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## **Games, Play, Meaning and *Minecraft***

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What criteria come into play when children assess challenge, intimidation and harm in games? To explore this question we use material from an interview co-produced by a parent (Carr) and child ('Cheesycat Puff' aka CC), in combination with the transcription of an audio-recorded, co-played session of *Minecraft*. The approach is informed by literature on auto-ethnography (e.g. Ellis, Adams, Bochner 2011), and shaped to some extent by the game-like assessments that we have encountered in clinical settings, including child development units and audiology departments. This is relevant, because it is our experience that even in clinical settings the meaning of a game is not determined by its rules or goals. As with the games that we play at home, these game-like assessments (with their beads, puzzles, buzzes, tricks, rules, challenges and goals) can generate varied, elusive and contradictory meanings.

Consider, for example, this session with an occupational therapist: it's summer 2012 and the health-worker is playing a game of catch-and-pass the sandbag with CC as part of an assessment of her coordination and motor skills. At the same time, CC is playing a game of "Can I hit that light, with this sandbag?" She is having a good time. The health-worker is not. What is evident is that the rules, goals and the scoring of the sandbag game as set by the health worker do not determine the meaning of the game for CC, or for me as spectator. It doesn't follow, of course, that all potential meanings are equal. My daughter's glee in non-compliance might be considered ephemeral whereas the score that is generated by the health-worker has repercussions. It goes on record. What matters, in the context of this particular paper, is that the health-worker's production of a score involves a process of extrication. She produces an authorized meaning of the game by threshing out and discarding the alternatives.

Game studies literature suggests that game-play involves a mobilized set of structural, textual and contextual factors, and different aspects of the game might be prioritized at differing times by those involved. Games are actualized through play, where 'play' is fluidic, contingent, reactive, embodied and experiential (e.g. Malaby 2007, Pearce 2004, Carr 2017). If the meaning of a game (even a game of catch) can vary because games involve play and because players differ, what are the implications for the assessment of games? What might game assessment reveal about meaning-making? These questions are explored in two parts. Firstly, through an account of the discourses, rhetoric and content that a young player references when assessing harm, intimidation and challenge in games. Are criteria drawn primarily from the rules of the game, from the setting and game content, or from the actions that are simulated within the game? Secondly: how relevant are these interpretations and assessments once play begins? To what extent does the game described in the interview resemble the game that is actualized during play?

The methods employed combine an interview-styled conversation (parent, child) with a game-play session (child, two parents) [1]. The game session was audio-recorded and then transcribed. For the sake of privacy, the child-contributor is using a pseudonym ('CC'). My initials, DC, are used on the transcript. That does not undermine CC's anonymity as I do not use our family name at work. CC was made aware of the potentially public nature of this work, and reminded that she had the option to withdraw at any time during the interview, or to retract any information shared either during the interview or afterwards. She has read and agreed the completed paper, which is shared with her permission, and her father's. Her father took part in sections of the interview and during our game session, and he appears on the transcript as F.

## **Part 1: Talking about *Minecraft***

To begin with, CC was reminded about her privacy, and that she could end the interview at any time. She chose a pseudonym and made choices about what was appropriate to disclose.

DC: What's your name for this?

CC: It's Cheesycat. Cheesycat Puff [aka 'CC']

DC: Should I include how old you are or anything else?

CC: No. Because it is my private information.

After a discussion of potential titles for the interview, we moved on to the first attribute: 'helpfulness'. CC was aware that the interview would be followed by a session co-playing *Minecraft*.

DC: How does a parent know if the game that their child is playing is helpful?

CC: I think *Minecraft* is helpful because it makes your body think about what you need do in the game to make yourself safe from monsters that come in the night. Such as the black things that make the teleports. Teleporting is where you move to another place in your own time. I will show you an example [picks up stuffed toy]. Imagine if Julie is here. Then she's there.

That's teleporting.

DC: So...the game is helpful because..?

CC: It helps you to build structures that keep you safe in the night and also you get to level up.

