

Parents and gaming literacy



OFFICE OF FILM
& LITERATURE
CLASSIFICATION

Te Tari Whakarōpū Tukuata, Tuhituhinga

PARENTS AND GAMING LITERACY

A RESEARCH REPORT FOR:

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EXECUTIVE COMMENTARY

The Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) commissioned Waikato researcher Dr Gareth Schott to investigate the degree of parents' gaming literacy, and any connections between this literacy and their perceptions of violence in video games, as well as their perceptions of the efficacy of the classification system for games.

The research involved twenty parents of young game players from the Waikato region. It sought to include both game-playing and non-game playing parents in order to gain insight into whether there were any notable differences in the responses of participants based on these differences. Nine of the parents identified themselves as game players, with the remaining eleven declaring no experience or interest in games. In some cases, those identifying themselves as game players referred to past experiences rather than a current and active interest in games.

Many participants felt that they were able to judge the maturity of their son/daughter in relation to deciding whether a game was suitable for them. However, many of the parents who participated in this research said they were not involved in the purchasing or acquisition of age-restricted video games for their dependants, instead responding to games once they were present in the home. This highlights the importance of increasing awareness around the meaning of the classifications which are assigned to video games, particularly age-restricted classifications. It also reinforces the 'gate-keeper' role of retail staff in relation to age-restricted video games.

All but two participants played the video game *Grand Theft Auto IV*, and the report focuses on discussion of their responses to that game. Two participants played *ODST: Halo 3*, which was originally selected for the purposes of this research by the Classification Office to be a contrasting game experience to *Grand Theft Auto IV*, but which proved too difficult for inexperienced players to familiarise themselves with in the allotted timeframe.

Interviews were conducted before and after the gaming session to ascertain and evaluate the impact (if any) that playing an R18 video game had on participants' perceptions of violent video games. The majority of participants expressed their surprise at enjoying playing the game (*Grand Theft Auto IV*).

Significantly, the research highlighted the importance of the context in which violence is elicited in a video game. Participants found their character in complex situations, where committing acts of violence was sometimes necessary in order to survive. The game's strong narrative also helped to

contextualise the violence and enabled some participants to identify with parts of the game's story. Participants noted that their experiences of playing the game did not match their preconceptions of a highly violent 'murder-simulator' – preconceptions which had largely been shaped by media reports of the game. For most participants, it prompted a radical re-evaluation of the game and of what may be contained within an R18 classified game.

Participants generally showed uncertainty regarding the reasons for the game's R18 classification, as well as a lack of awareness of how video game classification operates. However, after playing the game, most participants suggested that it was the sophistication of the game that gave it its classification, with participants highlighting the maturity needed to be able to comprehend the irony, satire, and intertextual references employed by the game's developers.

A key finding of this research is the importance of providing parents with information in order to increase their awareness and understanding of the video games their dependants are engaging with, by helping them to learn about games as well as about the classification process.

1 - INTRODUCTION

During the last decade the emergence and development of Game Studies, a new discipline of humanities-oriented theory and research addressing interactive digital games, have offered accounts of the way games (as technological, aesthetic and social phenomena) constitute a distinct form of expression and discrete category of cultural activity. The development of a new discipline devoted solely to games is based on the premise that gameplay is a different kind of mediated activity compared to other forms of media reception.

It is clear that while games represent evidence of the ‘transposability of the story’ (Chatman 1978) into any medium, a key difference that renders games distinct from more traditional media is their ludic¹ (or game-like) constituents– that is, how game playing is both a configurative practice as well as an interpretative practice. Games are dynamic entities that remain ‘*in potentia*’ until actualised by the player (Klastrup 2003). In doing so, the player is involved in recursive actions² that produce polysemic (or many different) performances and readings (Consalvo 2003). Such qualities might support the argument that it is a ‘mistake to consider that [games] present only one type of experience and foster one type of engagement’ (Newman 2002). To this effect, UK academics Dovey and Kennedy have argued that in assessing a game ‘we cannot have recourse solely to its textual characteristics; we have to pay particular attention to the *moment* of its enactment as it is played’ (Dovey & Kennedy 2006, p.6). Competing with the interpretive demands of film and literature is a basic perceptual act that demands that a game player picks up affordances (perceived action possibilities) in the game environment that indicate possibilities for how to interact with, and in, the game space. As New Zealand-produced Game Studies research into metrics of violence attests, experienced game players are capable of perceiving the ‘fusion of ludic, narrative and representational forces that continually fold, unfold and refold as play is activated’ (Schott 2008, 2009)³. Because these forces are complex, classifying game content can be challenging. This necessitates the dual approach used by the Classification Office to examine games, an approach that incorporates two perspectives: that of the Classification Officer who is the authority at applying the classification law to publications, and that of an expert gamer able to explore the highest levels of

¹ ‘Ludus’ is Latin for ‘game’. The term ‘ludology’ has been coined to describe the study of game and play activities.

² Within design vocabulary ‘recursive actions’ is the term that has been applied to the repetitive series of small-scale challenges and obstacles faced by a player within a game level. See Lauteren, G. (2002), ‘Pleasure of the Playable Text: Towards an aesthetic theory of computer games’, in F. Mäyrä (ed.), *Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference 2002 Proceedings*, Tampere University Press, Tampere.

³ Schott, G. (2009) "I Like the Idea of Killing But Not the Idea of Cruelty": How New Zealand youth negotiate the pleasures of simulated violence, *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory. Proceedings of DiGRA 2009*, <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/09287.36489.pdf>

the game and any other aspects at the direction of the Classification Officer.

The OFLC has shown continued commitment to ascertaining New Zealanders' understanding and perceptions of the classification system through research focusing on the degree of knowledge of, and attention given to, the age-restrictions put in place to protect the public good from possible injury. In the Classification Office's 2009 research report *Public Perceptions of a Violent Videogame – X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, it considered the future value of research that could 'explore the extent to which the public's perception of causal links between game playing and various social ills' might be 'moderated or even undermined by [knowledge of] how players actually respond to and negotiate their way through the content and characteristics of the medium' (OFLC 2009, p.24). A similar request for research of this nature has also emerged from game-related research communities. As UK education researchers Oliver and Pelletier (2005) have also argued there is a paucity of research generally *detailling* game play⁴.

1.1 - Developing Existing Research

The 2009 research study *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* provided a useful platform and catalyst for the research outlined in this report. The 2009 research was not only informative in its findings, but presented an interesting choice of research design. However, while the research concentrated on a single game text, participant viewpoints were not play-derived or always textually evaluative. Indeed, the report acknowledged how existing dominant frameworks for understanding and discussing games eclipsed the specific conditions and experiences offered by the text under investigation. The 2009 research opted to employ a perception-analysis methodology to record participants' comfort levels with audio-visual clips from the game *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, consisting of 1) player-activated gameplay footage and 2) non-interactive cut-scenes, typically designed to either move the narrative plot of the game forward or bridge game levels.

Examined in the context of play, emotion research highlights a certain predictability associated with emotion types that produces *action tendencies* (Drake & Myers 2006, pp.608-622), that is, likely courses of action triggered by a particular emotion in a particular situation. It is therefore logical to assume that games are designed to provoke action responses from the player that were not possible when viewed solely as a moving image clip. The current research sought to address the possible shortcomings of the prior research by examining what might be gained from engaging participants

⁴ Oliver, M. & Pelletier, C. (2005) The Things We Learned on Liberty Island: Designing games to help people become competent game players, *Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference: Changing Views – Worlds in Play*.

more directly in a structural and textual analysis of the impact and appropriateness of game text by **activating** and experiencing the text directly through **play**. This would require participants to act as agents, responding to the conditions of the game environment.

This report addresses a qualitative distinction, in effect, between watching and playing games – a distinction that holds significance for the dual presence of game software in New Zealand households, not only as played experiences but also viewed experiences. Unlike film, where *looking* is choreographed for the audience, producing a relatively comparable experience for them, by contrast, the observation of gameplay from the perspective of the viewer (not engaged in play) is typically unprocessed and appears repetitive both in terms of actions and sequences. That is, while games are exhibited and enacted on screen they are not necessarily watchable or explicable as a recognisable narrative form. In the context of player experience, it is also the case that game scholars have drawn attention to the difference between online (direct player input) and offline engagement with games (viewing of cut-scenes) (Newman 2002). In the former condition, the player or activator of on-screen action attunes to a qualitatively unique set of information as they concentrate on manoeuvring their avatar⁵ in attempting to reach goals.

Research by Schott and Kambouri (2003) illustrated that players and onlookers/advisors also possess different capacities for attending to what is onscreen during collaborative play. Compared to those controlling game play, those who were advising on the basis solely of watching on-screen action showed a greater capacity to take in more of the information available on screen. A comparable difference, with possibly even greater disparity, might be suggested between the perception of on-screen gameplay action between those who play games and those who view games, either over the shoulder or in passing.

The distinction between watching and playing games is significant in terms of the perceived acceptability of ‘game states’.⁶ For example, players’ goals and oppositional structures iteratively evolve as games progress, with earlier levels serving to prepare the player to face more worthy, difficult and challenging opposition in the subsequent stages of the game. Had participants in the OFLC’s 2009 research played *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* for the same length of time as they watched clips (deemed ‘boring’ and ‘repetitive’ as a viewing experience), the game state may have been interpreted differently, given that all games are required to function as pedagogic texts, preparing

⁵ This term has been appropriated by gaming culture to describe the on-screen representation of the player, in the form of a character or alter ego.

