The Multiple, Volatile and Ambiguous Effects of Children's and Young People's Digital Play

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Virtual, or digital, violence becomes embedded in children's everyday lives in a large variety of ways, dependent on its interaction with the comprehensive and complex social, relational and material-discursive processes that enact children's and young people's subjective becoming[1]. In this chapter, I will introduce post-structuralist and agential realist perspectives (Butler, 1993; Davies, 2000; Søndergaard, 2002a, 2002b; Davies, 2006; Barad, 2007; Højgaard & Søndergaard, 2011; 2013a) to show that digital play with violence may enact multiple, volatile and ambiguous material-discursive, relational and subjective effects. I will also show that understanding the processes involved in gaming demands situated analyses which are sufficiently sensitive to enable a conceptualization of the complexities of the social and subjective concerns and phenomena involved (Søndergaard, 2013a)[2].

1 Subjective becoming alternates with subject formation or subjectivation processes, all of which are linked to the conceptualization offered by Judith Butler on the simultaneous process of subjection under and coming to agency through discursive power (1993). Butler also explains such formative processes as enabling constraints (1997, p. 16) and points to ways in which norms for appropriate and inappropriate becomings weave through such processes; in Højgaard and Søndergaard (2011), these conceptualizations are reworked to emphasize material-discursive power as enabling constraints and condition of subject formation.

2 Søndergaard has covered some of the same ground in an earlier Danish-language publication (2013b); however, this work has not previously been available for an international audience.

The analytical questions posed in the readings of the qualitative material in which I situate my argument therefore ask how virtual games and fictional universes with violent content become relevant to children and young people in their everyday lives – including the everyday lives of those who live in troubled school contexts textured by social tensions and sometimes containing bullying practices. The analytical questions furthermore attend to how these children and young people experience and, together or alone, use the potentials and challenges of these virtual universes in their gaming.

Research Material and Conceptual Framework

The text is based on research material which was produced as part of *eXbus*, a more comprehensive study on school bullying among children and young people (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014; Søndergaard, 2014, 2015). This study involved an interdisciplinary team of researchers comparing empirical material from a number of subprojects as an ongoing part of the research process. My subproject was focused on an analysis and conceptualization of the basic social mechanisms which enact in- and exclusion and bullying practices among children and young people. Entangled in this focus, however, was an interest in the digital-analogue movements and interactions of the children and young people and, among such movements, their engagement, together or alone, with computer gaming and digital play with violence and aggression.

The empirical material was generated through interviews and observations among children and young people at schools and in after-school clubs. The material also includes children's drawings, notes from participation in gaming conventions and observations from net cafés, as well as several other different types of material produced with the aim of providing insight into the processes that form children's and young people's analogue and virtual practices within their everyday lives[3].

The analyses that appear in this chapter were developed at a point in the study when 130 interviews had been conducted with children aged between eight and fourteen. The majority of the interviews was conducted among entire school classes, compiling information from every student in the class. The children and young people talked about everyday lives, bullying and friendships, as well as the gaming

3 The material is described in a number of articles published on various aspects of the study on computer games and on bullying among children in school (cf. Søndergaard, 2013a; 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017).

practices, their dreams and humour. They shared with the interviewer their preferences for, thoughts about and experiences with watching films, TV and YouTube videos. Observations in schools, both in classrooms and schoolyards, as well as in after-school clubs with access to computer gaming, also form part of the material. In addition, the material includes interviews with parents, teachers, school principals and finally also telephone interviews with pedagogues from 50 after-school clubs where children have access to computer games. All this material, together with the empirical material in the other subprojects in *eXbus*, forms the background for the analyses presented in this article.

In analysing this material, Karen Barad's notion of intra-activity helps focus the many different material-discursive, subjective and technological forces, which not only interact, but *intra-act* as part of the enactment of the phenomena in focus (Barad, 2007). Replacing *inter* with *intra* to form the concept of intra-action emphasizes the mutually transformative effects that such forces have on each other in their open-ended agency and enactment of phenomena which are themselves part of such open-ended intra-activity and the enactment of other new processual and fluid, but nevertheless very 'real', phenomena[4]. The conceptualization of material-discursive agency and enactment of phenomena draws a parallel underlining the intra-activity of matter and discourse, of the non-human and the human (ibid.). Combining these perspectives with the poststructuralist conceptualizations of subject formation, of normativity and of the processes through which social formation takes place provides the conceptual and theoretical perspectives I apply in the analyses which follow – Judith Butler (1993) being a central figure in this tradition and a central source of inspiration in Barad's agential realist thinking.