When CC assesses the helpfulness of a game she highlights its goals and resources: The game is helpful because it offers you a chance to teleport, level up and stay safe, as well as the means to do it. When asked about 'helpfulness' CC emphasizes what might be described as the game-as-designed (goals, resources) while referring to an implied player: 'your body', 'you move' 'you safe', 'you need') that is partially distinguished from the position she's taking as informant ('I think', 'I will show'). CC makes claims about the game using evidence drawn from within the game. Yet, when it comes to the next issue, that of 'harm', CC switches to considerations that are external to the game and its rules and simulations.

DC: How would a parent know if a game is 'harmful'?

CC: Because... Basically on the television when a game comes on, it says "do not play if you have epilepsy or seizures". That's how you could know that a game is dangerous.

DC: Are there other ways a game could be harmful?

CC: No, just that. If you do have epilepsy or seizures, you need to consult a doctor before playing.

CC plays *Minecraft* on a PlayStation console using the television. When considering 'harm' CC ignores game content to focus on hardware, and avoids defining harm in relation to an implied, universal or abstract player. Instead, she talks about people that she believes to be at risk according to information (a paratext) that she has read and regards as factual. Later, when it comes to a question about assessing if a game is 'appropriate' or not, CC suggests the potential benefits of particular games, and discusses these in relation to the needs of a specific player (herself).

CC: *Knack* is appropriate because it has a bit of surprise and it helps your focus and your skills. The racing game [*Sonic and Sega All Stars Racing Essential*] is appropriate because it helps your fingers to get relaxed and stronger if you have trouble with writing.

DC: Is that your experience?

CC: Yep [...] The main reason why games are important is because they help your focus and your muscles get stronger if you have a have a writing disability, or just a disability, and it helps you learn more.

DC: [...] Do you think *Minecraft* makes you better with handwriting?

CC: Yes, and focusing. That is for real. I don't focus much. *Minecraft* helps focusing skills and instructions. Instructions are important and *Minecraft* has instructions.

DC: I think you are trying to sell me a copy of *Minecraft*.

CC: Exactly...Are you seriously going to write this?

DC: I don't know. But I do think it's interesting that you say that games help with your hands and writing. I just can't tell if you're saying it so that I put *Minecraft* on now, or if you really think so.

CC: I think it is important because I don't really focus at school and stuff.

DC: Can I include that in the interview?

CC: Yes!

CC is keen to emphasize the benefits of 'appropriate' gaming. This is the first time she has suggested that console gaming supports an improvement in fine motor skills. She combines this with claims that the game will support her with 'focus' (concentration) and then suggests that these new powers will transfer into a formal learning environment. I'm mystified as to where she's picked up the 'edutainment shtick' but I am impressed by her attempts to leverage it in to game-related negotiations. When it comes to the question of what would constitute an 'inappropriate' game, CC combines references to a specific game that (she says) she only knows by reputation, with references to gender, health and safety. When CC discusses the idea that a game might be inappropriate for children she does it while referencing a series of concerns that are not specific to games.

DC: Are there games that are NOT appropriate?

CC: Scary games. If games make your epilepsy worse. Like a shooting game. Like *Fortnite*. I haven't actually really played it but I have an idea because it's a shooting game so it might be too violent for somebody who has epilepsy.

DC: Tell me about *Fortnite*.

CC: I haven't played it I told you already.

DC: Do kids at school play it?

CC: Yes. J and B play it. They are basically boys. They like it and Miss [teacher] says - and sometimes I say: "No that's a shooting game, and it's a bit inappropriate".

DC: Why inappropriate?

CC: It's too scary if you have epilepsy because of the blood and shooting and yelling and violence.

DC: Yelling?

CC: You know - shooting. Sometimes people yell. It's just an example because shooting is wrong, but Donald Trump probably thinks shooting is right.

DC: Does he play *Fortnite*?

CC: I don't know, because he's American, and I don't live in America [...] but I don't know him, because I don't want to [...] every time he does something bad to people and the earth or cities I feel bad then I talk about it to try and feel better. I get those facts from the news [*Newsround* on Children's BBC] and I have my own opinions about it and that's why I tend to talk about it a lot.

DC: So, the news can upset children. Does that mean that the news is inappropriate for children?