⁶ The terms refers to how all game elements in play are configured at a specific moment, or during a defined period of time, such as a particular sequence of a game, e.g. a mission or a level.

players to engage competently with the available experiences contained within the game (Oliver & Pelletier 2005).

Kurt Squire has also argued that, 'Choosing a single set of inter-actions in a game for scrutiny is unproductive and disingenuous although it is a common tactic of mainstream media reporting of games' (2008, p.644). He reports research that has demonstrated how gamers do wildly different things with the worlds available to them, and conceptualise the worlds and themselves within them according to their own lived histories (Squire & DeVane 2006). The current research, therefore, looks at whether the nature of comprehension and significance attributed to content within game texts alters between **viewing**, and **direct player-to-game control**.

1.2 - Who Should Be Studied?

The current research opted to study how parents (of game players) evaluate a game text based upon direct experience playing that game. Despite persistent warnings of the 'holding power' games have over children (Turkle 1984, p.66), research suggests that it is not necessarily children that determine that they are 'bowling alone' (Putnam 2000) but, to a certain degree, parents who are unwilling to engage with game cultures (Green *et al.* 1998). In *Toward a Precautionary Risk Management of TV Violence* (2004), Ellen Wartella, a principal researcher for a major US study, *National Television Violence Study* (NTVS), is cited for her observation that research is required on how '*child audiences perceive, appropriate, and negotiate media messages through the variety of social groups to which they belong, such as the family*' (cited in King & Bridgman 2003, p.53).

In a digital age, games also form part of a broader suite of literacies that individuals are expected to master. The European Union Media Literacy Expert Group has usefully defined media literacy as:

the ability to access, analyse and evaluate the power of images, sounds and messages which we are now being confronted with on a daily basis and [which] are an important part of our contemporary culture.

While the concept of media and multi-literacies has attracted much discussion within contemporary education literature, discussions rarely extend to consideration of the manner in which parents, too, are responding to technological and economic changes. In an interesting online discussion thread, players (age unknown) were noted discussing 'Can you teach parents to game?' Comments included:

My parents hate videogames [but] they only played them like once EVER,

I tried to teach my Mum Guitar Hero. I had to go Beginner on Slowest Speed, and even then she missed tons of notes. It's truly pitiful.

I tried and succeeded. My mom likes Fable 2 and Kirby on DS. She's not very good but she will learn. But my dad will not even touch the controller.

(<http://forums.sarcasticgamer.com/showthread.php?t=15973>)

Beyond the ability of games texts to teach the player how to perform isolated skills, sequenced skills, and finally produce mastery (see Gee 2005, pp.24-25), little is known more generally about how players learn to read games more broadly, thus recognising and reflecting upon the moral and ethical frameworks governing particular game worlds. As Zagal (2009) argues, actions considered unethical in an out-of-game context may be expected or even demanded while playing a game. A good player (of any type of game) may be one who best exploits his opponent's weaknesses or deceives his fellow players most effectively. The current research was therefore interested to examine whether parents assent to the conditions of the game even if they find them unethical. Furthermore, to examine whether parents perceived that games pose a challenge to the current social order by encouraging young players (in the context of play) to operate in these ways, and what impact this has on decisions about the suitability of some games for young people.

1.3 - General Aims of the Research

1. This research sought to assess parental perceptions of interactive digital games as immersive entertainment experiences that are heavily reliant on 'contestation' (Jenkins & Squire 2002). In doing so, it sought to focus on the perspectives of parents of game players most affected by R16 and R18 age-restrictions (ages 14-17).
2. A potential implication associated with the rise of new forms of literacy (see Gee 2003), is that generations preceding 'digital natives' (to use Prensky's 2001 term), which includes today's parents, could be placing too much emphasis on the 'screen' as the major carrier of information being processed from games. Should a generational, or user/non-user, distinction emerge, it would carry forward implications for the way in which games are publicly understood. The research design for this project elected first to establish practical familiarity amongst participants with the specific texts and the medium under consideration.
3. This research sought to achieve discussion with parents of the use of games by their dependants, and the classification of games, based upon direct experience of playing them.

2 - RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employed qualitative methods with a small sample of twenty participants in order to address, in depth, the degree of **game literacy** possessed by parents. While it is useful to collect general perceptions of, and attitudes towards, interactive game texts, this research sought to engage parents in the activation of selected game texts in order to achieve a discussion of games based on direct experience. Large-scale, self-report methodologies may offer generalisability as to the general population's stance on games and understanding of classification, but they also work on the assumption that research participants possess a preformed set of ideas, thoughts and beliefs (Gubrium & Holstein 2003) that can be extracted by simply asking questions and recording answers (Cicourel 1964). This has the effect of subordinating the interpretive activity of participants solely in relation to the substance of what they report. To counter this, our research sought to assess general viewpoints on, and preconceptions of, the game medium against observed experiences and immediate and spontaneous reactions to gameplay.

In adding observation of gameplay to the methodology, it was possible to ensure that discussions with participants would be based on witnessed 'performative involvement', evident in the execution of decisions or response to the conditions of the game. This approach sought to examine the way the features of the game itself shaped the player's understanding of it. In doing so, it was also possible to assess the level of communicative competency and moving image literacy exhibited by parents who, in turn, may determine the degree of tolerance they possess for games, or pleasure they are able to gain from them (Burn & Parker 2001). It was also the intention that by observing patterns of activity within a game, it would be possible to examine how participants might respond to, but also become more knowledgeable about, the resources that are made available within games (in-game objects, actors and spaces), and how they are manipulated.

2.1 - Sampling

The process of **recruiting parents** for the project proved more difficult than first anticipated. The project sought parents of young people aged, ideally, between 14 and 16 years of age who possessed an active interest in game playing (across any platform). The project sought to achieve a good gender balance, include ethnic diversity, and also include two key categories – parents who play games themselves and those who do not.

Several attempts were made to attract parents to the project by utilising institutional electronic circulars or newsletters. Accounting for a potential generational gap that might determine the level of appeal of interactive games for some parents (i.e. those who do not play), the 'call for participation' was framed carefully as an opportunity for parents to develop a better understanding of their dependants' gaming pastime and interests.

The project also proposed to offer incentives for participation in order to aid recruitment. The rationale for incentives was based on the time commitment associated with participation (anticipated as 2-3 hours), the contribution being made to public discussion and evaluation of game-texts and classification processes, and also the potentially off-putting prospect, for some, of engaging in observed gameplay. Picking up on this last point, research has found that even amongst the game-playing community, the presence of others is capable of producing a 'choking' effect for the player controlling on-screen action and performance (Kimble & Rezabek 1992). We therefore sought to acknowledge that, for some parents, the prospect of playing games might place them in a position of vulnerability in terms of highlighting a lack of knowledge or ability to engage with contemporary media forms. Despite the proposal to use incentives (a voucher to the value of \$100, redeemable at a game retailer), this was not permitted by the University of Waikato Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Ethics Committee. Thus, in order to gain ethical approval for the research, the project proceeded by recruiting participants without reference to 'incentives for participation'.

As an example of an early attempt to recruit participants, an electronically circulated message promoting and describing the project, containing a call for participants, was sent out to staff at Hamilton City Council, one of the city's largest employers containing an employee population across a range of employment categories. However, this call for participation failed to produce a single expression of interest. The call for participation was repeated several times before it was decided to put a different sampling strategy into place. Instead, a sampling technique closer to snowball sampling (more typically employed in studies of 'hidden' populations that are difficult to access, e.g. drug users; see Heckathorn 1997) was used more effectively to recruit participants. This technique functioned by beginning with individuals *known to* the principal investigator and using them to achieve further participants through referrals. In this way, the sample of participants was able to grow (like a rolling snowball). In order to purposefully sample, as described above, the process of snowball sampling began with several individuals who served as entry points into different kinds of networks. For example, IT staff at the University of Waikato who were known to be members of guilds in Massively Multiplayer Online Role Play Games (MMORPG), such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard), were able to identify several (ex and current) members of their guild, situated locally, who were also parents. Similarly, by beginning with acquaintances from the

principal investigator's own social network, households containing young people in the Waikato, Bay of Plenty and the Matamata Piako District were identified and approached to request participation and/or referrals for recruitment. To prevent bias through employing this sampling technique, the *Matamata Chronicle* (mailed out weekly to all homes in the Matamata Piako District) ran a brief story outlining the study and calling for expressions of interest in participating. Parents who held concerns about monitoring and controlling gameplay of age-restricted games responded to this article and agreed to participate in the research.

From the twenty parents who participated in the study, seven were male, thirteen female. The majority of the small sample was Pākehā ($n = 16$), but also included Māori and Pacific Islanders ($n = 4$). In terms of occupation, the sample contained full-time mothers, individuals in a range of IT-related occupations, a variety of educational roles, rural and farming-related occupations, and positions in the arts. Nine participants identified themselves as game players, with the remaining eleven declaring no experience or interest in games. However, it must be noted that amongst those who did identify themselves as players during recruitment, it later became apparent during the research that the category of 'game player' was being employed rather loosely to describe, in some cases, past experience with games rather than a more current and active interest in games. Indeed, participants' self-categorisation of their relationship with games and game culture meant the research included two participants who possessed roughly similar levels of game experience but identified their standing as game players quite differently. Also, in a number of cases, during observation of gameplay (see Section 4), the game text and the platform on which it was played (console hardware Xbox 360) was just as unfamiliar to some game players as it was to non-game players.

