Young Boys Playing Digital Games
From Console to the Playground

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English abstract

This article studies how digital games are part of the everyday lives of Swedish 6 to 7-year-old boys. The data consist of video recordings from two schools, two after-school centres and four homes. The focus is on how children engage in, organize and use digital games in face-to-face interaction. It is argued that digital game competence matters not only in front of the screen, but also in the playground. In addition, it is argued that what counts as game competence is negotiated in the peer group.

Keywords: Game play, peers, digital competence, young boys, discourse analysis.
New media and young people have been the object of discussion ever since antiquity (Säljö, 2000). Parents apply rules to restrict and guide their children’s consumption of new media (e.g., Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Rideout, Roberts, & Foehr, 2005), and at school, students have to deal with rules concerning what kind of media may be used, when, together with whom, and where (Childress, 2004; Holloway & Valentine, 2003). The idea that games matter has often been discussed with a particular focus on the player (Erstad, Klovstad, Kristiansen & Søby, 2005; Gee, 2003; Kafai, Heeter, Denner & Sun, 2008a; Tapscott, 1998). Here, questions concerning gender, socioeconomic background, ethnicity, age and educational level have been of particular interest. Part of this discussion relates to an interest in the kind of competences, or literacy, that the gamer develops when using these media. This debate has often been related to what have been called digital divides, which points to competence differences in handling digital technology that may be related to structural variables. A different approach has been taken in research focusing on how the construction of gender, ethnicity, nationality and conflict solving is done within particular digital games (DeVane & Squire, 2008; Kafai, Heeter, Denner & Sun, 2008; Leonard, 2006). This research criticizes how power relations in Western societies are reflected in game designs, and it is expected to have an impact on how we see, for instance, gender, ethnicity, social class and sexuality. Both approaches to children’s use of digital games underline the fact that game play practices matter and are seen as being important with regard to competence and power.

The present paper discusses how digital games matter in Swedish boys’ everyday lives from the child perspective. The focus is on how boys use games in situ and how their game play competence matters in peer group interaction.

Game play and boys’ peer relations

Researchers argue that children’s play and games are implicitly gendered (Lever, 1978; Sutton-Smith, 1997). This view creates a dichotomy between girls’ and boys’ ways of playing games, in which the former way is described in terms of intimacy, cooperation and compliance, while the latter is described as being highly physical, competitive and governed by complex rules. Recently, this traditional distinction between girls’ versus boys’ ways of playing games has been questioned (see Evaldsson, 2004, 2005; M. H. Goodwin, 1990; Thorne, 1993).

Research on children and digital games in particular has shown that boys are more likely to play digital games than girls are (Erstad et al., 2005; Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith & Macgill, 2008; Livingstone & Bober, 2005; Medierådet, 2006). It has also been claimed that boys spend more time on gaming and that they are likely to consume a larger number of game titles than girls are (Erstad et al. 2005). But, when it comes to explaining gender differences, boys and girls are usually glossed along the lines of the traditional dichotomy. Gender differences are used as an explanation for different patterns concerning who consumes digital games. The main argument is that digital games do not appeal to girls, because such games differ too much from their real-life interests in sharing secrets and building friendships (Kafi et al. 2008). When explanations are given about why boys play more games than girls do, this difference is often described as being due to the logic of the games available on the market. For instance, it has been claimed that typical male games ‘revolve around warfare, anti-terrorism, invading aliens, zombies, science fiction, combat with robots, etc. Aesthetically, their settings tend to be highly rectilinear, typically man-made space’ (Fullerton, Morie & Pearce, 2008). Descriptions of the male gamer, such as the one above, reoccur when differences between boys’ and girls’ game play are described, but they do not explain how these themes may be of relevance to boys but not to girls, or vice versa. In sum, the discussion concerning gender differences in game play
presumes a given distinction between girls and boys regarding what activities they participate in and what interests they may have. Rather than presuming this distinction, I argue that we need to investigate in detail how children, boys and girls, accomplish game play.