CC: Yes. It's scary and it upsets people and at the end of every *Newsround* it says that if you are scared or upset or frightened about anything you saw on the news today tell a parent or guardian to help you fix it.

CC doesn't argue that 'shooting' in games is inappropriate because of the real-world act that it simulates. Instead, CC is concerned here with 'violence' as a genre of intensity, where the intensity itself could harm people that she considers vulnerable on the basis of being a child, and/or being susceptible to

seizures. Through a reference to a children's news programme CC also makes it clear that she doesn't consider this kind of troubling intensity to be specific to games. For CC, players actually shouting at each other is more of an issue than simulated shooting, and she makes a related point when asked about games and intimidation. It is intensity of feeling that is the issue, and that is not at all limited to games.

DC: How would a parent know if a game was too intimidating? Can you think of an example of something that makes you feel like that?

CC: Yes. *Harry Potter*, the movie. Can you put on *Minecraft* now?

DC: Is the *Harry Potter* movie scarier than a game?

CC: Yes

DC: Why?

CC: Because I'm mostly scared of blood and violence and I don't think it's for me...I like some bits but it's a bit too violent. And I don't need to be asked twice. My brain has run out of answers. Can I get daddy?

DC: Yep alright.

[CC goes off. Then comes back].

CC: He says he doesn't want to [put *Minecraft* on immediately]. I'm just trying to persuade him.

CC regards certain varieties of intensity as a problem, yet when it comes to content which might otherwise seem reasonable to describe as 'violent' (e.g. exploding monsters) she remains unfazed. Here's an example of an action that might be considered violent, yet CC only mentions it when speaking of teaching and learning.

DC: What are the rules in *Minecraft* and how did you learn them?

CC: The first time I saw a monster I thought it was basically harmless but then it went near me and exploded. That's how you learn the rules. And the most important one is to have fun and be creative.

DC: So, the monsters taught you the rules

CC: Yes. Of the game. Being creative is the most important thing to be safe.

CC keeps dropping in references to fun and creativity (she's lobbying for our *Minecraft* session to begin). She suggests that safety is contingent on creativity. Perhaps she imagines that as an adult I will be drawn to games that embed an enforced, punitive or medicinal model of 'creativity' as something that is 'good for children'.

As noted, CC refers to violence, and links it with a disturbing intensity of feeling that is not specific to the games, or to the actions simulated within a game. However, when it comes to considerations of game 'challenges' and assessing difficulty in games, CC emphasizes criteria that are specific to games. While CC mentions goals, leveling up or skills elsewhere, here she's describes glitches and design faults. It's not her role as the player to improve. It's up to the game to incorporate better design. While my questions frame the player's learning as something that relates to (and potentially changes perceptions of) difficulty levels, CC is clear that it's the game's problem: If the game design improved, her playing would get better and she'd achieve the

goals set by the game.

DC: How does a parent know if a game is challenging enough or too challenging?

CC: Yes. I've already discussed this. The most challenging game is the Mickey Mouse game [*Disney Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two*]. Nothing works and it takes...Like Oswald for example. The lucky rabbit. He hovers for about 2 seconds.

DC: So it's challenging because it's hard to reach the goals?

CC: Yes - the goal that you are aiming for in the game.

DC: How could it be easier?

CC: If Oswald would hover for longer.

DC: What if you were a better player, would it be easier?

CC: Yes it would.

DC: How do you get better?

CC: If there were more clues. Most of the characters don't say anything at all. They just sit there.

DC: Yes – but how would YOU get better?

CC: I've already answered that.

CC identifies the kind of design flaw that can't be resolved by improved skills on the part of a player. At least one reviewer of that same game agrees: "Jumping, the most important element of a platformer, is a clumsy mess" (McShea 2012). Our interview ends with CC offering to help me with the controls, if I will help her find the game: "Let's go and put *Minecraft* on".

## **Part 2: Playing *Minecraft* together**

At different points in our discussion CC refers to elements of the game (e.g. rules), the hardware (e.g. the warning about photosensitivity), player actions (e.g. shouting), and phenomena from outside of the game (e.g. aspects of player identity, news, films). She draws on various discourses, including the notions of therapeutic, creative and constructive gaming. When referring to harm, she ignores game content. When asked to consider 'scariness' she speaks about the news and then a film, rather than game content.