During the process of acquiring informed consent for participation, it was revealed that a certain reluctance to participate in the research was attributable to parents' apprehension about being judged a 'bad parent' should they acknowledge little knowledge or understanding of the medium whilst still allowing game technology and practices to take place in their home. As one participant stated, '*there's a danger it can be seen as an audit*'. Indeed, before the aims and purpose of the research could be outlined fully to prospective participants, the principal researcher was often required to accommodate confessional accounts of how sons/daughters were engaging with either unknown or age-inappropriate material.

2.2 - Observing Gameplay

For this research, all participants were given a choice between engaging with either *Halo 3: ODST* (Bungie), a sci-fi fantasy, first-person shooter game classified R16, or *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar Games), a third-person sand-box, action adventure role-play game, classified R18. It is important to note that participants were not being asked to assess either of the games in terms of their appropriateness for their dependants. Instead, participants were asked to evaluate their encounter with the game's mechanics and its game world as a designed experience that evokes reactions and responses from the player.

As a result of their popularity – and in the case of *Grand Theft Auto IV* its notoriety, usefully, both game texts were quite familiar to participants. Indeed, most participants held preconceptions about the games in advance of their engagement with the texts. While some participants did initially opt to play *Halo 3: ODST* (primarily to avoid what they perceived to be the ultra-violent and objectionable content of *Grand Theft Auto IV*), the experience proved too frustrating. In those particular cases, participants switched game and played *Grand Theft Auto IV*. For inexperienced players unfamiliar with *Halo 3: ODST* and/or the platform on which they were required to play it (Xbox 360), movement within the game was perceived to be too restricted and linear, the game space was only sparsely equipped with interactivity, and progression was too heavily reliant on successful negotiation of conflict-based encounters that demanded more mastery and quicker reactions than participants possessed. Successful experience with *Halo 3: ODST* required much more familiarity with the genre (first person shooter), franchise, narrative, and mechanics of player input in terms of manipulation of the controller and management of information sources (e.g. maps), than players were able to acquire within an hour. As a result, only a small number of participants (n= 2) played and discussed *Halo 3: ODST*; the majority of participants in this research played and discussed *Grand Theft Auto IV*. The remainder of this report, therefore, focuses on experiences with, and reactions to, *Grand Theft Auto IV*.

In asking participants to engage with a game like *Grand Theft Auto IV*, it was necessary to take into account the 'sand-box' quality of the game that gives players the freedom to explore and engage with the game environment as they see fit. This enables players to construct 'personal narratives' of their own choice and game experience that are separate from the experience of the 'designed narrative' when players engage with the back-story of the main character and his missions. Roger Caillois employs the terms '*paidia*' and '*ludus*' in *Man, Play and Games* (1962) to describe an axis of play between structured rule-driven games (*ludus*) and freeform imaginative play (*paidia*). As an interactive city, *Grand Theft Auto IV* enables both forms of engagement. In order to acknowledge

both the personal and distinctive nature of participants' experience with the game, and also enable comparisons between participants' experience of more fixed features of the game text, play sessions were carefully structured.

Participants firstly gained experience of the rules of the game and the objects needed to play (that contain special values and have rules attached to them; see Hunicke *et al.* 2004). 'Way points' were set for players to reach firstly on foot and then in a car. This allowed participants to explore the game environment with a predetermined end-goal. Once these simple tasks were completed, participants were asked to play the mission 'Ivan the Not So Terrible', selected for the moral dilemma it presents. In the non-interactive cut-scene for this particular mission, the player sees his/her protagonist and avatar, Niko, in an encounter with Russian crook Vladimir Glebov. Vlad (as he is known) informs Niko that a man named Ivan is planning to rob his cousin Roman's taxi firm. Niko is therefore directed to go to Roman's cab office to intercept Ivan and prevent the robbery. The implication here is that Vlad wants Ivan dead, and that he's using Niko to achieve this. The game then resumes, and as the player arrives at the cab office Ivan is seen making his getaway. A chase ensues, requiring the player to follow the car some distance before Ivan eventually abandons his vehicle and enters a construction site on foot in a further attempt to lose Niko. The chase continues up ladders and across roofs, requiring the player to leap across buildings, until reaching a dead-end. This mission then presents the first life-or-death decision of *Grand Theft Auto IV* as Ivan, having slipped, is left hanging onto the ledge of a building. The player is prompted to act by a pop-up window (that appears in the top left-hand corner of the screen) that contains the action buttons that will allow the player to either kick Ivan off the ledge of the building, or help him up. Should the player help Ivan, the player still receives a 100% completion for the mission as Niko informs Vlad that he will not be seeing Ivan again. Niko also benefits further from saving Ivan as the grateful NPC (non-player character) reappears later on in the game to give Niko an extra mission.

In playing the mission, participants not only applied their new skills, but also witnessed a non-interactive cut-scene that provided them with a feel for the character (Niko), his mannerisms, and his relationship with the individuals he is working for. It also meant that participants experienced the game's dynamics or run-time behaviour (Hunicke *et al.* 2004) – that is, the events that take place when the game is played and how the rules are performed. Once the mission was completed, participants were given whatever remaining time there was in the hour-long game-playing session to engage in self-directed play without any further directives.

Observation of gameplay took place in either comfortable labs situated at the University of Waikato or in the participants' home environments. The setting for the research was determined purely on the basis of whatever was most convenient for participants.

In order to record player experiences, participants were observed using a digital video camera. The camera was set up to focus on the game player in order to record non-verbal communication of pleasure or disapproval as they played. Indeed, games have been described as a 'lean forward' medium (as opposed to the 'lean back' medium of TV) that creates a gestural space in the space around the screen (Kirkpatrick 2009). The discourse on pleasure and enjoyment attached to games has, thus far, offered little acknowledgment of the body in its accounts (see Niedenthal 2009), and so this research sought to account for a wider range of responses elicited in response to games. Secondly, we sought to capture any verbal responses, questions or comments made during gameplay sessions. During university-based lab sessions it was also possible to capture and log the on-screen outcomes of player input, collecting files of gameplay.

In order to achieve a sufficient degree of play experience and progress within selected games within the timeframe allocated for play, participants were also paired with, and assisted by, an 'expert gamer'. This gave participants an option to hand over the game controller, or turn to another player for advice if unsure or stuck. From the perspective of the research design, this was not considered problematic as collaborative play also allows those without the game controller to operate as a legitimate peripheral participant (Lave & Wenger 1991) commenting and advising on screen-play. The support of play with an 'expert gamer' was considered a necessary condition, given not only the potential inexperience of participants but also the short time available for participants to develop procedural mastery. Indeed, Aarseth (2003) denominates the earliest phase of playing as an 'explorative stage', quite distinct from the understanding of games derived from total completion, repeated play, or expert play. A second advantage that collaborative play with an expert gamer offered the research was the access it gave to any discussions *around play* as it was activated and experienced.

2.3 - Interviews

Participants were **interviewed** before and after gameplay sessions. On average, the total participation time, including both observed gameplay and pre- and post-interview periods, ran between two and three hours. All participants generally played a game for an hour. It was more common than not for the researcher to end the play session rather than participants. Prior to the game session, participants engaged in a formal consent procedure (approved by the University of

Waikato Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Ethics Committee) in which the research process was outlined in full and participants' consent was obtained in writing. The pre-game interview then addressed the following areas:

1. Age and sex of dependants
2. Knowledge of game software and hardware that dependants either own and/or engage with
3. Knowledge of dependants' playing habits and preferences
4. Parents' own playing habits and preferences (if players)
5. Comfort in managing access to game content and how issues of 'suitability' may have been addressed and solved
6. Knowledge and understanding of the classification system
7. Knowledge and any preconceptions of the game about to be played.

Post-game play interviews focused on participants' reactions and response to the game experience and addressed:

1. General impressions and understanding of the game and its requirements
2. Discussion of any noteworthy properties of the game
3. Comprehension of the narrative and/or game subtext
4. Discussion of the game's classification and its appropriateness
5. A human values exercise.

Referring to point 5 above, a method for discussing human values in digital games was employed to aid discussion of game texts. A deck of 14 cards containing values represented in foundational documents such as the United States Constitution, the Charter of the United Nations, and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom was employed. Five cards were randomly assigned to participants, who were asked to comment on whether the value printed on the card was evident in the game or their experience of the game. The deck of cards was originally assembled by Mary Flanagan (Hunter College, NY) and her colleagues (Flanagan *et al.* 2007) and applied in their research into the educational facilitation of the design of human values into games. The values utilised for this research were:

Diversity	Security
Justice	Creativity
Inclusion	Cooperation
Equality	Sharing
Privacy	Trust
Gender Equality	Authorship
Environmentalism	Liberty

3 - FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following sections outline and discuss the findings derived from the pre- and post-game interviews, together with an assessment of participants' gameplay experiences. While the key focus of the research was parents' comprehension of, and experience with, games, it was also necessary for discussion to establish the degree to which interactive games may mediate aspects of their relationship with their dependants. Amongst the parents that constituted the small sample for this research, the age range of dependants was much broader than originally desired. While the principal researcher approached parents with dependants aged between 14 and 16 years of age, in sampling, the referral process in applying a snowball sampling technique led to potentially interested participants with children as young as nine years of age. Likewise, the local press coverage achieved for the project that included a 'call for participants', attracted responses from parents who held concerns about access and exposure to age-restricted games amongst children. The appeal and circulation of age-restricted games amongst children as young as nine years of age emerged as a significant cause for concern amongst parents who felt unprepared to address these issues, having expected them to arise when their children were much older. In the final sample, ages of participants' dependants ranged between seven and 15 years old.