Digital games are part of boys’ peer relations in the sense that they play games together, they talk about games (Aarsand, 2007b), and they are part of social structures online as well as offline where games and gaming are discussed (Taylor, 2008). The notion of peers refers to ‘that cohort or group of children who spend time together on an everyday basis’ (Corrsaro 1997, p. 95). The notion of peers underlines that the children in focus are of a similar age and they that regularly socialize. Studies of children’s peer relations have argued that children develop competence with regard to expressiveness, closeness and communities (Frønes, 1995). Research on peer groups has focused on, for instance, drawing (Ånggård, 2005), popular culture (Sparrman, 2002), social organization in terms of gender (Thorne, 1993), language learning (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2004; Cekaite, 2006), sharing and controlling (Corsaro, 1997) and conflicts (Evaldsson, 2005; M. H. Goodwin, 1990). Power relations in peer groups are often described as objects of negotiation (e.g., Evaldsson 2004, Goodwin 1990), in contrast to mixed generations or age practices, where the power relation is often in favour of the adult or the older party (Blum-Kulka & Snow 2004, Corsaro 1997, Grieshaber 2004). Moreover, peer relations can be seen as important with regard to how children’s social and cultural lives are produced and reproduced. In order to understand how digital games and game play works in young boys’ peer relations, I have studied how these activities are accomplished in situ.

Translation and power/knowledge relations

The present study of boys’ use of digital games in peer groups is anchored in two analytical concepts: translation and power/knowledge relations. *Translation* is seen as ‘a relation that does not transport causality, but induces two mediators into coexisting’ (Latour, 2005 p. 108). In contrast to the idea that objects move between and are adjusted to different activities, the idea of translation highlights the relation between mediators in order to understand the phenomenon. Two concepts are of importance to understanding translation: first, a *relation* is seen as a reference between activities, objects, and subjects. In the present text, it is the references between digital games, game play and play among boys that are considered. Second, a *mediator* is seen as something that transforms and modifies the meaning or the elements it is supposed to carry (Latour, 2005). Mediators always involve ‘something being retained, something being added and something being taken away’ (Prout, 2005 p. 109). Objects, persons, activities may be seen as mediators. In the present work, the idea of translation is used to understand how digital games are accomplished in different settings, and how these practices are related to other activities in which boys are involved. Moreover, phenomena like children’s use of digital games can be seen as an assemblage of mediators in time and space.

Mediation as well as social interaction implies the notion of power. Power is relational in the sense that it is an aspect of the relations between actors, human as well as non-human. Power is performed, and thereby productive (Foucault, 1980). This means that power could be seen as a verb, as something that is exercised. Power is closely related to knowledge, or as Foucault (1980) writes: ‘It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power’ (p. 52), thereby power and knowledge are intertwined. Power needs knowledge about the object it operates on and it defines what is considered as legitimate knowledge. ‘Power means relations, a more or less organized, hierarchical, co-ordinated cluster of relations’ (Foucault 1980, p. 198). Power relations produce hierarchical organizations of positions as well as knowledge.
What digital games are considered good and cool is an object of negotiation. This requires knowledge about digital games, where some games are dismissed as irrelevant to the category, while others are made visible as good and cool. The notion power/knowledge highlights actions that modify other actions, and it is used to understand how participants tune in and mutually orient to each other. Power/knowledge is seen as an aspect of relations and mediators. In short, power/knowledge relations mean that things as well as people are excluded and ‘sorted’ into different categories.

The Foucauldian work on power has largely been concerned with the relation between social structures, institutions and the individual (e.g., Ailwood, 2008; Fejes & Nicoll, 2008). In the present text, however, power/knowledge and translation are used as analytical tools to understand how children engage in, organize and use digital games in face-to-face interaction.