The empirical material and the concepts that are brought to work in this article are not used to produce a realist description of a particular field. Rather, I have been thinking with theory through the empirical material and with the material through the theoretical concepts, to analyse the complex character of digital play and its situated meaning and effects in the lives of the children and young people[5]. To think with theory and with empirical material also means that the broad and varied empirical material becomes part of what informs the analyses, even though not all data are brought directly into the text in the form of empirical examples.

4 In Søndergaard (2013a; 2016), this perspective is applied more directly in an analysis of the many forces intra-acting in the enactment of gaming engagement with violence. I will return briefly to this point later in this article.

5 Thinking with theory and with empirical material is a shared methodological approach among poststructuralist researchers; cf. Søndergaard (2002a), Alvesson and Sköldberg (2010), Jackson and Mazzei (2012).

The examples chosen illustrate analytical points about the variations and nuances, the embedded, processual and emerging character of the phenomena in focus.

In the first section of this article, I identify, in general terms, some of the possibilities and limitations that the children and young people in the research material encounter in the game worlds. I look at their ways of trying out belongings and positionings and the ways in which they enter the gaming environment. The second part of the article digs deeper into the variations and reconfigurations of virtual violence and aggression among the children and young people. I provide examples of how different gaming practices may assume different forms of relevance for children and young people according to their positions in the social groups they belong to. And I show not only how analogue experiences are linked to digital practices, but also how digital practices are brought into analogue play and the negotiation of social positioning.

POTENTIALS AND CHALLENGES

For children and young people, playing digital games presents opportunities to play, experience something and often to interact with other children and young people – on an equal footing to hanging out in the school playground, watching TV and films, playing tag or football, talking to their parents or siblings and whatever else they spend time doing. However, when met with adults' concerns, children hesitate and wonder how they can communicate their interest in virtual games; for example, in ways that demystify the games and legitimize the children's engagement.

Most children are aware of the adults' concerns that such games are probably too violent, or that the children sit still for too long and spend too much time indoors. And many children respond in a similar way to eleven-year-old Tobias when asked whether they play computer games: "Yes, I play a lot of computer games. Every day, actually, with my friends, but I don't become violent because I play them! It is just fun and exciting". These adult concerns are handled in a variety of ways by children. Many move such activities away from their concerned parents and, instead, seek out homes where access to games is not monitored in the same way as it is in their own home. Other children accept and stick to the limitations that their parents consider a necessary regulation of their child's gaming practices.

Sometimes, parental concern has unintended effects, such as when parents, in collaboration with pedagogues, decide that an after-school club should limit children's computer game play to intervals of 20 or 30 minutes at a time and at the

same time restrict whether children are allowed to save their game play. Such restrictions may determine whether the children are allowed to save avatars they have created or their status on missions. One effect of these types of restrictions may be that children choose to play simple shooting games that they can complete within the allocated time limit in the club's computer rooms. In such situations, the children in the empirical material tend to play the more complicated and demanding games at home.

When computer and computer games become part of the play repertoire of a group of children, the social network is an essential component, which is necessary for the games to function and for their embedded learning processes. In groups of children where there is a high level of tension and fear of social exclusion, bullying and practices which intensify negotiations of inclusion and exclusion, this type of process will, of course, play out with corresponding tensions and complications. Patterns of inclusion and exclusion can amplify accelerations and decelerations in these learning processes: The marginalized individuals, or those who are targeted for marginalization, are not initiated and their knowledge is not sought out or is devalued if it is offered.

Such manoeuvers may include moving away from areas in which the marginalized individual's knowledge is relevant. It may also mean choosing different games and training in them without giving the currently marginalized individual the opportunity to reorient him- or herself and participate in the group's new gaming preferences. Subsequently, the exclusion can be legitimized by citing "different gaming interests": "He plays WoW. None of us are interested in WoW any more" - and what can be done about that? That is just how it is; different interests are, after all, a matter of preference, they seem to state. They do not want to put up with "cry-baby whining about that too?" In short, the manoeuvers through which inclusion, exclusion and bullying take place – contempt, derision, lack of empathy and so on (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014) – can, of course, permeate the ways in which computer games are learned and completed, as well as the ways in which recognition or invisibility are distributed based on how the game play is managed. Such patterns of social relating are recounted in the interviews and observed among the children and young people in the research material.