3.1 - Pre-Play Interviews: Knowledge of Game Content

Given that the time commitment associated with completing games can be sizeable (depending on the genre), it was assumed that parents should be able to identify a number of game texts that their dependants had played, and the platforms on which they played. While some participants were able to identify and cite game titles, generally, knowledge of playing preferences did not trip off the tongue easily. In showing more familiarity than other participants, some responses included direct reference to titles:

*Things like Halo, Doom, other ones I can't even remember, loads, Medal of Honor, sometimes Grand Theft Auto. (Female who plays games)**

and

* It is important to note that while quotations will identify how participants categorised their relationship to the practice of game playing, it is necessary to reinforce the comments made in the section on the 'recruitment of participants' concerning the discrepancy that emerged between self-labelling and the subsequent knowledge and mastery shown in the research procedures.

He's drawn to shoot 'em up games ... the GTA franchise ... Infected. What else is there? Scarface: Money, power and respect on PSP... Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon that sort of thing. (Male who plays games)

In contrast, others preferred to cite the hardware on which games are played, in lieu of citing software titles or the nature of game content:

Basically, one time or another he's had an Xbox, Xbox 360 and online gaming, he's had access to all of them. Plus he's got a mate around the corner that got the Playstation – so, probably from age ... probably quite young from what he could do around the corner. Probably from 7 or 8 he was gaming. (Male who does not play games)

Reference to secondary access to gaming technologies and content, evident above, was also cited elsewhere:

Not when they are with me, they might at friends' houses ... There's one very close friend that they go to who has a Playstation and stuff there.

[Interviewer]: *Do you find that problematic?*

[Participant]: *I don't mind. It's occasional when they do it and it's a treat. I'd have a problem with it if they were doing it all the time. (Male who plays games)*

At the other end of the spectrum, there were responses that failed to specify any game titles, opting instead to provide more judgment-laden commentary on the nature of what their dependants were engaging in:

In terms of Xbox he tended to like driving around like a lunatic in cars ... or running down corridors shooting people. (Male who does not play games)

Or examples of how they completely avoided knowledge of games being played in the house:

It sounds noisy but we don't look. (Female who does not play)

3.2 - Parents' Relationship with Games

As already noted, eleven of the participants described themselves as having no game experience or interest in the medium. Amongst the nine remaining participants there proved to be a wide range of game preferences and experiences constituting the sample of game players studied. When quizzed about what participants played, some fondly recalled gaming experiences as far back as first generation coin-operated arcade games, pre-dating the domestication of gaming technologies. Within this category there was one participant who considered himself a gamer:

I used to play Pac Man and things, Space Invaders when I was a kid, but I wasn't really that good at the action games. I played the adventure games but I don't really play many games now, very occasionally ... I got a couple of emulators from the 80s ... and I play the old games. (Male who plays games)

While another did not feel that a similar game history was adequate enough to describe himself as a game player:

I played stand-up videogames in videogame parlours in the 80s as much as anyone did. I kind of lost track of games when they got beyond two buttons ... Having said that, there was the odd shoot 'em up game that I'd still be playing right the way through to the 90s, the odd one ... When [son] got a disk of old arcade games, we played a couple of arcade games on his Xbox together – but it wasn't many – it didn't happen very often. (Male who does not play games)

Given the sampling technique employed for the research, a key means of identifying participants who played games was achieved through approaching the more visible community attached to online gaming. A number of participants, therefore, almost exclusively possessed experience with MMOGs and MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-play games). For example:

My preference is definitely role-playing and I play both online and offline ... I was playing Guild Wars, which is online ... I've always been a computer game player, we don't have a Playstation or an Xbox ... I'm very used to using a keyboard and mouse ... at the moment I'm not in any active guilds ... but I have been. (Female who plays games).

WoW [World of Warcraft] for four years solid. Before that I started on Neverwinter Nights. Actually, it was just networked between [partner] and I, and then we branched out into the wider online. (Female who plays games)

Consistent amongst the small sample of game players was a tendency to possess a rather narrow range of gaming preferences, often confined to a single platform and/or game. Only two participants really indicated possessing a broad range of cross-platform gaming habits, and only one illustrated an ongoing and active interest in consuming and playing new game titles. Existing research has found a more varied and wider range of playing experiences amongst younger generations that identify games as their primary medium of media engagement (for example, Schott 2009). Connected to this point, other participants' responses also indicated that, while it was ongoing, they had a more casual relationship with games that indicated secondary access to hardware and software that was possessed and determined by their dependants. Such examples indicated little commitment to specific games, or responsibility for the purchase or presence of game titles in the home. For example:

I remember once having turns on Street Fighter. (Female who plays games)

Irrespective of the different levels of engagement with games, participants that played games commonly expressed a belief that they felt well equipped to support and monitor dependants' access to games because of their experiences. Yet, this belief did not necessarily translate into a clear distinction between the performance and understanding of players and non-players with the game selected for play. Likewise, prior or continued experience with games did not necessarily prove to be an advantage in dealing with intergenerational taste differences when preferences failed to match. As one MMORPG player indicated:

He really likes the first-person sort of stuff, a bit of car racing, like the motor-cross sort of stuff. It very much depends on the media that he's using too. So he plays quite different games on the computer to what he might play on the Xbox. He has played Halo, talking of non-appropriate content for his age, but I can't think of the other game that [partner's] got, where he says "absolutely no, you're not playing that, end of story". Because it's just far too violent, I can't even think what it is, because I don't touch the Xbox. (Female who plays games)

Additionally, deferral to the knowledge and opinion of male spouses on the appropriateness of content also revealed how some game technologies continued to be gendered male. This finding is consistent with prior research conducted by the principal investigator who found female parents held fewer rights, and had less access and status compared to fathers (Schott & Horrell 2000, pp.36-53).

If he asks to play a game that's R-rated or M-rated, then [partner] will say yes or no based on whether he thinks it's appropriate – because he's already played it. (Female who plays games)

3.3 - Suitability

All participants were questioned as to whether, as parents, they had ever experienced an occasion in which under-age dependants had sought to play, or had gained access to, age-restricted games. This line of questioning followed more general questioning around dependants' playing habits that, in some cases, had already produced reference to a number of the age-restricted game titles that were inappropriate for the stated age of their dependants (e.g. *Halo*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Doom*). Also, in the light of comments made as to why parents showed reluctance to participate in the research (outlined above, in section 2.1), it is logical to assume that maybe the 'vagueness' displayed by some participants regarding their dependants' playing preferences *might* be attributable to their knowledge of game classifications. This issue was not pursued heavily in advance of the gameplay observation in order to avoid contradicting the key aim of the research and its focus on game literacy. It did, however, become clear from the general discussion that amongst the small sample of participants a number of their dependants had engaged with, or experienced, game content classified as unsuitable for their age. Participants' explanations for this were again varied, but converged around the idea that exposure to material classified as inappropriate for their dependants was largely inevitable and unavoidable. To this extent, this idea governed the degree of vigilance parents gave to preventing access to age-inappropriate material. As one participant stated:

That's the thing, he would always want to play games that were restricted ... and my willingness to let him was often down to energy levels as much as anything else. There would certainly be lots of times when I'd be arguing "no I don't want you to play this game because it is R16 and you're not 16", but there would be other times when I'd just go "oh fuck it, I can't be bothered arguing today", so he'd land up getting it. Thing is also, he's got these mates ... who live around the corner ... [their parents] seem to let their kids play anything, so consequently, no amount of trying to stop him playing any game around our house would stop him having access to it around the corner or elsewhere. (Male who does not play games)

My success rate of stopping him playing restricted games was probably only about 50/50. (Male who does not play games)

There was also a common tendency amongst participants to offer an explanation that included reference to their son/daughter being 'more mature for their age':

[Dependant] in particular is very mature in his ability to say "it's not real, I can disassociate from that", and he's done that from quite early on and that's possibly why [partner] and I allow him to watch a little bit of content that is a little bit more advanced. (Female who plays games)

I don't look at it as age, I look at it as maturity – no matter what it is. (Female who plays games)

Well, I believe that he has that level of maturity where he can actually say "that's just a film" or "it's just an online game" or, you know, "I don't need to actually get that wrapped up in this, it doesn't need to scare me at night". (Female who does not play)

Examining the responses across the whole sample, it is difficult to conclude that participants thought that classifications were too cautious, but rather, it is often difficult for parents to withstand the external cultural and social pressures driving dependants' desire to access age-restricted games from a young age. As one participant commented:

He had teenage mores from 7 years old. Now he's a teenager, it's just more of the same really. (Male who does not play).

For many of the dependants, it appeared to be the case that the really 'good' and 'fun' games only began at R16 for console games, e.g., *To him restricted is more attractive ... more fun.* (Male who does not play), with lower ratings more tolerated for online games where the social engagement constitutes a greater attraction.