**Method and setting**

Inspired by multi-site ethnography (Hannerz, 2003; Marcus, 1995), the present study follows children’s use of digital games on different sites. My data consist of one week of videotaped observations of two first grade classrooms, two after-school centres and four homes. I have named the two school areas *East* and *West* to differentiate between these schools, after-school centres and homes. The video recordings have focused on four children, two boys and two girls aged 7-8, and their encounters during one week. More precisely, we follow one boy and one girl in the same class during the same week. The children have been videotaped in the school and at the leisure centre by the researchers, while parents video-recorded them in the home. Informed consent was obtained from the children in the school class and their parents as well as from the head teachers, class teachers and the leisure-time pedagogues. All participants have been given pseudonyms. Examples from the video recordings have been transcribed according a modified version of conversation analysis (see Appendix 1) and translated into English.

A child perspective is considered by focusing on children’s activities and their understanding. The analysis is based on two conversational analytical assumptions. The first assumption is that interaction among participants is sequentially organized in a turn-taking system, which means that one utterance is followed by another one. The second assumption is that the participants’ understanding of each other is related to how the other person responds to the former speaker’s turn. How the participants orient to each others’ turns is not only an important resource for people in understanding their fellow interlocutors, but this is also where researchers have to focus to understand activities from the participants’ perspective. This has been referred to as the ‘proof procedure’ (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974). The responses are seen as ‘proofs’ of how something has been understood by the participants themselves. For instance, it could be argued that an utterance can be interpreted as an invitation if the co-participants treat it as an invitation. Thereby, based on the turn-taking system and the proof procedure, it could be claimed that the paper takes a child perspective on what happens in social interaction.

In the present text, I will use examples from video recordings in area West. The leisure centre was located next to the school, and the two shared a huge playground. Behind one of the school buildings, there was a large area with a forest, wood stocks, sand, stones and hills where the children spent a great deal of their time. During the fieldwork, the boys used digital games at home, at the leisure centre, in the classroom as well as in the playground. In the excerpts, I will present Justus and his friends from school West across two sites to see how game play matters and is accomplished. The boys spent most of the time between lessons talking about and playing different digital games.
single most discussed and played games were variations of Star Wars. The excerpts in the present
text have been chosen because they illustrate how children used a game series across practices in their
everyday lives. In the data, girls played with girls and boys played with boys. Several studies show
that there is a tendency towards sex segregation in peer relations during the early years at school
(Corsaro, 1997; Lever, 1978; Thorne, 1993). This tendency could also be seen in the present data,
but there were also several situations in which boys and girls played together.

Game play with friends at home

Game play demands game consoles as well as games. All of the boys in the school class had access
to game consoles, but the kind of games they had differed. When I talked to the children, it was
obvious that they were not yet into borrowing or downloading games. This means that the boys had
to rely on friends, elder siblings or parents for borrowing and obtaining new games (cf. DiSalvo,
Crowley & Norwood, 2008). This resulted in a situation where some of the children have shared
knowledge based on experience from playing the same game, while others knew the games vaguely
either through talk about games at school and the leisure centre, or from visiting friends. As such,
the games were translated and brought into existence on several different sites.

In the first excerpt, I focus on how Justus introduces and guides Tobias in ‘Lego Star Wars’. The
game is full of references to the ‘Star Wars’ movies seen in available avatars, possible customizing of
the avatars and the virtual environment, as well as the name of the game. From conversations with
the boys, I know that Tobias plays digital games regularly, but as we will see in the present excerpt,
he is a newbie when it comes to playing ‘Lego Star Wars’. Justus sits on the couch, while Tobias is
placed on the floor. The avatars are located in a place that has the form of a star with four different
corridors.

**Excerpt 1: Game play at home**

Participants: Justus (7), Tobias (7) and Playstation 2

Place: Lego Star Wars
Tobias >Justus what am I going to do here?<

Justus <First (.) come over here>

((Tobias places his avatar next to Tobias’s avatar. Then, Justus walks across two areas that light up when they are passed))

Tobias Are we not going to see when he st[rypes xxx

Justus [Ye::s but (.) then we

have to play for real

(4) ((Money falls down from the ceiling. Justus and Tobias collect it))

Justus ((Opens a door and pigeons fly out))

((Both avatars run through the pigeons and into the corridor at the opposite side))