On the other hand, game-playing competences can also disrupt such patterns. At times, it may be an attractive option to go home after school with nine-year-old Oskar, who has access to *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA) (Rockstar North, 2004) in his older brother's room and parents who do not interfere very much, even though he is not someone Joshua and Daniel otherwise wish to be associated with and despite the fact that they often participate in exclusionary manoeuvers against him. Joshua might even say to the others, in earshot of everyone, that "Oskar is really

good at GTA" – a degree of recognition that Oskar rarely experiences from anyone, least of all from the inner circle among the group of boys in his school class to which Joshua and Daniel belong.

At this school, and among this group of boys in the class, access to GTA (Rockstar North, 2004) has a high status and Oskar counteracts his otherwise problematic position in the class by offering the opportunity to play this game in his brother's room. For many children in our study, the PEGI 18+ label on games has nothing to do with age. Rather, this is an indication of coolness. A 16+ game is very cool and 18+ is even better. Oskar's role as gatekeeper to practices that can provide access to this extra coolness to the other boys increases his utility within the group and protects him, at least temporarily, from the social exclusion he usually experiences in the class.

TRYING OUT BELONGINGS AND POSITIONINGS

The empirical material provides numerous examples of the potential offered by computer games for shared experiences and joint actions. Children and young people can be united by the entertainment aspect of the games; they can use games to experience a particular mood, challenge, or conflict that seems relevant to their own lives; they can practice things that are fun and see how this practice results in a clear increase in their abilities, whether they are learning to fly, shoot and hit targets, understand complicated tactical manoeuvers on large battlefields, create societies, or whatever else the game designs allow them to do. They can play with people they know, but also with children and young people they have never met – children and young people from other countries. And they have the opportunity to interact, play and chat without any significant social costs. Online contact with children and young people from outside one's local environment is always a choice and can be revoked if it does not work out and children can play and chat, pretend to be someone else, play with different identities and explore social boundaries without the interactions becoming more serious or binding than they can cope with.

As part of all this, they can practice negotiating the premises for relating and participating. To those that come from communities of children that are characterized by complicated social manoeuvers, tensions and bullying, it may seem liberating that there is a certain form of clarity in online relations. In gaming universes, the main focus is gameplay and in online relations with strangers, matters are usually settled up front if something is not working to everyone's satisfaction. Participants leave, or are thrown out of the game if they do not submit to the rules and

norms of the group they are in. But since the others are strangers and there are plenty of other strangers online to choose from, being thrown out in this way is not necessarily dramatic. It may even be an event deliberately provoked as part of playing with risk and with social borders together with one's friends.

In groups of children with many tensions, the opportunity for less complicated relationships represented by online games with strangers may be attractive for the simple reason that the games provide an alternative to the exhausting scenarios that the children encounter in school. In virtual games, children can be strong participants and competent, sought-after teammates even if they are excluded from their class on a daily basis and forced to struggle to achieve a bare minimum of respect. I will provide examples of such cases later in the article.

This opportunity to experience new positions also applies to some of those who are the subject of fear and trepidation among classmates. The dominance which they otherwise dare not risk abandoning should it place them as the target for contempt and exclusion can be temporarily relinquished within the alternate universes computer games make available.

THE GAMING UNIVERSE AND ITS ATMOSPHERE

Within the boundaries of the game, the opportunities for creativity and expression are determined by the technology; the limitations are fixed and often quite narrow. Rule systems and potential actions are determined by the game's design and in shooting and strategy games, for example, progression is controlled and limited in specific ways. A sniper in *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 2000) cannot suddenly take the initiative to enter into peace negotiations or redefine the scene from a battle to a picnic: *Grand Theft Auto*'s main character, Carl Johansen, is bound by the gang-related premise of the game and cannot simply go to a job centre or a student counsellor in search of another way of life and leave his criminal lifestyle behind. Attempts to defy the intention of the game have little chance – such as when eleven-year-old Adrian, during a visit to an Internet café, tried to defy the premise of *Counter-Strike* by wandering around along the walls without shooting or fleeing, while he sat and hummed to himself in front of the screen. Such attempts merely result in one's avatar being obliterated or – if it stays alive for a while – one's co-players becoming very annoyed. Adrian received some tough blows from the other players on that occasion and I did not see him repeat the experiment.

