the participants. One ten year-old boy explained that, as well as playing his games, “...I do rugby 3 times a week, cricket 2 times a week, I do fencing 3 hours a week (.) ummm and I do swimming and I also do running apart from my video games.”

Activities such as these (which were common amongst the children interviewed) are not typical of lower income households in the UK and suggest that these children are not from lower income families. . In families with fewer economic and cultural resources, there is clearly the potential for video games to displace other activities. Nonetheless, what can be discounted is any necessary causal relationship between playing video games and reduced levels of physical or social activity. This depends on the wide family and economic circumstances. Furthermore, whilst video games were clearly significant in the children’s identity strategies, given that they helped to negotiate entry to peer groups, gaming was by no means the only element in children’s sense of identity.

*Video games and children in the family*

Children were able to develop economic literacy in negotiating with parents to obtain the latest games or consoles, by searching out offers and utilising birthday money, offering to do jobs around the house or even buying games jointly with adult family members. One twelve year-old girl explained that she made all her own economic decisions when it came to buying games or digital devices: “yeah I just like the independence really (….) that was about when I was 10 that I started doing that (.) cuz my mom thought I was old enough to do it by myself (.) but not at 8 or 9 ‘cause I was a bit too young.” The children’s video games are often resourced by parents or grandparents.

G.’ Male 8 yrs.: ...game money (.) so game cards (.) I once got a game card that was one hundred pounds …… I think it was my grandma (.) my mom and dad normally do or I buy with my own pocket money.

Children use the resources to plan for the games they want to buy:

B.R.’ Male 11 yrs.: I normally save up from my own money (.) I do lots of chores (.....) I’d wash my dad’s car and I get 5 pounds for it (….) sometimes my parents get it for me in Christmas.

‘J.G.’ Male 11 yrs.: well sometimes I save up, sometimes I use my Christmas money or birthday money or get it in Christmas like that or anybody in my family get it and sometimes it’s just a treat for like being good for the whole year.

A shared interest in games also assisted bonding and co-operation with siblings:

L.S.’ Male 9 yrs.: we [‘L.S.’ and his 6 yrs. old brother ‘R.S.’] wanted the new DS and mom wouldn’t let us and so only if we save up together we can get one and share it (….) well pocket money, birthdays and sometimes if you are lucky you find money on the streets and you just pick it up

Because of the relative economic autonomy they were afforded through ‘pocket money’ within the family setting, some children demonstrated a critical awareness of commercial strategies. In one discussion about selling old consoles to earn the money to buy new games, a boy of 10 years of age declaimed “well there’s one company that brought out 5 shooting games but they are all the same” and his group agreed that it made no sense to buy them all. So, video games impacted on the child’s sense of identity by enabling an advanced economic awareness and the skills to plan, budget and negotiate.

Video games were sources of family interaction, particularly for males in the family, as explained by this boy:

 J.G.’ Male 11 yrs.: well I’m not an only child (.) the thing is we have quite a lot of wii games and all my family enjoy the wii except for my mom obviously so my dad plays games with me and so like yesterday we were playing (.) I also like sports games so I was playing NBA 09 with my dad (.) and I play with my brother obviously and my sister (…) so like I do my homework first and then I like get ready for bed and ummm since I’m older than my brother, I don’t go straight to bed I go like (.) I have time with my dad (.) cause he’s at work and my mom’s at work but my mom can’t really do these like games so I do it with my dad for about 30 min or an hour (….) but if it’s a holiday (…) so I’d probably like maybe play some video games with my dad cause I’ve got a free day (.)”