Alternatively, when it comes to questions about challenge and difficulty, CC doesn't talk about the acquisition of skills, she talks about poor game design. As the following transcript of our *Minecraft* session indicates, when making sense of a game during play, CC makes similar shifts (game, player, cultural references) but there's a further framework to consider, and that is play itself. As will become evident, we are playing *Minecraft*, and we are not playing a building game.

When the session begins CC spots a lakeside mansion in the distance. The steps in are very tall, so CC (in the guise of our avatar, Cardboard Thing) attempts to dig her way in. She gets inside and wanders the hallways until she encounters a guard called a Vindicator. The vindicator slays Cardboard Thing. For most of the rest of the session we're wandering around trying to find the mansion again, stumbling across chickens, pigs, cows, horses and the occasional monster. CC wants to get back to the mansion. CC's dad knows

*Minecraft* well, so he offers advice ('F' on the transcript). Here's our arrival at the mansion:

CC: I want to get into the castle.

F: You can't jump two blocks.

CC: I'll have to dig.

DC: They're going to be mad if you start digging away at their front steps aren't they?

CC: I'm just investigating because I found a whole new world here. I'm trying to get in.

DC: [Laughs] ...you're just smashing up their house.

Having demolished her way inside, CC begins to explore.

DC: This is creepy.

CC: You try.

[CC passes the controls to DC, who passes the controls back to CC]

DC: No, it's creepy.

CC: It's just dark.

F: A deserted mansion at the edge of a lake...

DC: ...what could possibly go wrong?

CC: Nothing. I'm gonna dig some.

DC: No, don't smash up their carpet [laughs]. You've already destroyed the front of their house. I still don't understand why you're carrying a stick.

CC: Who wants to go in and investigate?

DC: Alright...oh, look, go upstairs.

CC: I'm scared.

F: You want to go upstairs?

CC: Can you try?

[CC passes controls to F]

DC: Okay, scary music for when you go up the stairs...

CC: [Laughs]...Ah, maybe we should just check the outside first.

One of CC's strategies for managing the level of scariness in *Minecraft* is to pass the controller to somebody else. She continues to watch, but the threat apparently becomes somebody else's problem. The scariness is connecting to varieties of intensity, just as in the interview, but in this case, it's an (almost) manageable intensity that mixes shouting, laughing and screaming. We spend more time exploring and a second strategy for managing scariness becomes evident:

CC: Giant spider! I'm scared of these things.

DC: Scared of what...

CC: Giant spiders. They're coming

[CC suddenly flicks over to one of the game's menu screens]

CC: They're so scary.

DC: Can we go back to the game...?

CC: No, this is, it's so scary.

DC: Oh, okay. So...what part of it is worrying you?

CC: Hear that slurpy noise?

DC: The what?  
CC: Hear the slurpy noise.  
DC: No...[laughs].  
F: It's, it's, there's a, essentially it's the noise a spider makes.  
DC: Okay, so there's a spider coming?  
F: Yeah.  
DC: Is it in the tree?  
F: We don't know.  
DC: Oh. Oh, I saw something up there.  
F: That's a pig.  
DC: That's a pig?

CC's second strategy for managing scariness is to switch to a menu screen. One of CC's favourite game mechanics is collection, so the line between collecting things within the game-world, and collecting in the sense offered by the game's menus might not be that distinct. Eventually CC decides that she wants to return to the mansion. CC has shown interest in collecting pumpkins (in order to restore Cardboard Thing's health) but she doesn't bother to collect anything else, or engage in any crafting or building. She has made houses before when she's playing quietly on her own (she also likes digging giant holes). Yet in this particular session we're engaging in a collective, chaotic and experimental version of play, and so we are producing a chaotic, anarchic version of the game. For CC, deciding what version of the game to actualise is her choice, "cos it's my game". For me as co-player, and a researcher, it's a reminder of the degree to which our participation shapes and changes the mode of play that's adopted, and hence the game that's actualized.