It was more common amongst participants to perceive a classification as a general guideline, which was often then displaced by a personal evaluation of the maturity level of the dependent:

We are quite selective about what we do let him watch, whereas other people I guess go blanket, "no, it says it's R16, absolutely not". 'Medium' or 'Mature' rating, you kind of go, what does that mean? (Female who plays games)

Indeed, one participant assessed the game-playing preferences of his son in context, by taking into account factors such as his engagement in paid employment, to determine his maturity and the appropriateness of parental intervention. He stated:

It's very hard – he's doing men's work. It's very hard to all of a sudden say "you're not big enough to play", it defeats – it undermines what we are trying to do with establishing a work ethic and responsibility and all that, and then say ... "you're not big enough to play this game" when actually if he's been given the right sort of grounding and morals he should be able to play. (Male who does not play)

More commonly, dependants were simply described as possessing a high level of media and/or computing literacy, '*... they are immersed in media and their level of media savyness is, you know, what it is – it's on another level again from what ours is*' (Male who does not play). There was only one real example of a participant outlining clearly the kinds of conditions and boundaries that she insists upon. These included:

Any kind of gore splatter, I find it objectionable, and if I can't turn it off, then it's a no go. If she's going to be involved in fighting sequences, I prefer it to be long-distance, like a magical fireball, rather than a sword and slashing and stabbing. (Female who plays games)

On the whole, participants were more inclined to cite a belief in self-regulation. That is, the need for classification to be interpreted with a degree of flexibility to allow dependants to manage their own taste boundaries. For many, this view was nested in the unpredictable and individual nature of the transition from childhood to adulthood, via adolescence. In terms of classification, there was a strong sentiment that restricted ratings below R18 were negotiable and to a large degree inconsequential. The majority of participants used PG-16 [not an actual rating] to express how R16 game texts are treated and negotiated in their homes. A typical exchange around these issues comprised comments such as:

Those age things, whether they were on films, or games, you know ... I don't even know them properly, R15 and stuff like that – we would use that as a sort of fictitious kind of marker, "ooohh you know you have to be 15 to watch this one", play it up, sit down, watch it, play it, ... bring that confidence up, "you can handle this, you're literate on it even though your twelve or eleven", "you've watched it with us and you're way up to speed". (Male who does not play)

Yes, there is a line that needs to be drawn for us to be a community, but in our everyday lives I think you should be able to make your own decisions – until your kids are old enough. Parents should be making the decisions not the friggin' government. (Female who does not play)

Adults tend to patronise young people's ability ... they are far more savvy than the adult world gives them credit for. (Male who plays games)

The notion that parents employ individual assessments of the appropriateness of content based on the maturity of their dependant was strengthened by supplementary comments that described how parents differentiate between sibling's needs and also restrict access to dependants' peers. For example:

... he's got a next-door neighbour who comes over ... and [dependant] will be playing something like Halo and I have to stop and think, shoot, I wonder if their mum is ok with this? So I have to sort of say to [dependant] when [friend] is over here you don't play that game, because I don't know [if their mum is okay with it]. (Female who plays games)

Two participants raised the importance of discussing under-age game experiences with their dependants, not only as part of a process of negotiated access to specific content, but as a means of developing literacy. For example:

I think that process of making him aware of why I didn't want him to play certain games – he was always going to try and access those games, whether at a friend's house or not, but that has instilled in him an awareness at least that, even if he doesn't have any self-regulating behaviours towards those games, there are ... social boundaries being tested here. (Male who plays games)

In recalling the response to the presence of an early title from the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise in the home, another participant stated:

I made sure I hopped in there and talked and brought all of that stuff up, verbalised it all ... It really was quite a good learning tool to talk about gender, and rights and wrongs, and you can do this and you can't do that – and so, used it really well as a spring-boarding kind of tool. (Male who does not play)

3.3.1 - Online Content

Compared to viewpoints collected on access and exposure to content within single-player game experiences, the concerns around online gaming were much more heightened amongst the small sample of this research. This presented itself in two ways. Firstly, regarding the potential for the

commercial exploitation of parents and children within children-oriented ‘safe’ MMOG spaces online:

Well, my daughter started asking whether she could play something called Club Penguin [Disney]. I don't know anything about it, it seems to be a mix of gaming and social networking ... because you have to pay it seems like another way of getting money out of parents. I just didn't want to go there at all to be honest.

[Interviewer] *What was your fear about it?*

[Participant] *Commercial exploitation.* (Male who plays games)

Likewise:

But my daughter is in some Moshi site ... you make friends, and you leave little sticky notes on each other's pin boards and, you know, when you get more friends, you get more points. You can buy pretty stuff and that sort of thing ... you have to pay to get special things, and of course I won't ... so it's interesting that she can't access a lot of the content because of that – so she's given up.

(Female who plays games)

The second, more commonly presented, concern dealt with the anxieties connected to the identities hidden behind the masks of avatars, and the possible harmful or inappropriate nature of social interactions that may occur from not knowing the age, sex and motivations of other players. These concerns were more commonly expressed with MMOGs or MMORPGs that attract older populations of gamers, but were also expressed in relation to ‘safe’ zones. In another reference to *Club Penguin*, one participant stated:

The only thing I've sort of had an issue with is when my daughter was playing that Penguin online game, where you go online with a bunch of other penguins – it's a kiddy role-playing online game – and, as a parent, you can opt to have free text chat or only kind of like set balloon responses. I started [child] off with the set balloons, then when her friend was on it I changed it to free text chat and HER FRIEND, while I was on it monitoring [child], her friend went and chatted to strange penguins – they were looking for boyfriends!

[Interviewer]: *Strange penguins [laughing].*

[Participant] *[laughs] ... they were looking for boyfriends and girlfriends, and I was like “what are you doing? That could be like a dirty old man at home”. Her parents are both in education you know, education roles. They should kind of know better, but you know, they obviously trusted their daughter and that was what she was doing.* (Female who plays games)

Some participants indicated that they felt that it was acceptable to allow dependants to watch their online gameplay, and occasionally participate under supervision:

She watched me do a 10 day trial period of World of Warcraft and she just sat behind me the whole time, didn't want to take her eyes off the screen – was itching to play. (Female who plays games)

However, a line was drawn at joining an online community or playing unsupervised, due to its competitive adult culture and time demands:

[Dependant] keeps asking about WoW, "when am I going to play WoW?", "when am I going to play WoW?", because he sees us playing it all the time, and it's just "not yet, not yet"... there's stuff that gets said and ... it's not the content, it's the people that are uncontrolled ... if they were playing and we were on with them, then that's fine, because I am there to protect them and they won't end up in an online situation they shouldn't be in, but if they are online, on their own, it's just, it's open game ... it's just a little bit of that anger that can come through, you know that rage that some people have, you know. And we had it in our guild all the time, people just losing the plot, going completely off the deep end, throwing big tantrums. And also there's a little bit of sexual innuendo and a lot of the chat, and you know, the way the characters interact with each other, and the things that they are emoting. (Female who plays games)

Also

She has played a little bit of Guild Wars online, she's ...

[Interviewer] *Against people she knows? Would it be her friends?*

[Participant] *No, no, but I'm there with her, not playing, but I'm there, and she, we have strict kind of guidelines that she's not allowed to have conversations with strangers, she just runs, because in Guild Wars you only communicate with other players in towns and cities.*

[Interviewer] *Yep.*

[Participant] *When you are out on your quest you're alone, unless you're with a party. So she knows that if anybody ever starts a conversation with her, she just leaves the town or city, yeah.*

[Interviewer] *Would that be voice-based?*

[Participant] *No, text chat.* (Female who plays games)

Arguments concerning online threats to young people are currently being considered within the UK education technology community in terms of 'e-safety'. Official definitions of 'e-safety' acknowledge that 'children and young people are vulnerable and may expose themselves to danger

– knowingly or unknowingly – when using ... digital technologies’ (BECTA 2006). In the UK policy context, these concerns about vulnerability, danger and appropriateness have been expressed in terms of specific ‘e-safety’ risks and dangers centred around the ‘four Cs’: online content, contact, commerce and culture. From this perspective, children are felt to require protection from a host of online risks such as cyber-bullies, paedophiles, violent games, illicit downloading of copyrighted and/or inappropriate material, disclosure of personal information, and commercial exploitation. Whilst there are initiatives in the UK that constitute a comprehensive policy response to a fast-changing set of problems (e.g. *Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre* and *UK Council on Child Internet Safety*), the nature of the UK e-safety agenda has attracted criticism from some commentators – not least in terms of its alarmist representation of the risks that young people encounter when using information and communication technologies more generally. These arguments derive in part from the mixed conclusions of recent investigations of the *actual* levels of risk encountered by young people. Such research literature appears to lend some support to Livingstone’s 2004 contention that while one should not deny the real dangers that can exist in some exceptional circumstances, the relation between risk, danger and incidence of harm implied in much of the official safety and protection rhetoric is ‘genuinely tenuous’. As such, a disjuncture between the implication of risk, as articulated within, say, official e-safety agendas, and the far lower incidence of risk, suggests more discussion needs to take place between adults and young people with regard to the issues connected to the negotiation and comprehension of digital content, configurative environments and participatory cultures.