Tobias But we=

Justus =and then (.) nobody can be there

Tobias >Yes but look<

Justus ((Shakes his head))

Tobias You will see

(5) ((Tobias opens a door but nothing happens))

Tobias But if we (.) are doing this? ((Steps on a field that lights up))

Justus No ((shaking his head))

Only money comes ((money falls down from the ceiling and the boys pick it up))

Tobias Exactly (.) if we say like this look at me

(2) ((Tobias’ avatar runs to the opposite corridor. Justus opens the door at the end of the corridor. In addition money comes out of a hole in the wall close to Justus))

Justus THE MONEY TOBBE ((Tobias is on his way through the open door))

Tobias Yes okay ((returns to Justus))

Tobias starts by asking what to do (line 1), and Justus runs across the screen with his avatar simultaneously as he tells and shows Tobias where to meet him with his avatar (lines 2-4). Both players are facing the screen. The virtual space can be seen as a semiotic field in which the activity takes place. A semiotic field refers to the signs and the medium in which the action is embedded, and that the player uses these to make sense of activities (C. Goodwin, 2000). In the excerpt, we see how Justus, through references to the game, takes this interactional environment for granted. When Justus tells Tobias to ‘come over here’ (line 2), he uses his avatar as the point of reference. Tobias has no problem identifying what Justus means and he places his avatar next to Justus’s (lines 3-4) and not, which could have been a possibility, by sitting himself next to Justus on the couch. This shows that the activity is framed as game play, and that talk and instructions are understood within
this frame (Goffman, 1974). It could be claimed that the activity is framed as a demonstration and an instruction within the game (cf. Tannen & Wallat 1999 [1987]). Note that the game play is mediated not only through the software and the hardware, but also through Justus’s way of understanding and handling the game.

When Tobias asks what he is going to do (line 1) and how the game progresses (line 5), he also offers Justus the position as the most knowledgeable player, who is given the power to decide what to do next. Justus answers Tobias’s question (line 5) by saying that they ‘have to play for real’ (line 7). Thereby, he creates a distinction between ‘playing-for-real’ and not-playing-for-real. Labelling the activity as real versus not real displays the knowledgeable game player’s evaluation of the task, as a demanding task, and that he, as the expert, knows how to accomplish it. At the same time as Justus makes the distinction between playing-for-real and not-playing-for-real, he also says that the ongoing activity is not-playing-for-real. In the ongoing demonstration, Justus tells Tobias where to stand (line 2) and how to open the doors to get the money, that is, by illuminating areas on the floor (lines 3 and 4). In short, Justus takes the responsibility to teach Tobias to play for real, and in this way he defines what constitutes valid game play knowledge. After the avatars have opened the doors and collected the money, Tobias runs over to the opposite corridor (lines 12-13). Justus tells him that he will not find anything behind that door (line 14). Tobias disagrees with Justus (lines 15, 17); he opens the door at the end of the corridor, but nothing happens (line 18). Justus’s utterance ‘You will see’ is a way to position himself as the most knowledgeable player, where he has the information Tobias needs to succeed in the game. Tobias tries the trick he learnt in the previous corridor; he walks on the field in a similar way as Justus did before. The field lights up (line 19) and shortly thereafter, money falls from the ceiling (line 22). Justus and Tobias collect the money just as Tobias confirms that he now understands how to get the money and that it differs from the previous place where the pigeons appeared (line 24). Then the players move over to the fourth corridor. While Tobias runs to the door at the end of it, Justus stops and opens a trapdoor on the right at the beginning of the corridor. When he does this, money falls out of the door. Tobias runs through the door at the end of the corridor, but Justus shouts that he has to collect the money first. During this sequence, we see how Justus tells Tobias what to pay attention to and what to do. Tobias has not yet seen the relevance of collecting money. The reason for this may be that the money is used to buy things and does not have consequences for moving to the next scene at this stage of the game. As a gamer with more experience of ‘Lego Star Wars’, Justus knows that money is of importance later on in the game.