Virtual games are still *games* and, like *Ludo*, chess and *Stratego*, there cannot be many enhancements to the rules before the game breaks down as a unifying group activity. Virtual games are also an expression of a fixed space of action. The

rules may be more or less rigid, but they are there. Whereas *Ludo* is based on a set of social conventions between the players which are confirmed by the materiality of the board and the game pieces, the fixation of rules, possible actions, consequences, positions, aesthetics, choices and, in the end, the norms and values of virtual games are materialized in the game's design and technology.

Following on from this, there are also possibilities and challenges inherent to the mood-controlling nature of such games. Players open themselves up to the required moods. These moods are linked to the competences that the player and the community work towards with dedication. Shooting games require a certain measure of aggression and contempt production, just as many analogue games do. For example, the same applies to analogue team sports. An important element in winning a football game is the coach, who encourages players to be aggressive on the field. Without some measure of controlled aggression, ruthlessness and uniformity, sporting performances would look very different to those we witness today – from Olympic stadiums to seventh grade soccer teams. In all of these arenas, coaches strive to instil controlled aggression and a clear us-against-them perspective in their charges, while spectators shout their aggression across the sidelines to support this process.

In sports, aggression is cultivated as an expression of a normatively legitimate frame of mind. Here, a strong will to compete is nurtured, along with the desire to come first, be the best and the greatest and to do so at the expense of others. This is a will to win, to go far – perhaps even to cross the boundaries of normal caring for others and, in many sports, one's own pain threshold – in order to achieve the goal. Consideration and reciprocity between teams is non-existent once the ball is in play. This attitude is encouraged and supported by sporting culture, coaches' calls to exploit the "others'" weak spots, repeated statements emphasizing the strengths of "our" team, the rules of the game and the framework of rewards. And parents seem unconcerned when aggression takes such forms and is situated in this kind of gaming scenario.

The production of a shared frame of mind is also central to virtual gaming universes. In shooting and strategy games, there is no coach to incite this mood of aggressive readiness. Instead, several actors are involved. The players produce and reproduce this frame of mind together, just as the game's carefully selected music, sound effects, graphics and overall design engender this atmosphere, often accompanied by an electronic voice, making comments and encouraging the players. Shooting games require an attitude involving a certain degree of targeted aggression and ruthlessness towards the opponent(s). Children and young people sitting in front of screens at their after-school club accept the challenge with loud cries and a large amount of aggression and contempt production: "Die, you disgusting

idiot!", "Fuck, man! I am going to murder you!", "Fucking little sniper bastard, man!", "We are going to murder that faggot 100 per cent!" and so on. The general impression from observations in computer rooms at after-school clubs is that of a high level of noise, contempt in the form illustrated above, tense voices and bodies and an atmosphere that is thick with aggression, triumph, regret – especially in situations where there are a lot of children and where they play in groups.

Transitions/shifts between analogue relating and relationships between avatars take place in a number of different ways. Sometimes these shifts are marked by ironic over-dramatization, which exposes the absurdity of a shared game centred upon violence. Occasionally the taunts and contempt from the in-game actions turn into self-irony, while at other times, the transition is marked by laughter and ridicule or other strategies of emotional control and/or transformation which, in a variety of ways, integrate and transform the contempt, hatred, defeat, or unbridled triumph that the players perform as part of the game's mood requirement via their *I* or *we* identities, creating a continuum between them and the avatars (see also Højgaard, Juelskjær & Søndergaard, 2012; Søndergaard, 2013a).

The strong expressions that are shouted and cultivated during the game are not necessarily appropriate for the emotional experiences in the aforementioned differentiations. Hatred, contempt, triumph etc. may also be experienced as excitement and intensity, or as a curiosity about the violence and aggression that the game makes available – the children play with the expressions of contempt and aggression. However, like in sports activities, the performance of what can be recognized as a '*bad loser*' is also a possible positioning in computer games – this position may be performed by those who do not participate in or enter the emotional transformation that takes place during the transition period after the game is over; who leave the room in anger or begin to beat up their opponents following the events in the game.

