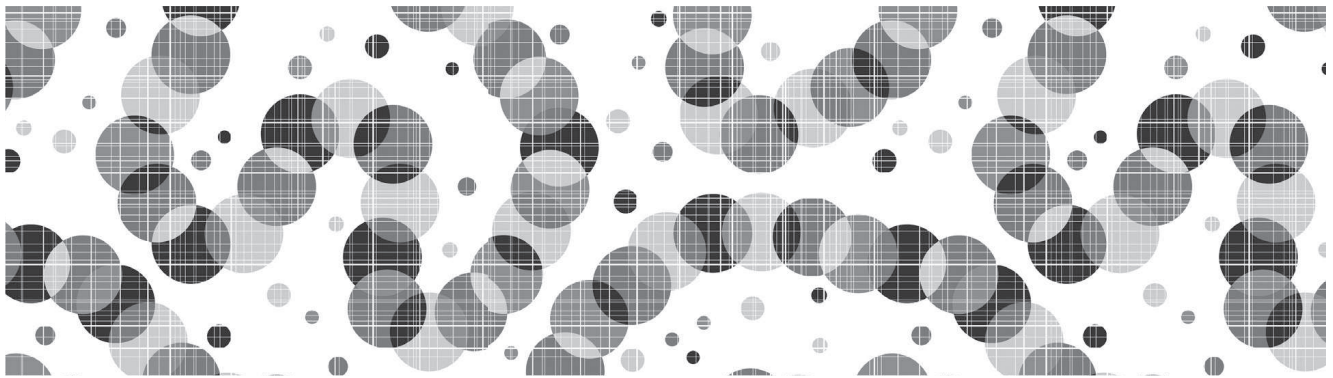


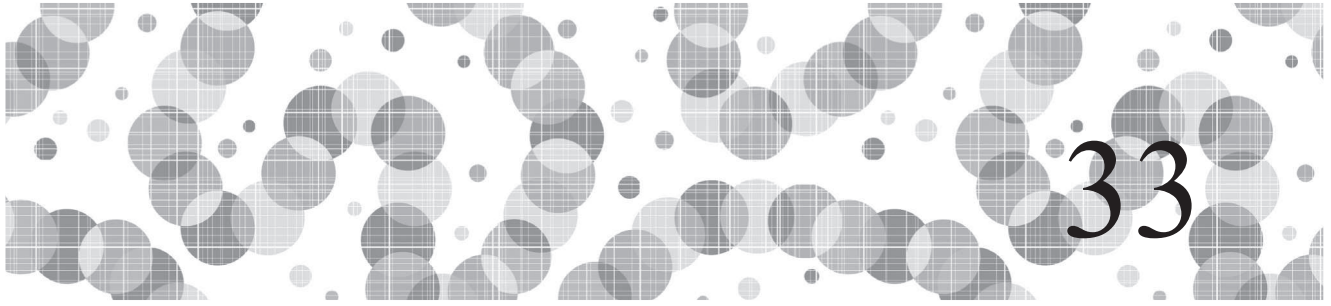
The SAGE Handbook of
**Play and Learning in
Early Childhood**



Edited by
Liz Brooker
Mindy Blaise and
Susan Edwards

 **SAGE reference**

Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC



Media, Popular Culture and Play

Jackie Marsh

INTRODUCTION

Research on the relationship between popular culture and play has, historically, drawn on a range of theoretical perspectives, including those originating from the fields of cultural studies and media studies. Inevitably, discussion on the nature of popular culture itself must be informed by analyses of the nature of social and cultural practices in specific economic, historical and political contexts. Definitions of popular culture are many and varied, and therefore it is necessary to begin the chapter with a clear statement of how this notion is conceptualized in this context. Drawing from Mukerji and Schudson (1991: 3), who emphasize the way in which popular culture includes the beliefs, practices and objects that are widely shared among a population, it can be proposed that children's popular culture includes both media-related texts and artefacts and those non-media-related practices and beliefs that are embedded in everyday life experiences. Examples of the latter might include