DC: So what happens now?  
F: Well... [sighs] if you were playing it as the game was intended to be played you'd be mining resources and constructing things.  
DC: Why?  
F: Uh, essentially to make your...[sighs] yeah, I don't know why.  
CC: I decided I'm going to sneak into the house.  
DC: [Laughs].  
CC: I'm going to dig into their house.  
DC: Won't they get cross?  
CC: Dude, no. I'll just check it out.  
DC: You're just going around destroying other people's houses. Is that...?  
CC: Yeah, why?  
DC: Is that the point of *Minecraft*?  
F: No, but this is clearly...  
CC: My choice cos it's my game.  
DC: Hm. To be fair it's mostly what Lara Croft does.  
F: That's true.  
[CC explores the house and finds a Vindicator]  
CC: Oh dude, they're getting cross.  
DC: Oh, look, there's somebody. Oh!  
CC: [Screams/laughs].  
[Vindicator kills the intruder]  
DC: He died. Cardboard Thing was slain by Vindicator.

CC: I hate them!  
DC: [Laughs].  
CC: Maybe I should have rung the bell first.  
DC: So...OK, you messed up their house so they chased you out with an axe and killed you.  
CC: Yeah [laughs]. Sounds a lot like a thing Miss Trunchbull would do to Matilda.

Here we're making sense of the game (or imposing meaning on events in the game) using external references. The adults connect the hostile intruder theme with the *Tomb Raider* franchise, while CC connects it to Dahl's book, *Matilda*. We respawn, and wander around trying to find our way back to the mansion. We encounter more creatures. By this point CC has decided that the vindicators do not like Cardboard Thing because Cardboard thing is a spider (and for all I know, she's right). CC then proposes to 'act more human' as a disguise. She plans to 'pass' as human by ringing the doorbell and entering through the front door, rather than smashing her way in to the mansion through a wall. But to do that, we'll have to find our way back. Sometime later:

CC: Just swim quick, you'll drown if you...  
F: It's very easy to get disorientated.  
DC: It's just, agh...  
CC: [Laughs]  
DC: What's that?  
CC: That's a wolf, that's a wolf.  
DC: Are they dangerous?  
F: No. Sometimes they are, but they seem to be okay.  
CC: They're cute.  
[Action: Cardboard Thing tries to befriend wolf by patting it]  
CC: Don't hurt them, don't punch them mummy. It's getting to be night-time, find that house. Slay the vindicator. Slay all the vindicators and then you get to rule your house.  
DC: ...I get to rule the house?  
CC: Yeah.  
F: I've never, I've never...[sigh]  
DC: Hang on, so...your idea of playing *Minecraft* is to break into the castle, kill everyone who lives there and then take it over?  
CC: Yeah, because they killed me  
F: And then destroy it, block by block.  
DC: [Laughs].

We're getting louder and laughing more when stupid things happen, which loops back into how we're playing, what we do, and how we react. As noted, in the interview CC emphasizes that intensity of feeling can a problem, but as the amount of shouting, exploding and laughing we are all doing by this point indicates, intensity doesn't have to be a bad thing.

CC: Oh, turn around, turn around, quick!  
DC: Turn around what? That way?  
CC: [Screams/laughs] –

[Action: a green-headed stick monster has arrived]  
F: That's going to kill you. It's going to explode and you'll die.  
CC: Yeah. There's your monster.  
DC: Can I hit it?  
[Action: Cardboard Thing hits monster a with a stick]  
DC: Oh. I killed it.  
CC: Dude...so rude.  
DC: I won. Ha.  
F: Wow, that's amazing. How did you do that?  
DC: I dunno...  
F: Normally [if you get close to one of those] you just die.  
CC: [victory chant] Mummy, mummy...

We're all enjoying some very conventional video game tropes, including combat with monsters. We are lost, we are being loud, we're having a good time, and we'd be happy to experiment by poking whatever we came across with a stick to see what happens. In retrospect, if I'd asked more about resource collection, and directed more curiosity towards building, a different mode of play might have been generated, and a different version of the game would have emerged.