So, there are occasions when the mood seems to be drawn out – and it takes a while for it to be absorbed in other moods as the groups of children dissipate out of the room and into other activities. In some cases in the research material, the children do not view this as a mere result of some people being bad losers or mixing things up in irritating ways. In groups with a lot of tensions, the production of contempt and a particular frame of mind in the game may appear analogue to and entangled with the production of contempt and the mood that operates in the off-screen situations in which social tensions turn into explicit exclusionary manoeuvers, such as open attacks, derision and humiliation (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014; Søndergaard, 2014).

ENCOUNTERS AND MANOEUVRING

I have elsewhere (Søndergaard, 2013a; 2016) shown how multiple material-discursive forces intra-act in the enactment of children's and young people's engagement with virtual violence and how that particular enactment of violence is but a small, for some even tiny, part of the violence they are presented with in their everyday lives. In the article *New materialist analyses of virtual gaming, distributed violence, and relational aggression* (2016), I use the stories of two young boys as examples to show how this comprehensive apparatus of intra-active forces may enact virtual violence as a highly relevant space for playing with, contemplating, manoeuvring, negotiating and in other ways simply dealing with violence and aggression as phenomena produced and actualized in the world which adults offer them to belong to and to become subjects in. Familiar with violence from history lessons, everyday racism, bullying, violent police actions, media representations of terror, war and natural catastrophes and many other versions of violence and aggression, violent computer games seem an obvious activity to engage in in order to process and play with similar kinds of realities (Søndergaard, 2016).

Kurt Borchard (2015) reaches similar conclusions in his work when he argues that games are both a product of and a commentary on our culture; his point being that violent games might even promote critical thinking about and greater social awareness of how we want to be in the world. He writes: "Living with contradictory pulls is hard, sometimes unbearably hard. But video games today have become social sense-making tools, spaces for defining and reproducing aspects of the world we might, or might not, want" (p. 8).

For the children and young people, that sense-making and negotiation, and thereby also the social and subjective formation offered through those virtual scenarios, may take place by collectively engaging with (virtual) danger, aggression, potential death and violence – and by positioning themselves as agentic in the midst of all this. It may take place by helping each other through, teaching each other the tricks and developing common strategies and by taking part in and initiating jokes, ridiculing or hailing and critical discussing the violent and aggressive content of the games. So let us dig further into the variations and reconfigurings of virtual violence and aggression among the children and young people.

The distributed violence and the currents of aggression that run through children's everyday lives also entangle processes of subject formation in its simultaneous subjection and enabling of agency (Butler, 1993; Højgaard & Søndergaard, 2011; Søndergaard, 2016). The virtual contributions to this formation are encountered, combined and processed in different ways by the children and young people. The possible digital practices, ways of relating, fantasies, experience and relations

are shaped by the children, both individually and jointly, in very complex ways. They are cited, adopted, rejected and combined with other possibilities, conditions and impressions; they are transformed, processed and reconstituted through the children's and the young people's play, their shared creation of meaning, their embodied, sensual acquisitions and reactions and through their ongoing relating practices.

In recent years, the game industry has worked intensively to make game design feel as 'real' as possible. Some of these efforts have refined the virtual universes and avatars to such an extent that they are able to initiate sensory perceptions that are in an ever-closer continuum with human sensations. It seems significant for the producers that the pixels emulate experiences and potentials that appear to be sensorily and emotionally relevant to gamers in ways that engage them intensely enough to enact increasing demand and revenue in the games market. The importance of such sensory perceptions does vary, however.

For some children and young people in the research material, the characters are "just pixels" and the intensity and excitement in the game is successfully borne by the pixel level. For others, it is important that the characters and scenarios are very life-like and sensorily integrated in a way that emulates experiences from their everyday life, because they also seek a game experience that resembles potential situations at school as closely as possible. For some, tactics are the most important thing – the game could just as easily be about the shooting of wild animals on the savannah or mosquitoes flying through the air. For others, the avatars' characters and their similarity to people they interact with at school or elsewhere is central.

THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SEEK DIFFERENT BUT *RELEVANT* GAMING EXPERIENCES

The ways in which game experience become relevant differ and change – across time and among children, among young people. Yet an example counts twelve-year-old Logan who, after a hard day at school with bullying and humiliation, practically runs to his bedroom and starts up *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 2000) on his computer. He does not start up *goSupermodel* (watAgame ApS, 2006) or *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004). He opens a simple shooting game: *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 2000). The imaginary terrorists he mows down with volleys of missiles from his rocket launcher are not just pixels – they are closely linked to the children in and around his school class and with all the "fucking idiots who laugh and all the ones who do fuck all". For him, the scenario on the screen is closely associated

with the school playground and he takes great pleasure in destroying the characters, before starting his homework and eating dinner, accompanied by his dad's repeated questions about how his day at school was and his own repeated responses: "Fine", "Nothing special" and "It's OK".