urban legends, popular sayings, chain letters (or emails, as is currently the case) and customs. In relation to young children, everyday cultural practices include the transmission of nursery rhymes. The focus in this chapter is on those aspects of children's popular culture which are embedded in, or influenced by, media and new technologies, such as television, films, computer games, online sites and mobile technologies, and related texts and artefacts. This demarcation is not intended to suggest that media-related play and non-media play can be easily categorized and separated in this way; play, as we know, is a fluid and complex concept that defies attempts to classify it or its contents. Further to this, it is problematic to suggest that culture can be separated into something that relates to 'popular' and that which is distinct from it. As Raymond Williams (1977) suggested, 'culture is ordinary', by which he intended to argue that the concept of culture should include everyday practices in addition to notions of high culture that relate to the arts, for example. Nevertheless, despite these



limitations to an approach that does focus narrowly on media-related play, there is much to be gained from a close analysis of the way in which media-related popular cultural practices are integrated into play, given the numerous myths and misunderstandings that abound in this area, which give rise to recurrent moral panics about the nature of childhood in the new media age (e.g. Palmer, 2006).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Theoretical perspectives from cultural studies provide opportunities to consider the relationship between dominant, hegemonic cultural values and children's play. Poststructuralist analyses of this relationship have moved beyond the Frankfurt-school notion of the 'duped' masses to acknowledge the complexities of the interactions between consumer and producer. For example, Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay and Negus (1997) developed the 'circuit of culture' model in order to examine the social and cultural practices embedded in the use of the Sony Walkman. They identified key elements that circulate in cultural production and consumption, which include identity, regulation and representation. This model makes it clear that in any cultural event, complex factors intersect. As a result, it is difficult to make any assumptions about children's agency, or lack of it, in the practice of media production or consumption without considering the ways in which each of these elements interact in situated contexts.

Perspectives from cultural studies also enable a consideration of the relationship between children's play and larger structures within society over time. For example, Williams's work has more recently been drawn upon to consider the way in which children's play practices are composed of elements that operate simultaneously, yet originate from different timescales, with varied cultural effects (Willett, Richards, Marsh,

Burn and Bishop, 2013). Williams distinguished between residual, dominant and emergent aspects of culture in an attempt to explain how the present is layered:

Any culture includes available elements of its past, but their place in the contemporary cultural process is profoundly variable. I would call the 'archaic' that which is wholly recognized as an element of the past, to be observed, to be examined, or even on occasion to be consciously 'revived', in a deliberately specializing way. What I mean by the 'residual' is very different. The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process... Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practised on the basis of the residue – cultural as well as social – of some previous social and cultural institution or formation (Williams, 1977: 122).

In children's play, residual forms, such as games that have been passed on and re-articulated through generations, are present in contemporary culture. Dominant practices reflect hegemonic cultural forms and it is this element of popular cultural play that has perhaps received most attention, with, for example, extensive reviews of the way in which dominant ideologies in relation to commercialism pervade children's play practices (Seiter, 1995; Kenway and Bullen, 2001). It is the 'emergent' category that Williams felt offered the potential for oppositional practices (Williams, 1981). In considering the relationship between media, play and popular culture, innovative and emergent practices develop which provide space for children's agentive play and which enable children to challenge and transgress dominant cultural values and forms; these play practices may, in turn, become residual if they are sedimented into everyday practice over time (Willett et al., 2013).

The related field of media studies has also been highly influential in analyses of children's play and popular culture. Whilst the majority of research in this field has been focused on the practices of older children and

young people, the findings do have relevance when considering the experiences of young children. Work in this area has identified the way in which media are a central element of children's lives (Buckingham, 2000). In the digital nexus of play and creativity, media are central to children's meaning-making practices (Willett, Robinson and Marsh, 2009). Children develop 'ruling passions' (Barton and Hamilton, 1998) related to particular media characters, texts and/or artefacts and these inform constructions of identity and social relationships in the early years (Marsh et al., 2005). As media texts have become more embodied in digital technologies, children communicate with others in multiple ways through online networks (Ito et al., 2008) and engage in participatory communities that develop a range of skills and knowledge (Jenkins et al., 2006). Two concepts in particular deserve consideration here: those of transmedia intertextuality and media ecology.

One of the key theoretical concepts that has informed understanding of the relationship between media, popular culture and play is that of *transmedia intertextuality*. Kinder (1993) developed this concept in an analysis of children's media texts, which are linked together in a process of 'transmedia intertextuality', such as the way in which television programmes may have spin-offs in the form of books, comics and computer games. Grimes (2008: 122) points to the way in which such media 'supersystems' privilege consumerism, suggesting that 'each text promotes consumption of the other (related) texts, and invokes consumerism as the preferred mode of experience – by promising that purchase of ancillary products will enable more intimate access to the narrative and its characters'. Drawing on Fleming's (1996) analysis of the way in which toys are positioned in these cross-media supersystems, this phenomenon can be seen to create a narrativized semiotic system in which children can access the narrative from any entry point and, thus, the

idea of a particular text being the central focus is no longer relevant.