Once we're playing together, we're collaborating in the production of a particular version of *Minecraft*. Although, as anyone who's played MMORPGs or *Monopoly* will know, players can disagree about the most appropriate way to actualize a game. Arguments over loot division and strategy, back-seat driving and player-to-player pedagogy are all reflections of the difficulties involved in the management of (potential, multiple and contested) meanings during play (Carr 2012).

In this particular instance, the *Minecraft* that we've collectively actualised is a puzzle game involving killer robot guards. It doesn't much resemble the creative building game that CC described in our earlier interview. Furthermore, the player that CC performs during the session (the role, the actions) doesn't much resemble the industrious and creative player hinted at during the interview.

DC: So... can I go and kill some vindicators now?  
F: Yeah, off you go.  
CC: Oh, yeah. Go to the front door, open their house and go in.  
DC: Yeah... I'm just going to dig my way in through the side.  
CC: No, dude, you're gonna get killed, trust me.  
DC: Now, can you tell me why you like this game?  
CC: It's just a puzzle, like a puzzle.  
DC: If it's a puzzle what are you trying to solve?  
CC: The puzzle is to get in the house and not get killed by vindicators, of course. There's a spider nearby... stand by everyone! Quick, swim, quick...  
DC: I'm not worried...oh! I'm riding a fish.  
CC: But, mummy, you're going to drown, get up quick.  
DC: I'm not going to drown, I'm a robot. I am going to kill the vindicators.  
CC: [To F] Mummy's brave.

[Cardboard Thing finds a vindicator]  
CC: [Screams / Laughs]  
F: [Laughs] You died.  
DC: [Laughs]

## Conclusion

During the interview CC is trying to persuade me to put the game on, and she's using parent-friendly, pro-education rhetoric to make her case: It's all about 'being creative and having fun!' and it's the first time she's used the "games help me to improve my fine motor skills" argument. As our play session makes apparent, the version of the player and the version of the game that were evoked during the interview don't survive for long in *Minecraft*. As co-author, parent and interviewer I had not attempted anything like an 'objective' role and yet I'm still surprised, in retrospect, about the extent to which my involvement in a *Minecraft* session apparently resulted in our actualizing a cube-headed version of *Dead Space*. From a research perspective it raises questions about the role or presence of a researcher – who laughs at particular events rather than others, or expresses an interest in certain kinds of actions rather than others. It's a reminder that, as researchers, we are implicated in the meaning-making that takes place during play, then during analysis, then during writing up. We're engaging in processes of selection and omission that position us in a particular way in relation to game content, co-players, research practices (Taylor 2008) and debates in the field. It's not that different from the kind of 'pick 'n' mix' work that CC does when assessing harm or appropriateness in games.

Our interview and play session indicate that meaning-making related to games is shaped by the contexts of play. 'Contexts' might involve the location of play itself (in a clinic, a classroom, at home), the game's framing within paratexts and by genre, the conventions that exist within a player community, or the proclivities of your co-players. There are player communities where only goal-directed play is considered acceptable, just as there are forms of analysis that presuppose particular modes of play, including my own work on interpretation and representation in narrative-orientated game genres (e.g. Carr 2017). This is one of the reasons why it might be important to continue to reflect on and distinguish between claims about meaning-making that pertain to games-as-designed, claims about meaning-making during play, and claims about the interpretation of games as a situated practice. These distinctions will have implications for game scholars wishing to engage in game interpretation while acknowledging the complexity of the relationship between meaning and the game-as-structure, the game-as-played, and play as a variable, multiple, embodied and contextual mode of engagement.

## Notes:

[1] CC and I agreed the ethical framing of this work though a discussion of the BERA ethical research guidelines, including sections on confidentiality, informed consent, collaboration and authorship. The focus on the assessment of harm, intimidation and challenge was suggested by the Call for Papers for this special issue.

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## Games

*Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two* Junction Point, Blitz games, Heavy Iron Studios (2012)

*Fortnite* Epic Games/People Can Fly (2017)

*Knack* SIE Japan Studio (2013)

*Minecraft* Mojang, Markus Persson, 4J Studios (2009)

*Sonic and Sega All Stars Racing Essential*

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