In the above excerpt, we see how power is used in establishing valid knowledge concerning how to play the game, what to expect, what buttons to push and when. The power relation works in both directions, Tobias asks for help to handle the ongoing operation, and Justus tells him where to stand, move and what to do. Note that the game play encounter is tight in the sense that almost nothing from the surroundings seems to enter into the activity (cf. Juul, 2005). This may be because both boys are experienced players, which causes them to stay within the game play frame. They are both focusing on the game, and the activity takes place in the virtual landscape without references to anything outside the activity. In addition, inside the game play frame, demonstrations and co-operations are part of the game play encounter. Put differently, game play occurs on several layers (cf. Goffman, 1961). A more general claim is that game play activities, such as the one above, include cooperation, leading to common experiences and friendship.
Playing in the playground

While game play is characterized by the players as being present in front of a screen and often has the character of being a ‘hands-on activity’, digital games in the playground can be seen as ‘hands-off’ game activities (Aarsand, 2007a). Such activities include talk about digital games, imitations of activities that take place in games, or the creation of play environments and objects that can be explicitly related to digital games. Hands-off game activities can be seen as examples of how digital games are translated into other sites.

The second excerpt shows how displaying knowledge concerning popular culture such as digital games is of importance to the social organization of peer-group activities in the playground. In Excerpt 2, we will meet a peer group consisting of Justus, Samuel, Konrad and Robin. The boys have already decided to play ‘Star Wars’, and they are now entering the part where they discuss and choose characters.

Excerpt 2: Distribution of positions

Participants: Justus, Samuel, Konrad and Robin

Place: Playground

1 Samuel What? Well then I am what is his name
2 Robin Well actually he is Obi-Wan ((points at Samuel))
3 Konrad Then Justus is xxx ((points at Justus))
4 Justus No: ((shaking his head))
5 Robin And who are you?
6 Samuel L[uke (.)
7 Justus [Luke
8 Robin [Yes then ((looking at Konrad))
9 Samuel [And then I am Obi-Wan from the first period in Star Wars 1
10 Robin [Uh:: because he looks better then
11 Konrad [Xxx ((to Justus))
12 Samuel Yes:
13 (2)
14 Robin Bu bu but he is kind of good looking in the second one wh
15 wh when he has nice hair
16 ((Justus and Konrad start to wrestle))

Samuel tries to remember the name of the character that he wants to play (line 1). Robin states that Samuel is Obi-Wan, thereby displaying that this position is already taken (line 2). Then, Konrad tries to position Justus, but he resists (lines 3-4). This causes Robin to ask what character Justus is. Samuel and Justus answer simultaneously that he is Luke, which displays alignment between the boys. Note that Obi-Wan and Luke are two of the main characters in several of the Star Wars movies.
Thereby, Samuel and Justus occupy two popular positions within the field of Star Wars. These positions also work as symbols for who is central in the play. Put differently, the distribution of positions within the play displays the participants’ social status (Goodwin 1990). In the present peer group, Justus and Samuel usually take charge in play that makes reference to digital games or movies.

It has been claimed that social status in peer groups is a reoccurring object of negotiation (cf. Corsaro, 1997; Goodwin, 1990). Samuel even elaborates on his position when he underlines that he is Obi-Wan from the first period in Star Wars 1 (line 10). Robin states that Obi-Wan looks better in that period than in the other ones; thereby he also confirms Samuel’s position as Obi-Wan. After a two-second pause, Robin comes back to the topic and suggests that he even looked good in the second movie. In this sequence, we see how Samuel and Robin establish a common understanding of Obi-Wan as an attractive position in the ongoing play. Note that what makes Obi-Wan from the first period particularly attractive is not his abilities in Star Wars, but what he looks like. Seen in contrast to research that categorizes children’s preferences for games and play along the dichotomy of girls’ versus boys’ games, it can be seen that the distribution of positions as well as arguments for why certain positions are attractive are not related to warfare, being very competitive or being particularly physical. Rather, we see that game play in-the-playground among boys consists of negotiations and distributions of positions as well as a concern for what their characters looked like, while at the same time the activity is well anchored within the field of Star Wars.