A second key concept that is germane to any study of the relationship between media, popular culture and play is the notion of the *media ecology*. Originating from the work of Marshall McLuhan (1964) and developed by Neil Postman (1970: 61) as 'the study of media as environments', this ecological metaphor emphasizes the way in which media are embedded within social and cultural networks in which the various elements are integrated. Scolari (2012: 218) identifies two particular uses of the term in the field: '(a) media ecology as an environment and (b) media ecology as an intermedia relationship'. Media researchers who use the term (e.g. Ito et al., 2008; Horst, Herr-Stephenson and Robinson, 2010) have identified how children and young people's media practices are related and rooted in their everyday lives. However, a number of commentators have identified the problems that arise when drawing from a biological concept (see Scolari, 2012) and Carrington (2013) suggests that the complexities of social interaction in the new media age require an alternative concept that allows for more flexibility. She proposes, drawing from Deleuze (1991), to use the term 'assemblages' to account for the polycentricity and multilayeredness of media supersystems in which individual elements can be separated in a discrete manner:

While an ecological framing looks to find a contributory role for all components, an assemblage has room for tension, mismatch and ongoing reconfiguration. There is not a sense of creating and then maintaining a balanced symbiosis of parts. As a result of this heterogeneity and independence, assemblages dismantle and reassemble in different combinations as context and requirements shift (Carrington, 2013: 209).

New media assemblages permeate the play practices of young children in contemporary societies and shape the ways in which children draw on a range of media texts in their play. The next section of the chapter offers a brief history of the trajectory of practices in

this area over the past half-century or so, from play focused on a single medium to the kinds of play practices that are clearly identifiable in the new media age, in which, as Carrington notes, polycentricity and shifting meanings across space and time are clearly identifiable elements.

MEDIA, POPULAR CULTURE AND PLAY: A HISTORICAL REVIEW

In order to illustrate the issues raised in the move from single mediaplay to new media assemblagesplay, this section focuses on a discussion of children's television-related play, drawing from two research studies conducted between 2009 and 2012. Whilst it is necessary to focus on one medium because of space restrictions, patterns that emerge can also be applied to other media. Further, the studies outlined here were based in England and thus, inevitably, the historical review is culturally specific. Nevertheless, the trends that are discernible across the past half-century in the UK are likely to be similar to patterns in other media-saturated cultures and, thus, the analysis may be applied more broadly in an international context.

Whilst commercially made television sets were available in the UK from 1928, it was only in the 1950s that wider take-up occurred as families purchased sets in order to watch the Coronation (Hilmes and Jacobs, 2003). This period coincides with the start of the research undertaken by folklorists Iona and Peter Opie on children's play. The Opies undertook surveys of children's play in the 1950s–1980s in the UK, which led to a series of publications (Opie and Opie, 1959, 1969a, 1969b, 1985; Opie, 1993) detailing children's games, rhymes, songs, customs, rites of passage and beliefs. In a study funded by the British Academy, Marsh and Bishop (2012a) traced some of the original contributors to the Opie surveys and interviewed 8 of them, along with 20 of their contemporaries, in order to examine continuities and discontinuities in relation to

media and play over time. The individuals were traced through a number of sources including the use of social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Friends Reunited), local press and school alumni networks. Semi-structured oral history interviews were conducted with each individual, to explore their memories of play and its relationship to media and commercial markets.

These data were compared with findings from a study undertaken as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Beyond Text programme – 'Children's playground games and songs in the new media age' (Burn et al., 2011). The project included ethnographic studies, conducted over two years, of two primary school playgrounds in Sheffield and London. Children aged 5–11 were involved in the study. Researchers visited the playgrounds weekly and undertook observations of playground play, using written field notes, digital video cameras, still cameras and digital audio recording equipment. Children also participated in interviews about the play that had been observed on occasion; sometimes these interviews took place straight after the play, at other times children reflected on video data. Each school had a Children's Panel, which consisted of children who met with the researchers on a regular basis throughout the project. Children also undertook their own observations of play, using video cameras and notebooks. These data were compared and contrasted in order to identify continuities and discontinuities in such play between the 1950s and 1960s and 2010s.