In this case the boy of 11 years of age is able to bond with his father through a common interest in which the boy is equally expert. Again, the interaction is an affirming source of identity for the boy, reinforcing his bond with his family as an equal partner, through games, with his father. He notes that he is not an only child, and describes himself in terms of his family relationships. Another boy identifies as an only child, and is aware of the advantages in that:

 C.T.’ Male 10 yrs.: no(.) only child (.) and I’m happy (.) I’m spoilt [laughing]

‘G.T.’ Male 10 yrs.: he gets 70 pounds a week for doing nothing [referring to CT]

A twelve year old boy found that his uncle became a role model through their interest in video games:

J.M.’ Male 12 yrs.: well I’ve got an uncle,.. J., he tells me all about the games and when the new games are coming out and all that (.) and he tells me what to do in levels and where I can get games and all that (….) yeah I buy them (...) mom lends me some money that I get to spend.”

Identity is necessarily relational- we view ourselves through our relative position within our social network, and video games acted as a resource through which children were able to express, experiment with, and negotiate their senses of identity.

**Discussion**

The children’s comments suggested that video games opened up a world of identification that was both alluring and empowering. Video games are representations of reality, perhaps of hyper-reality (Baudrillard, 2002) yet for Hegarty (2004: 9) there has never been a “realer” world for the children to live in and to establish their presence, identity and create meaning for their lives than now (Hegarty, 2004:9). The findings supported many themes noted in earlier literature. For example, access to video games and the associated mobile digital communications may be narrowing the distance in certain forms of knowledge and attitudes between children and adults (Goldberg et al. 2003), possibly accentuating the tendency for today’s children to seem ‘older, younger’ (Sutherland and Thompson, 2003). Hegarty (2004) argues that video games have actually provided the children with a valuable platform for communication, identity positioning and experimentation. It has been suggested that today’s children are more advanced than previous generations in using brands in identity strategies (Achenreiner and John, 2003; Jamison, 2006; Nairn, 2010) and the role of particular game brands and game genres in supporting age, gender and group identity positioning in this study may support this point. It has been noted that the consumption of video games is a part of a culturally forceful trend to self-realisation through consumption for this generation, as they have become a currency for negotiating peer acceptance and affiliation. Video games were used as a means of extending and deepening bonds within the children’s existing social circles. This may enhance (Olson et al. 2008; Griffiths, 1996) rather than inhibit (Bacigalupa, 2005) social skills, contrary to conventional wisdom that holds that video games discourage face-to-face social negotiations and friendships (Buckingham and Green, 2003). Moreover, children seem to have socially constructed a culture of their own based on the consumption of video games as a form of ‘acculturation’ (Peñaloza, 1994) to orient and assert their anchoring for an identity. Thus video games seem to have created a ‘culture of consumption’ (Kozinets, 2002) for children which stems from a temporary collective identity grounded in a common lifestyle interest in video games. Within the family, children assumed power as experts on digital communication (Ekström, 2007; 2010) and played and discussed games with adults as equals. Thus it seems that power is negotiated rather than structurally imposed within family dynamics and video games are one currency for this negotiation. This may not preclude the possibility that, in some families in which the adults have no interest in video games, the children’s facility with games might act to widen rather than narrow the generational gap (Tufte and Rasmussen, 2010), creating a very different identity dynamic within family socialisation. Also video games are suggested to be one of children’s means of deploying power within family context as they are utilized as a source of family socialisation or withdrawal from it.

The findings supported the suggestion that children tend to develop as economic actors “in a complex cultural system that both enables and constrains their consumption activities” (Marshall, 2010:10). Within the limited economic autonomy afforded them in the family setting, the children’s interest in video games enabled them to exercise skills of budgeting, planning and negotiation. In this way, video games extend the reach and scope of the children’s intellectual and social activities and thus extend the landscape in which they experiment with identity strategies.

As noted above, this is an interpretive study based on qualitative data sets from a small convenience sample of children, and therefore more research is needed to substantiate the findings. However, the study offers new and novel insights into the role of video games as resources in children’s evolving sense of identity that support increasingly positive findings around the role of video games in children’s lives. The findings can potentially inform educational and consumer policy towards children, with the caveat that larger studies would be required to add detail to the conceptualisation of children’s identity as a way of giving structure to the various dimensions children’s lives that are influenced by video games.

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