What is striking in the above excerpt is that the boys’ main resource in the construction of the play is not the digital games, but the movies. Unlike the games, the main story in the films is structured around different times and spaces. Thereby, utterances like ‘Obi-Wan from the first period in Star Wars 1’ (line 10) most likely refer to the time structure that is recognizable in the movies. Further on, the visual assessment of the main character rests on the idea that he changes during the films. This change is not obvious in the same sense in the games. In these boys’ peer play, popular culture, such as digital games and movies, works as a resource in socially organizing their life as friends and peers. It could be argued that media phenomena like ‘Star Wars’ can be seen as an assemblage of media activities, where the different activities and objects are seen as gates to a cultural field consisting of certain characters and narratives that reappear (cf. Aarsand, 2007b). Moreover, different cultural activities and objects become co-existing parts in a network that is actualized differently depending on the activity.

Negotiating game competence

It has been argued that digital games are just one part in a broader media ecology that involves comics, graphic novels, animation, toys, trading card games and character merchandise (Ito, 2008). In a production chain, it is necessary to track the original cultural expression owing to copyrights. For instance, the ‘Lord of the Rings’ first appeared as a printed book, and then has been turned into movies, games, picture books and music. From the users’ point of view, whether or not the movie is the ‘original’ source of the phenomenon may not even be a question.

The next excerpt shows how digital games work as a resource in the social organization of boys in peer groups. We will meet three boys, Justus, Samuel and Robin, who have decided to play Star Wars. Star Wars is an example of a media phenomenon that includes books, movies, toys and digital games. It stretches across several continents and generations just as fairy tales do. Justus and Samuel told me that they are best friends, and that they often see each other outside school. When we enter
the next excerpt, the three boys have just met Tobias, who is a classmate, and they start a discussion about what to play.

**Excerpt 3: Warcraft is Warcraft**

Participants: Justus, Tobias, Samuel and Robin

Place: Playground

1. Tobias Would you like to play something?
2. Samuel We are playing Star Wars
3. Tobias But I played that with them ((nodding)) earlier
4. Samuel What would you like to play then?
5. Tobias ‘Warcraft’ ((starts walking))
6. (3)
7. Robin Yes but Justus does not wa wa want to
8. Tobias Pirate Warcraft exists
9. Justus That does not exist
10. Tobias Oyea (. ) I have seen it (nodding)
11. Samuel No that does not [exist
12. Justus [YOU’RE LYING!=
13. Tobias =No ((shaking his head))
14. Samuel There is no such [thing as Pirate Warcraft
15. Justus [Uh! ((moves close to Samuel’s face))
16. Tobias No but it exists pirates in Warcraft ((bends down to his
17. sandals))
18. Justus No[:
19. Samuel [SEE WARCRAFT IS WARCRAFT ((grasps Tobias head and pushes
20. it down))
21. Tobias But I have seen it
22. Robin But Samuel (. ) Samuel (. ) Samuel ((tries to grab Samuel))
23. Justus And besides that (. ) we don’t believe in anyth[ing=
24. Samuel [No:: let’s go
25. ((turns around and starts to walk))
26. Justus =you say ((Justus and Robin follow Samuel))