3.4 - Learning about Games

Participants were asked about the kinds of information sources they would consult when mediating access to game content when presented with game texts that they might be unfamiliar with. In response, *game players* generally claimed they would play a game first to assess its appropriateness:

If they brought something into the house then I’d definitely try it out first ... I’d play it myself first, yeah. (Male who plays games)

Another game that’s kind of more adult oriented like Guild Wars that I’ve let her play, I’ve played it first, so I’m going by my interpretation of that game. Even though I think Guild Wars is R13.

(Female who plays games)

Participants’ comments were also illustrative of the buying power of young people and the manner in which parents have little control over games entering the home from a range of external sources

(e.g. friends). That is, parents appeared to be responding to games *once* present in the home. As one participant, accounting for the presence of *Grand Theft Auto* in the house, stated, '*it wasn't a conscious decision, you know, "yes you can go and buy that game", it just turned up here and oh well*'. (Male who does not play).

Whilst not necessarily indicative of current practice, participants more generally pointed to the web as a potential source of information on suitability of games:

I'd definitely google it before I made a choice and find out the rating, um, and probably go to the online website if there was one available. (Female who plays games)

I guess [partner] would go online and research it, yeah, he'd look it up, look up some of the reviews on the sites that are available. He'd go and find out a little bit more about it. (Female who plays games)

I'd look it up online. I'd probably go to Amazon to see what other people, parents, are saying about it, and then some sort of watchdog site where parents are talking about it. And then I'd get it and play it. (Female who does not play)

3.5 - Familiarity with classifications

Participants were presented with example images of classifications and asked to discuss their general understanding of them. They were also invited to outline the perceived difference between R16 and R18 content. Overall, responses illustrated a great deal of uncertainty about the classification system when applied to games. Instead, participants preferred to draw on their own history of media use and familiarity with film. In doing so, many responses placed emphasis on sexual content as a key reason for higher age-restriction ratings:

My initial reaction is that R18 is more sexually explicit ... I don't actually know. My understanding is that it's easier to get violent stuff when you're younger than sexually explicit stuff.

[Interviewer] *Does the violence change in nature between R16 and R18?*

[Participant]: *I don't know to be honest ... I don't really know.* (Male who plays games)

It doesn't actually tell me anything much, as I don't know what it means, I don't know the classification system ... R16 I don't know what that means, is it sexual content, or swearing? No idea. I don't know the difference between 16 and 18. (Female who does not play)

Is there maybe a bit of nudity in R18s? (Male who does not play)

No, no idea. Out of lack of knowledge I'd imagine that it would be a lot more violent.

[Interviewer] *Frequency? Or something else?*

[Participant] *The graphic nature (Male who plays games)*

I would have no idea what that means. See, well I even find M really vague. I think "what does M tell me?", I mean [dependant] has gone to this M film, but we are not going to let him watch that M film. To me, R18 is bordering on really violent, or graphically violent, not the thought of the violence or some psycho message – it's actually showing it – and that can be pretty gruesome nowadays. And it's usually sexual content. (Female who plays games)

Uncertainty pervaded all responses whether participants indicated that they followed the classification system or not:

I know there is a set criterion for each of those ratings, but I don't know specifically what they are. All I know, I trust the people who do that to know their jobs and to know the age-appropriate ratings because I know they are there for a reason. So when I see R16 I think right, I know my daughter and I think she's actually quite advanced for her age and she'll probably be quite a mature 16 year-old. (Female who plays games)

4 - GAMEPLAY

Prior to playing either *Halo 3: ODST* or *Grand Theft Auto IV*, participants were presented with the games in their packaging and asked whether they had any prior experience with, or any preconceptions of, the games. While the age range of participants' dependants should have determined that neither game was age-appropriate, some participants did indicate that they were aware of the games from seeing them played at home. One participant showed inconsistency in his responses during different points in the interview process, but ultimately revealed purchasing the game and viewing it being played at home:

- a) *We don't buy age-restricted games.*
- b) *I've seen [dependant] play both those games [Halo 3: ODST and Grand Theft Auto IV].*
- c) *I think we bought him the New York one. (Male who does not play)*

While *Halo 3: ODST* was noted for its franchise popularity amongst young people, with the exceptions of the two male participants who opted to play *Halo 3: ODST*, there was little evidence of knowledge of the game. In contrast, as expected, *Grand Theft Auto IV* was more familiar to participants for the controversy it has attracted:

No, I've seen it very briefly, but pretty much everything I know about it, I've read or heard ... the ones that stick out are the sexist nature of the game, so the demoralisation of women and the overall kind of criminal activities that go on within the game, they are the ones that stick out. (Female who plays games)

I've not heard good things about it and it is on [partner's] list of "no, never, you are not touching that" as far as [dependant] is concerned...

[Interviewer] *What have you heard about it?*

[Participant] *That it can be quite violent if you choose to be. For me, it goes against the values I am trying to install in my children about respecting authority and you don't kill cops and you don't run over prostitutes, you know, there's no respect for life in it, I think, is what I rebel against ... it's a violent game. (Female who plays games)*

4.1 - Experience of Play

For participants, whether they had prior game experience or not, or whether they approached *Grand Theft Auto IV* with a declared dislike of what it promotes, all found the game relatively easy and much more enjoyable to play than first anticipated. Through the course of the structured play (as outlined in section 2.2), all participants were able to manipulate their avatar and the environment enough to allow them to experience a sense of agency within the game. When first playing, many of the participants did, however, show signs of embarrassment, such as reddening of the neck and cheeks, nervous laughter and self-deprecating comments about how little they would be able to achieve. Amongst game players there was also a tendency to discuss the differences between platforms (console and PC) and the impact that unfamiliarity with the controllers and interface was having on their initial performance. Generally, once sessions got under way, they were peppered with laughter that indicated enjoyment and fun.

One of the advantages of using *Grand Theft Auto IV* in this research was the size and scope of the game and the space made available to the player to freely explore. This constitutes a different experience from, say, war or horror games that often contain maze-like structures in order to contain and intensify battle or conflict that, in turn, places pressure on players to accurately execute precise actions and quick movements. When players did progress from walking the streets of Liberty City to driving a car, they did inevitably fail to control their vehicles and crashed into street lamps, pedestrians, vehicles and buildings. Rather than making the experience of traversing space frustrating, participants discovered that errors and/or lower abilities within a sand-box game constituted fun, as they responded to the impact and consequences of their actions with laughter (e.g. car bonnets flying off, driving with the engine on fire). In one case a participant was in the process of discussing how objectionable he felt it was that you could run over pedestrians in a game, when he turned a corner in his car, mounted the pavement and squashed a pedestrian against a wall. At that moment the participant failed to contain his laughter, undermining his rational evaluation of the game with his bodily and non-verbal response.

Through gameplay, it was possible to witness examples of a tension felt by participants, created by the application of real-world logic to engagement with the game, that often contradicted the game's design. It was common for participants to overlook the gameness of *Grand Theft Auto IV* due to the representational content contained within its ode to urban life, which presents players with a city as well as a game:

It's not comical. I mean it's quite realistic.

[Interviewer] *Realistic?*

[Participant] *Well, in the fact that your landscape is realistic, you're dealing with human people, you've got real cars, it's the stuff that we live with every day as opposed to the ones based on fantasy which you can completely disassociate from.* (Female who plays games)

Thompson, in his 2008 review of *Grand Theft Auto IV*, stated that developers Rockstar are 'utterly in love with the idea of the American city: the riot of decay and grandeur, the garish commercialism, the violence and beauty, the architectural delights hidden in every corner'. For many participants, the underlying narrative of the game was powerless in the face of the richness of the game environment. Indeed, during the mission 'Ivan the Not So Terrible', one participant required assistance to reach its climactic moral dilemma as she followed the road code, thus driving too slowly to successfully engage in a car chase. The participant sought to avoid pedestrians and adhere to traffic signals, not realising that the road traffic in *Grand Theft Auto IV* is designed to run slower than the cars driven by the avatar, thus automatically making the player drive fast. Other participants were quicker to realise that the game was not designed for players to follow the road code:

I actually felt like a bit of a twat stopping at a red light, it didn't feel right.