The games mean different things to different players. For John, who also experiences tough days at school because of bullying, it is not necessarily a fantasy of shooting his tormentors that is central to the shooting games he plays in the afternoons. He is seeking relaxation and oblivion in the change of perspective away from everyday school life that the games provide, just as adults pick up a detective novel or turn on the television to watch a film in order to release the tension from a stressful day of struggle and competition at work.

For John, the games are a way to achieve a level of excitement that matches that of the school playground. The game captivates him so that he does not think about the playground. This is in contrast to Logan, who seeks an opportunity to relive the school scenario and those who were after him in fantasy form and with a different outcome. In the game, it is Logan who humiliates and Logan who wins. For John, it is important to forget about school using a strategy that involves finding a level of intensity that matches the school experiences so that he can disappear into a universe of excitement where defeat is not a foregone conclusion. In the virtual fight, he can be active in the face of attacks and threats and he has a chance to succeed, or at least to train himself to be able to cope, via transparent rules which are determined by the game's design and which, unlike at school, do not change and shift from day to day depending on changes in the positioning of children in his class. In a sense, for him, the games are a way to seek out the possibility of winning, but based on his descriptions in the conversations with the observer at his after-school club, he does not seem to make direct associations with his tormentors or the school playground like Logan does. Both boys seek opportunities to gain control and win, but Logan wants to win in a sensory experience of closer proximity with his tormentors, whereas John wants to keep them at a distance via a winning mood that can compete with the feelings of defeat he experiences.

For yet other children, the characters may just as well be cartoon characters – they explode, blood pours out of them when they are shot, points are accumulated and players taunt each other or praise their achievements. There does not seem to be any significant association with real people. At the after-school club, twelve-year-old Alina and Christina laugh loudly and happily comment on each other's scores in *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 2000), "Ah, that was a good move", "Fucking little sniper bastard, die!", "How many points do you have now?", "That's evil, man!" They laugh and throw themselves back in their chairs. "Let's choose another level; this one is no fun anymore!" For them, on this occasion, *Counter-*

Strike (Valve, 2000) is not actualized as a scenario that propagates atrocities or emotions such as revenge. It is a game they play together, with signs and possible actions that may also include a titillating contrast between camaraderie and human destruction and in which repeated outbursts to each other further affirm their friendship.

For Ida, it is a matter of finding games, as well as TV series, she can relate to in yet different ways. Ida is ten years old and is the victim of bullying in the girls' group. She describes how she often cries alone in the toilets at the after-school club, where no one can see her, as well as in her room when she gets home, so that her parents and siblings do not notice anything is wrong. She tells how she tries to get through the hard days by thinking about nice things, such as lessons in subjects she likes and looks forward to. For Ida, the virtual games and television are a sanctuary:

> The best way I can think of to not think about it [the problems at school] is to watch a lot of TV and play computer games, because they are some of the things that make me forget about it [...] I relax when I watch TV. Or when I go to tennis. I have other friends there.

Ida has a parallel everyday life at her tennis club, where she spends three afternoons a week: "At tennis, I am the happy, strong tennis girl, because I am strong in relation to my club. And at school, I am the boring, weak girl". These two different subjectification contexts of the school and the tennis club, where she is either happy or boring, strong or weak, influence the ways in which the virtual universes are actualized for her. Ida seeks out a TV series about Hannah Montana, a girl with a dual identity as both a famous singer and a normal schoolgirl – "the thing about her secret life, it is very exciting. And she has a dual identity, it's really funny", she explains – and she chooses the computer game *goSupermodel* (watAgame ApS, 2006), where she can construct her character so that it is attractive and competent. She is very fond of her online friends in the game and they know nothing about – and must not find out about – how her life is at school, she says.