Tobias asks if they want to play something, Samuel reacts by telling him that they are already playing Star Wars (line 2). Tobias tells Samuel that he does not want to play Star Wars, using the argument that he has already played it with some of the other children. In Tobias’s account, we see that playing Star Wars is well known and likely to take place among several of the children at this school. Samuel displays openness to negotiate about what to play when he asks Tobias what he wants to play. Tobias
suggests that they play a popular digital game called ‘Warcraft’ (line 4), but Robin tells him that Justus, the third boy in the group, does not want to play that. Then, Tobias presents new information about ‘Warcraft’ by saying that ‘Pirate Warcraft’ exists (line 8). Justus denies Tobias’s claims by using the same words with a slight twist. According to Goodwin (1990), this way of changing the format of the utterances, format tying, is one way to create opposition and thereby a conflict. This is the turning point at which the activity changes character. It is no longer a negotiation about what to play. It has become a question of knowledge and thereby also of the power to define what counts as knowledge. In the dispute, Tobias claims that he has seen the game himself (line 10). The appeal to what he has seen is an example of stake inoculation, that is, when Tobias downgrades his personal interest by appealing to something outside his influence, and as a fact (cf. Potter, 1996). Samuel recycles Justus’s words and thereby also aligns with Justus when he claims that the game does not exist. Justus upgrades the confrontation by shouting that Tobias is lying (line 12), thereby positioning him as morally unaccountable, as somebody who cannot be trusted. Samuel repeats that ‘Pirate Warcraft’ does not exist. In short, Justus and Samuel do not accept the categorization of the game as a pirate game. Tobias retreats partly by letting go of the game’s title, but holds on to his main argument; there are pirates in Warcraft (line 16). Justus keeps denying the existence of pirates in Warcraft, thereby aligning with Samuel, who starts shouting while grabbing Tobias’s head and pushing it down to the ground (lines 19-20). While Tobias gets on his feet and says that this is what he saw, Samuel turns around. Robin tries to get Samuel’s attention by grabbing his arm (line 22). Justus closes the episode by stating that they do not believe in anything Tobias says, before they turn their backs on Tobias and walk away (lines 24-26). This later extreme case formulation is not only expressed vocally, but also bodily when Samuel and Justus walk away.

Playing digital games in the playground was not an unusual activity among the boys. The above episode started as a negotiation about what to play, and ended up in a dispute about the nature of a particular game. If we see the interaction between the boys as a question of displaying game competence, then it could be claimed that at the point when Justus and Samuel state that the game does not exist (lines 9 and 11), they have also claimed that Tobias does not have valid knowledge. These boys, Justus and Samuel, exercise power when they show how a specific game is to be described and categorized. They define what counts as knowledge. In the above excerpt, we see how Tobias does not accept the alternative suggestions concerning the game. The consequence is that he loses his possibility to negotiate about what to play; even worse, he is excluded from the activity. The question of exclusion is organized as a form of disciplining Tobias into viewing Warcraft as they do, or at least accepting their version as the official one. Because of the central role given to digital games among these children, there is reason to believe that having and knowing digital games is of importance when it comes to participation and status in the playground (cf. Aarsand, 2007a). Being revealed as not possessing the presumed knowledge means that one is in danger of losing credibility in the peer group.

Digital games in children’s peer culture

Boys play games on the computer as well as in the playground. In the games Star Wars and Warcraft, the narratives are built up around violence; they are goal oriented and the content is usually quite remote from the lives of 7-year-old children. Yet Star Wars and Warcraft are two of the games that often reoccurred among the boys in my study. According to interactional research on game and play, there is no reason to believe that how boys use digital games differs radically from how girls use them (cf. Goodwin, 2006; 1990; Evaldsson, 2004; 2009). In the present study, playing in the playground with references to digital games is studied among boys.
In this paper, I argue that media phenomena such as Star Wars are situated activities that are used and translated in game play as well as in play activities in the playground. Obviously, Star Wars located in Lego Star Wars differs from Star Wars in the playground. In Lego Star Wars, the game structure and the boys participating in the game mediate the activities. Thereby, game play requires competences in handling game equipment as well as virtual demands. The activity is accomplished differently depending on how players position themselves and co-players. When players consider each other as equal with regard to power and knowledge, this has consequences for how game play is accomplished (Aarsand & Aronsson, 2009). This can be seen, for instance, in the distribution of positions, interaction patterns and what is considered valid game play competence. In Excerpt 1, the expert player directed the less knowledgeable player’s attention to aspects of the game, and he demonstrated how to solve certain tasks. Another way to demonstrate what is valid knowledge is to disapprove claims and suggestions in public, or simply to claim that they are not valid, like in Excerpt 3. To influence the construction of knowledge, one has to position oneself as more powerful and knowledgeable than the other party. It could be argued that relevant and valid knowledge in game play or in the playground is made visible and sanctioned in the power/knowledge relation between the players. In the excerpts, we see how game play competence is developed among peers, and where the boys are active constructors of what counts as knowledge. In addition, other aspects are central to the children’s participation in peer groups, like having common experiences, forming friendships and struggling for central positions in social hierarchies.