[Interviewer] *Why should you in a game?*

[Participant] *Exactly, why shouldn't you drive up a wall? It's not real.* (Female who plays games)

Returning to the participant who drove carefully throughout the mission, it was necessary to help her reach her destination in the car. Having been aided the participant in the mission, the participant then negotiated the rooftop chase successfully to reach Ivan hanging off the ledge of the building. Without hesitation, she kicked the character off the building to his death. She later stated that on the street she was not so clear whether that still constituted the parameters of the game, yet, the rooftop scenario was so familiar from film and television, and so removed from everyday life, that she had little hesitation in conforming to the role and expectation in order to murder the character. Indeed, she was the only participant to select the option of killing Ivan. All the other participants nervously helped the character back onto the building. It was common for participants to report later that they expected to be subsequently punished by Ivan for showing kindness. For example:

By not stepping on the guy's hands and helping him up, I was wondering whether I might jeopardise my character, later on. Whether that guy would go "ha ha ha" and push me off, or run off. So I

was aware of those sorts of elements of trying to fulfil a role ... I suppose there was an element that you could see what happened if you went beyond your brief, that was kind of nice. (Male who does not play)

Corroborating Kurt Squire's assertion (cited in Section 1) that gamers do wildly different things with the worlds available to them, participants showed a lot of variety in their approaches to the game. Indeed, the first player to engage with the game failed to leave the apartment that constitutes the start-point and safe-house for the game. As this participant wandered around his virtual cousin's apartment, his proximity to the television prompted a pop-up menu illustrating how to operate the television. The participant subsequently watched the virtual television, in a virtual apartment, without experiencing the virtual city outside, for the full duration of his play session (an approach which sparked the implementation of structured play for the remainder of the sample). In doing so, however, the participant revelled in the ironic, over-the-top nature of *South Park*-esq comic treatments of taboo or culturally sensitive topics (e.g. reinterpretation of American history). Indeed, many of the participants recognised the irony and social satire operating within the game more generally:

I found it quite funny, but I mean everything is just so over-the-top, so how can you possibly take it so seriously? (Female who does not play)

Participants also found joy in driving a range of vehicles (sometimes recklessly), with one participant trying motorcycles, a limousine, a construction truck and fire engine; and there were failed attempts to acquire boats and planes. Some participants also sought to explore the depth of the environment, trying doors and building entrances, seeking out entertainment and food establishments, surfing the net in a cyber-café, and playing pool and arcade games in bars. For example:

I could have run around in that all day, just looking at stuff, swimming, driving things around, seeing what I can or can't open, talking to people, seeing what responses I get, that kind of thing. I like that part of the immersion is the noise, the background noise, I like that you get people tooting at you, yelling if you bump into them, and the radio. (Female who plays games)

While one participant found herself unintentionally holding a rifle (from pressing the wrong button), and enjoying the reaction and panic it caused on the city streets (people fleeing, cars abandoned causing traffic jams), on the whole, participants were rarely engaged in violent encounters. Often participants were the victims rather than the perpetrators of violence if they did

experience it. Unsuccessful attempts to steal a vehicle in a gang area, or pursuits by police as the result of committing a crime (e.g. carjacking in front of police or failing to stop at a tollbooth) often resulted in the participant's avatar getting killed. In this way, participants experienced the presence of the law and how it was not possible to 'do anything' without consequence, as they had first believed.

With the exception of a few participants who opted to complete further missions during their unguided section of the play session, participants did not carry or brandish guns or use them to kill innocent people unconnected to the internal criminal underworld. Participants learnt that within meaningful engagement with the game, violence is contextualised and players are presented with choices in which either avoidance or resistance is possible:

What I haven't spotted until now ... the only other people you deliberately set out to kill are other criminals. (Male who does not play)

Good moral choices actually accrue advantages, which is interesting, as I would have assumed that the opposite would have been true. (Male who does not play)

4.2 - Initial Reactions and Responses

Some participants felt genuinely *relieved* that the experience was nowhere near their preconceptions (based upon media coverage of the game). Indeed, participants on the whole were pleasantly surprised by the experience itself and expressed their surprise at having enjoyed playing the game. For most players, it prompted a radical re-evaluation of the game and what is contained within an R18 classified game. For many, post-game, it was the sophistication of the game that gave it its classification, with participants highlighting the maturity needed to be able to comprehend the irony, satire and intertextual references employed by the game's developers. Some examples of participants' initial reactions are outlined below:

That was exhilarating ... that was positive. That was a really positive experience and I did not expect that ... fear of not knowing is probably why I have labelled them as negative ... doing that experience, being walked through the experience, because obviously I would have got really frustrated not knowing how to play the game ... I actually had some successes. (Female who does not play)

I think I have only ever heard about the bad stuff, the ability to go and kill and run people down and those sort of things, you know, exterminate cops and crash and bash and all that kind of stuff, so I

didn't realise that there was just a fun side to it ... so it's interesting that there's that aspect of it and that you never hear about that aspect of it. (Female who plays games)

[Laughter] *I actually enjoyed it when I could just run around and look at things, and can I do this and can I do that. I liked having someone there that I could ask, you know, oh "can I do that?" "can I grab that truck?" or "can I grab that car?" But it wasn't what I was expecting. (Female who plays games)*

I found it entertaining in that respect. It's not a game that I'd want to play. If you said to me "Come and have a game of Grand Theft Auto", I'd be like, "no, it's ok." But yeah, I found the game entertaining because you're hitting things, running people over and it just seems hilarious because it's just so far removed from reality. (Female who plays games)

Post-play interviews then sought to identify more clearly aspects of the game responsible for why it achieved a positive evaluation, in particular, how preconceptions were challenged by direct experience with the text. In doing so, some participants who had allowed dependants to play the game were able to readdress some of their prior evaluations of the game. For example:

I have talked to [dependant] about the morality of randomly driving over people in the street, for instance, I now know that has to do with your capacity to actually operate the machinery ... having said that I have never come across him raping anyone or doing anything sexual in games, but I have certainly seen him doing things in games, where I am going, "What are you doing that for? That's a bit violent," and you know, there's violence and then there is getting involved in moral dilemmas. (Male who does not play)

If I'm watching someone else play it, it's not the same as playing it yourself, and how you feel when you're playing it. (Female who does not play)

Greater understanding was gained not only of player actions but also of the context in which violence is elicited. Many participants expected the game to constitute a simple murder simulator. Instead, it was found to involve the player in a complex situation where violence is threatened but also presents itself as a solution or commodity that the player can exploit to change his situation and resist the inevitability of his fate:

Getting to NY [sic.], that survival instinct kicking in, so performing those missions to get by, having no, probably low, literacy or no other skills to get by on. In that way I feel like it's a

simulation, but a simulation way, way beyond my social and cultural framework. (Male who plays games)

Those games put you in an interesting position, it's like we have – we can empathise – it's a tricky situation. But without empathy it's – I wouldn't be comfortable performing the tasks. We have to be able to empathise with the character; otherwise, it's a completely different game. He's in a tough spot. He's not necessarily a bad person, but he's prepared to do bad things because he's in a tricky situation. (Male who plays games)

Most participants mentioned the sense of helplessness experienced by the avatar, having just arrived in the country at the beginning of the game and possessing few resources or cultural capital to help him protect his cousin (Roman).

I suppose it's putting you into the world of 'the other', it was incredibly foreign to me. (Male who does not play)

Given the unfamiliarity with the game medium, game text, and/or platform evident within the small sample, a number of participants embraced the narrative context of the avatar as a stranger in an unfamiliar culture:

In some ways useful, providing a window into another culture, another way of being, getting to live vicariously through, "oh there but for the grace of God go I" sort of thing. It is about transposing yourself into a different landscape, different culture and so, in that way, it was engaging. (Male who plays games)

Finding out the depth and elements that were there, that were not immediate to me with my knowledge of it, but then looking around a street as you do when you come to a city. (Male who does not play)

The **value card** exercise was also employed to stimulate and focus thought on different aspects of the game, and the responses to cards have been integrated into sections of this report, earlier and below. While a deck of 14 cards was used in the research, each participant randomly selected five cards. In some cases the cards served to reinforce some of the issues that had already been identified and discussed, for example:

Happiness – *I laughed through the whole thing, not because it is an inherently happy game, I think it's quite the opposite.*

[Interviewer] *Why was it so funny?*

[Participant] *Because it's things that you can't do in life, you just can't do it, and you'd love [to], so you're driving along and you think, I wonder what it would be like to drive into that pole ... it's cool to be able to crash into a pole, split lanes, and all the stuff you'd like to do in life but you can't.*

(Female who does not play)

In other cases, the cards did function to promote a re-evaluation of prior reactions and responses, for example:

Autonomy – *Yeah, you have a lot of it, I thought. The character's free will. There's that room for free play as well, just roaming around. If he wants to progress, then he has to conform and be bad to a certain degree ... so maybe not a lot of autonomy really?* (Female who plays games)

Justice – *Obviously there are repercussions for what you do ... that other guy, I was trying to steal his car, and I didn't go fast enough so he tried to pull me out and beat me up. No I think it's good because if you could just run around there and do whatever you like and there were no repercussions, then it wouldn't be much of a game then, it would just be exploring.* (Female who does not play)

4.3 - Interactivity

For many participants the level of interactivity associated with *Grand Theft Auto IV* was considered impressive. For some participants who do play games, it was somewhat indicative, too, of how their game experiences or preferences may be detached from technological developments evident within new games:

The level of detail and interactivity of the landscape – I walked past a box and it moved... stack of cardboard boxes and my shin nudged it and just that one moved, so yeah, the options involved add to the subtlety – it's really impressive. (Male who plays games)

A large part of me says 'now they created this on a computer' ... there I am in a virtual world on a screen and it's hours and hours and hours of coding. Amazing. (Female who plays games)

The play experience illustrated for participants a generational divide in terms of the demands of contemporary media forms and the levels of literacy required to engage with interactive games. This was often posited as a positive outcome of the experience, as it demonstrated to all participants that

games are not only different from what they had believed but also require different levels of understanding and engagement in their activation by players:

I think we underestimate the level of awareness that people have when they are gaming in these environments. Even really, really violent ones. They do pick up on subtle ironies. (Female who plays games)

Because it is a multi-layered, multi-path approach (a movie has a beginning and an end, there's one path through it), obviously there are many different paths through it. You could, I suppose, play it and not come across any violence ... quite conceivably. (Male who does not play)