INSPIRATION FOR ANALOGUE PLAY CAN BE TAKEN FROM DIGITAL UNIVERSES

For some children and young people, the games are sometimes actualized through a more direct inspiration that affects how they play other games too. The structure of the game design and the ways in which levels and missions are made available

are adopted by some of the children as an inspiration for a game with different content. For some, the plot is adopted without the structure and this becomes the focal point of the game. Some of the eleven-year-old boys spend a lot of time during the spring playing zombies and survivors, based on the model from the *Left 4 Dead* (Valve South, 2008) universe – four of the boys were survivors of a virus which turned people into zombies, while the rest of the group were drooling zombies who tried to capture and devour them.

In yet another example, games in the schoolyard or around the children's homes were updated using content from computer games. In previous generations, it was "Indians" who captured "cowboys", bound them to flagpoles and roasted them slowly over open fires, or "natives" who captured "explorers" in the jungle and imprisoned them in caves (or the closest woodshed) where they awaited a slow and painful death among snakes and giant spiders. Inspiration came from books for children and youths of that era. Now, zombies from films and games chase the unfortunate victims, but the plots are the same: life and death, the struggle of existence and the production of winners and losers. This plot is not only present in games and films available to children and young people, it is also evident in the children's everyday lives and the societies and social contexts they belong to.

The violence and aggression that permeate the children's lives can therefore be found in the games, both directly associated with the plots and scenarios that are shown and more indirectly in the form of moods that match and touch upon them – as well as in numerous other versions. If we stay with the forms of actualization that Logan, John, Alina and Christina have come to exemplify while seeking out particular kinds of computer games, violence and aggression is encountered here in a form attached to the design and controlled by the technology. In the game, the children can experiment with being in close proximity to all this violence and with handling and manoeuvring within it. As I mentioned earlier, they are also able to experience being in control, being the active party and not having to submit to the dread and anxiety which some of them experience when navigating the school playground or when thinking about the stories they have seen on the TV news: It could happen here; terror could hit on my way to school in the morning. Imagine if my siblings were taken hostage in kindergarten, if my mother was on the train that was blown up. In the games, they are able to be active in relation to the kinds of dangers they live with or hear about daily. They are able to arm themselves with the most effective weapons, sneak around using the best routes across the rooftops, plan the most ingenious strategy and get at the people who are up to no good. The potential to be active and in control and to win is

clearly attractive to many children and young people in a world infused with violence and aggression, destruction and devastation.

However, there are multiple layers and aspects to this attractiveness. The game not only offers the children the opportunity to assume a position where they have more control; the children and young people are also offered an opportunity to ridicule, laugh at and literally *play* with violence and cruelty. It is as if they would *touch* the horrors and evil and get a feel for them, so they are able to either encounter them via resistance and participation or laugh at them together with their friends and co-players. When the corpses they have produced are *tea-bagged* amidst loud cheers in the computer room – an action carried out by the victorious avatar, who stands behind the corpse and goes up and down on bended knee (like dipping a teabag in boiling water in an imitation of a sexual act) – the wars, terrorism, slaughter and the broken bodies, among all the many other things that can happen in the game universe, are also the subject of ironic distancing, ridicule and gallows humour. There is a great deal of irony and distancing in the exaggeration and the games' often absurd scenarios, such as they are made available by the designers and appropriated and further developed by the children themselves.

INTRA-ACTIONS: RESONANCES, CONFLUENCES AND DILUTING SOLUTIONS

Having come this far, we can understand the games as a potential area for both collective and individual processing of, play with and attempts at play-based management of violence and aggression as phenomena that permeate the children's everyday lives and not only in the form of violence in the school playground, but also violence conveyed by the media and that which is reported and cultivated in school lessons and through many other sources (Søndergaard, 2016). However, given the children's complex and varying everyday lives, all of these currents of violence intra-act in different and situated ways with the experiences and engagements in particular groups of children and young people or for specific individuals.

For eleven-year-old Ethan, the adoption of war as it is portrayed by the media is a theme for play. It is, for example, not only a matter of imitation or of letting off steam, so to say, but is also a way of processing an issue in which he was caught up at the time when the interview and observations were conducted in his class. His class was textured by strong social tensions and changing bullying positionings and after a period time where he was fairly reasonably positioned among the children in his group, he was on his way downwards in the class' social hier-

archy. Sometime after the first interview with him, he became the target of bullying in the class. Elsewhere, I analysed Ethan's play in relation to humour and the thrill of bullying (Søndergaard, 2017) and there, I highlighted the play repetition of particular themes from the media as a possible step in establishing an arena of experience that can be used to experience, process and sense tensions and positionings that seem to be central in the children's everyday lives.