Digital games are not closed systems that exist in their own right, rather the opposite: games need players to come into existence (cf. Aarseth, 1997). Thereby, games are always already translated in game play. As can be seen in the children’s use of digital games, the games are actualized and brought into existence in the playground. But playing Star Wars in the playground has few similarities with playing Star Wars as a digital game. What makes us identify activities in the playground as related to Star Wars is the participants’ use of the Star Wars concept. This notion actualizes a semiotic field where positions and characters are known and negotiated, where an activity such as fighting with sticks is identified as fighting with laser swords, and where walking around is similar to going on a mission. The semiotic field used by the boys consists of digital games, movies, music, websites, comics and books. This media mix appeared as shared knowledge, used to create activities in the playground and make them meaningful to the participants. When we look in detail at children’s peer play, activities and objects are not necessarily what they seem to be. References to Star Wars may be to digital games, but they may also be to movies, books, TV series or even cartoons. This means that playing Star Wars in the playground brings other Star Wars activities into coexistence, and it actualizes a popular cultural network. If the activity is framed as playing Star Wars, knowing the semiotic field and the network is a resource in accessing play activities, participating in negotiations about the distribution of positions and characters, and influencing the development of the play. In short, the media mix and the common experience work as a semiotic field in which different activities are locally structured, understood and acted upon. In the playground, as well as in ‘Lego Star Wars’, power/knowledge relations are of importance to positioning as well as to what is categorized as knowledge. Playing digital games in the playground includes relations and mediators other than the games played on a game console. But rather than seeing ‘Lego Star Wars’ and ‘Star Wars in-the-playground’ as completely different practices, they could be seen as parts of a literacy network in which popular culture, in terms of games and movies, circulates and is made relevant in the everyday lives of these boys.

In sum, when children’s practices are studied across activities in situ, it can be seen how game and game play competence are central even in peer-group activities in the playground. In the playground,
these competences were used as resources in social interaction and organization of self-initiated activities. In order to learn something, it has been argued that the student needs to see the authenticity and relevance of what is taught (e.g. Larsson 1996). Then, children’s everyday practices are huge resources in planning and creating teaching, whether it concerns geography, languages or social competences. Several of the knowledge domains that are known from the school curriculum are part of children’s everyday lives, but these are used and framed differently in game play activities. The fact that game play is one of the most common activities among children in Western countries (Erstad et al., 2005; Livingstone & Bober, 2005; Medierådet 2006) makes it an argument as to why digital games and game play are of particular importance to teachers working with children. If educators and policymakers include ‘hands-off’ game activities in the discussion on how digital games may be used in education, then this would increase the pedagogical potential of game activities.

Appendix 1: Transcript convention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>Inquiring intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=</td>
<td>Contiguous utterances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:</td>
<td>Prolongation of preceding vowel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[...]</td>
<td>Lines left out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>Pause 2 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(.)</td>
<td>Pause shorter than 0.2 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xxx</td>
<td>Something was said but the transcriber could not discern its content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word</td>
<td>The bracket indicates the onset of overlapping speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word</td>
<td>Underlined means stressed word (or part of it)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Word’</td>
<td>Quiet speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORD</td>
<td>Loud speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>((laughing))</td>
<td>Comments made by the researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;Word&lt;</td>
<td>Embeds faster speech than surrounding speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hehe</td>
<td>Laughter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


Hannerz, U. (2003). Being there... and there... and there!: Reflections on Multi-Site Ethnography. *Ethnography, 4*(2), 201-216.


*Gender and Education, 17*(5), 539 - 553.