I think it's his story, but it's very much something that you dictate as a player in a sense ... because you are given decisions – it's not just a clear “go and do this”, which I was expecting, “go and kill him”, “oh, ok I'll go and kill him” – but when I got there I had a choice: “do I kill him or do I not?” and what does that mean? So you almost get to dictate his story a little bit which I thought was interesting because I thought, I guess I expected it to be like in WoW [World of Warcraft] where you have an end-goal and you just go and do that, and then you move on to the next part of the chain – so there is no choice in a sense. (Female who plays games)

Participants were asked for their opinion as to why *Grand Theft Auto IV* had received an R18 classification. Rather than a failure to interpret the game text and its themes, participants showed uncertainty regarding the reasons for its classification, again due to a lack of awareness of how the assessment behind classification operates. Given the positivity of the response to the game and the lower levels of violence experienced compared to what participants had anticipated, one participant speculated that the moral reasoning required by the game was perhaps too complex for younger players:

Well, I can certainly see how the scenario where you have a choice between where you help someone, there's a moral judgment where the censors could easily decide it's beyond or not suitable for people under 18 to be contemplating ... that would seem to be the basis of it, rather than because it's a splatter as such, you know. (Male who does not play)

However, the opposite view was also presented:

It was set in a narrative that was testing our moral boundaries, I like that ... I don't think kids need to be protected from that part of the game. I don't think parents would be concerned with those moral tests that the characters go through. (Male who plays games)

Other participants experienced difficulty responding to the enquiry:

I don't know the rating system – there's fighting, there's crashing, there's probably swearing, but I don't recall hearing any. There probably is. Yes, there was. I don't know which of those things make it R18? I would have thought closer to R16, but I just don't know the rating system. (Female who does not play)

From what I played ... I didn't find anything in there that was particularly alarming, you know what I mean? (Female who plays games)

Some reverted to popular conceptions about the game when articulating their opinion as to why it had received the R18 classification:

... I know you can apparently rape people; you can take them and lock them in rooms and all that sort of stuff, that's the only stuff that I've heard in the media or the backlash in the media. (Male who does not play)

In general, experience of the game served to confound and confuse participants, as it presented a much more tempered and reasonable experience than was anticipated. A few participants commented that they currently held more concerns over some of the live-action *YouTube* content available online rather than games that have a distinguishable and identifiable aesthetic that clearly defines them as 'games'. An example was provided of the home-made, low-tech content circulated online that showcases extreme stunt-based antics (e.g. skating). This is a culture that has become more popular and recognisable with its translation to television and film via *Jackass* and its various imitators. In the example mentioned by a participant, one of the clip's subjects suffered horrendous injuries, nothing close to what the participant had ever witnessed on television or in a film. The main concern rested with the participant's son's lack of awareness of the possibility that the material could have been digitally manipulated or constructed and the whole thing staged. This ability to craft convincing accounts of seemingly real events (exploited in films like *The Blair Witch Project*, *Paranormal Activity* and *[Rec]*) was more of a concern for its ability to blur reality and fiction than the content of games.

5 - CONCLUSIONS

I wish I had done this ten years ago. (Female who does not play)

A general need exists for games research that is ‘more attentive’ to the situated experiences of interactive content rather than simply interpreting its surface features (see Jenkins 1993). That is, sensitivity to the spaces, places and conditions in which content is encountered and experienced within game texts. This research was able to address shortcomings in other research by ascertaining the impact of parents’ engagement with the semiotic resources employed by the games medium. In doing so, the research also served to counteract the effects of a broader research culture that has produced a society that has learnt to become ‘researchable subjects’ and to perform being a citizen by ‘expressing’ what they [see] as appropriate opinions (Buckingham & Bragg 2004, p.23). Media research has shown us that participants will not necessarily wish to construct themselves as possessing differing attitudes and beliefs from media-reinforced social standards. Discussing the media is itself a form of social action that allows people to define themselves and negotiate their relationships with others. In our study, this required the encouragement and extraction of different kinds of performance from participants through which their attitudes towards game content could be expressed more spontaneously.

In asking participants to play games, the research facilitated the construction of a more layered appreciation of game content, activity and intent, and an understanding that served to contradict commonly articulated perceptions of game players as ‘unintelligible’ for wasting their time playing games – ‘time that could be spent engaging in more constructive activities’ (Griffiths 1997, p.233). Games constitute cultural artefacts that occupy a place in a broader cultural context that demands understanding of how they exploit different technological platforms, diverge amongst titles and genres, and of the nature of the relationships they possess with other mediums. This research therefore held a fundamental interest in how games are *understood* through play (see Zagal 2009).

For James Paul Gee (2003) literacy as it is applied to games not only entails the ability to decode and understand meanings with respect to the semiotic domain of games but also the ability to produce meanings. Likewise, Espen Aarseth (1997) has highlighted how games constitute a mode of textuality and activity that demands the player work with the materiality of the text and participate in the construction of its structure. In acknowledging the nature of the medium as interactive, understanding has therefore become analogous with the ability to access the content, i.e. play. Seeman cites educator Chris Worsnop’s comments that good media education is not about

‘propagandising students into a single way of thinking’ but is to support them to ‘make their own choices and decisions about the ideological and political messages surrounding them in 21st century culture’ (Seeman 2004, pp.19-20). For many of the parents who participated in this research, their gameplay experience led to a similar conclusion, contingent on the need to apply *direct experiences* with games when conversing on access to media content and experiences.

Referring back to Prensky’s concept of ‘digital natives’, the term was coined precisely to describe an innate confidence witnessed in the use of new technologies such as the internet, video games, mobile telephony and ‘all the other toys and tools of the digital age’ (Prensky 2001, p.1). His work also typifies a fast-growing body of commentary from around the world that seeks to make sense of the distinct technological cultures and lifestyles of current generations of children and young people. Rather than using these technologies merely as part of their everyday lives, Prensky, like others, has reasoned that digital technology is essential to these young people’s existence. Digital natives are therefore depicted as being constantly ‘surrounded’ by and ‘immersed’ in new technologies in ways that older generations could never be. Much of the language used to describe the digital native is closer to the branding that would be employed in advertising or marketing campaigns than in serious academic debate. A host of commentators write persuasively of computer-game obsessed ‘homo-zappiens’ and ‘net savvy’ youth. These are young people who are described as living ‘digital childhoods’. All of these popular accounts neatly depict a distinct but common step-change in the ways in which contemporary forms of childhood, adolescence and young adulthood are now centred on digital technology and media. These differences imply a series of ‘disconnects’ between the ways that digital natives go about their business and the manner in which the world is still controlled largely by older generations. Disconnects, frictions and clashes are especially apparent when it comes to the existing focus on games.

As these last points suggest, the idea of the digital native carries a range of implications for institutions and organisations that seek to address young people’s engagement with contemporary media. In this sense, many of the structures of the digital immigrant world are incompatible with the needs and demands of young people. It could be argued that one solution might be to develop initiatives that seek to change and engage directly with the micro-politics of the home. The form these ‘subtler’, ‘less disruptive’ approaches may take to digital technology use could arise from altering the processes and practices surrounding play within the home. That is, involving the home in a reconfiguration of the ‘formality-informality span’, addressing the varying ‘extent and strictness of the social rituals which bind the behaviour of people’ in their dealings with technology and each other, as Barbara Misztal has described it (2000, p.8). She argues:

Although the process of formalisation is the dominant trend in modern social life, informality is the essential element in constructing trust relationships and, thus, in any cooperative arrangement aimed at improving the quality of life ... only a society that achieves an optimal balance between the informality and formality of interactional practices is in a position to create the conditions for cooperation and innovation (Misztal 2000, p.229).

As the ultimate 'end users' of gaming technology it would seem logical that parents also accommodate and pay more attention to the views, opinions, ideas and expertise of their children as players. As Mimi Ito *et al.* conclude:

Although youth are often considered early adopters and expert users of new technology, their views on the significance of new media practice are not always taken seriously. Adults who stand on the other side of a generation gap can see these new practices as mystifying and, at times, threatening to existing social norms and existing standards. Although we do not believe that youth have all the answers, we feel that it is crucial to listen carefully to them and learn from their experiences of growing up in a changing media ecology (Ito *et al.* 2008, p.35).

Encouraging intergenerational conversations and shared experience of games in order to establish digital technology use as a site for meaningful negotiation and collaboration between household members is not, however, considered a straightforward task. This is why the classification process is imperative, as relations surrounding gaming technology would need to be moved on from the 'climates of unease' that presently surround them. Advancing arguments for the negotiated adjustment of game technology use is certainly not intended as a proposal to relax the formal aspects of game classification. From this perspective, we recommend further thought be given to the way regulators might go about helping players and parents learn *about* digital games. Parents are perfectly placed to better support players to develop forms of 'critical' digital literacy, that is, 'cultivat[ing] the habit of uncovering and critiquing both [players'] own constructed and contingent experiences and resulting worldviews, particularly those that influence society's relation[s] with technology' (Duffelmeyer 2001, p.243).

There exists a pressing need for spaces to be provided for young people to develop a sense of critical agency that goes beyond that made available by consumer media culture – that is, giving young people the time to 'look between the scenes' of the technological cultures they live within, and consider the many social, ethical and political issues which surround technology consumption

and use. Increased parental knowledge and game literacy could help young people reach a better understanding of the processes and power relations involved in 'why they want what they want' (to use Walkerdine's phrase, 1991) and even, it could be argued, why they get what they get.

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