During this period, Ethan was very active in establishing a Guantanamo game at the far end of the playground and in appointing his classmates as prisoners and guards and himself as a guard. There was a particular series of actions and distribution of weapons, but the staging was difficult to accomplish and his frustration regarding this was pronounced. The game meant a lot to Ethan. For him, the war and the USA's, during that period, media-hyped *war on terror* was an extremely engaging theme and his preoccupation with it and attempt to create opportunities to re-enact scenarios from these media stories was transferred – via powerful, mutually invasive anxiety and associations with excitement – into the social complications and struggles that permeated his class at that time. However, the same struggle for positioning established different engagements in the distribution of roles and weapons in the game; some children were opposed to being unarmed prisoners and difficulties mounted up along with the complicated resonances between the group's everyday relationships, media scenarios and attempts to choreograph the game.

In this regard, it appears that resonances arose on many different levels in the intra-actions through which everyday life is established. This can include resonances, mutual imitation, or the reinforcement, moderation, or down-playing of themes and moods found in media narratives and, for example, phantasmal play arenas, as well as aggression and tensions in the group of children, in virtual universes, media narratives and play arenas.

In some games, as I have described, whole scenarios are directly adopted and the resonance occurs between tensions and moods from school classrooms and schoolyards, virtual games, off-screen imitations of games, play in the playground, small videos uploaded on YouTube and so on. For example, *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 2000) can be the basis for play scenarios using larger pieces of equipment in the form of weapons and camouflage clothing in the so-called laser games or laser shooting ranges, which are located around the Danish countryside, where children aged ten years and above can play analogue shooting games. In this way, children's entertainment and play imitates the games that imitate the adults' real wars – laser games imitate *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 2000), *Battlefield* (Visceral Games, 2015) and *Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2007), which, in turn, imitate the wars in Iraq and now Syria and other places. And the children

imitate the laser games when they are in the playground or in their gardens, just as they stage battlefields and fights with the toys they have at their disposal. Imitations, transformation and experiments with scenarios and sequences are played across the spaces in which the children are located. One can also see the scenes and characters from shooting games in videos uploaded to YouTube with Lego figures in the roles as *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 2000) terrorists and anti-terrorists, or as GTA's (Rockstar North, 2004) Carl Johnson and his adversaries. Since Lego does not provide blood or beard stubble, these are painted on, so the dead terrorists look quite credible when the finished piece is uploaded to YouTube.

Children are part of the complex, intra-acting apparatuses that enact our common socio-material reality. Their formation processes and their participation also constitute an intra-active force and, no matter how extensive and complex the apparatus is, it is essential to consider their contribution and their processes of becoming, not only in relation to what the virtual violence means for children and young people, but also in relation to the more extensive apparatus that constitutes digital violence as a phenomenon. Children's and young people's demands and importance in relation to market mechanisms enact intra-active effects in the apparatus (Barad, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Based on the analyses and perspectives presented in this article, we can conclude that the intra-action among technology, virtual violence, children and young people's everyday lives, their experiences, engagements and relational practices is indeed complex. It is emergent, changing and situated in its character.

Virtual experiences open up possibilities and imaginative horizons that are entangled with all the other possibilities and imaginative horizons in children's and young people's everyday lives. The phantasmal universes in computer games offer *thinkable* and *(im)possible* characters, actions, reactions, ways of relating, dangers, failures and successes, which merge with and become part of children and young people's experiences and processes of subjectification. They entangle the comprehensive repertoire of the familiar, recognizable, known and imaginable elements in their lives – thereby also experiences of care, warmth, boredom, humour, creativity and whatever else may set the tone and establish the premises for their Danish childhood.

The relevance of virtual violence and thereby the reasons children and young people may have to engage in it, is situated in their everyday lives and linked to

their processes of subjectification; more comprehensively, to the overall apparatus that enacts their becoming and their belonging.

The children and young people recognize the violence, the virtual positionings, characters and possible actions that the fictitious digital universes allow them to experience as phantasmal. Being a warrior and carrying weapons remains a fantasy in the children's and young peoples' current societal situation. However, if the apparatus changes – if socio-material, political, global economic conditions change – the fictitious and impossible can change status and intra-actions in the extensive apparatus can be transformed.

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