Inevitably, there are challenges that are raised in this approach. The respondents in the British Academy-funded study were invited to reflect on events that took place 50 or 60 years ago and their memories may not have been accurate; for some respondents, there may have been elements of nostalgia in their reminiscences. In comparison, children in the AHRC-funded study were asked to demonstrate and discuss contemporary play activities and therefore recollection was much easier. Nevertheless,

the data raised a series of issues that deserve consideration in any review of the relationship between media, popular culture and play over time.

First, it was notable that there are numerous continuities in such play. Bishop and Curtis (2006), in a review of the relationship between television and play, suggested that there are three primary ways in which children draw from television. The first of these is allusion. Children refer to the names of television programme characters, celebrities or brand names (onomastic allusion), copy gestures drawn from television (gestural allusion) or refer to topics they have viewed on television (topical allusion). The second way in which children draw from television is referred to as the process of syncretism or hybridization. This can account for the way in which children blend characters and plots drawn from television with more traditional play practices such as ‘cops and robbers’ play, which might draw on a TV series called *The Bill* (cf. Opie and Opie, 1969: 340). The third way in which children draw on television is through the process of mimesis. Whilst mimesis can refer to instances in which children copy characters or storylines faithfully, it can also refer to more creative adaptations in which children develop the original plots and characters in new and innovative ways.

These three patterns were prevalent in both sets of data. For example, allusion – particularly onomastic allusion, in which children referenced television characters in their play – was evident across all of the datasets, with programmes and characters mentioned from the 1950s and 1960s including *Watch with Mother*, *The Man from Uncle* and *Bonanza* and those in the more recent study ranging from children’s programmes (for example *SpongeBob SquarePants*) to programmes aimed at adults (for example *EastEnders*). Similarly, in relation to mimesis, the adults in the oral history interviews reported replaying stories from favourite television programmes, such as *Robin Hood*, just as this activity was

observed in the contemporary playgrounds (Willett et al., 2013). The process of syncretism or hybridization was also discernible across the two projects. Children blended characters and plots drawn from television with more traditional play practices. In *Children’s Games in Street and Playground* (1969), the Opies identify eight categories of ‘pretending games’:

- Mothers and Fathers
- Playing Schools
- Road Accidents (boys feign injury; girls make-believe they are nurses)
- Playing Horses (children pretend to be or to possess animals)
- Storybook World (children make-believe they would be able to manage in abnormal situations)
- War Games (children engage in pretence battles either against an imaginary enemy or an opposing group of children)
- Cops and Robbers (players on one side chase or seek the other side)
- Fairies and Witches (girls enact the everlasting fight between good and evil) (1969: xxv–xxvi).

Television-influenced play could be found across the majority of these categories, such as children playing ‘Cowboys and Indians’ games in the 1950s and 1960s, based on programmes such as *Bonanza*, and children playing witches and wizards in the 2010s, centred on programmes such as *Wizards of Waverley Place*. This process has been a persistent theme over the decades. As Cummings James and McCain report in their study of television and play in 1982, ‘there was no game theme identified that was not somewhat related to the themes in games identified in previous research on the folklore of children’s play’ (p. 799). This process of syncretization is complex and multilayered and certainly challenges any notion that children simply ‘copy’ the source text (cf. Sutton-Smith, 1997).

Whilst there are a number of continuities with the past, there are also discontinuities. Obvious differences relate to the way in which new genres, such as reality television, now permeate the playgrounds of today,

such as the observations made of children replaying *The Jeremy Kyle Show* (Marsh and Bishop, 2012b). Further, a key difference between the two eras could be found in relation to shared viewing experiences. The majority of children in the 1950s and 1960s would generally have all watched the same programmes because of the limited number of channels. This was clear in the interview with 58-year-old Neil:

Interviewer: You obviously had a TV in your home then, were you watching those at your own house?

Neil: Mainly, yeah. We tended to sort of come in, play during the day, come in in the afternoon – I think it was 4 o'clock we finished or something like that, I'm not too sure now. We'd get in and then we'd have our tea and then watch a bit of telly, and those sort of... the 4 to 5 time would be kids' programmes, really, I think.

Interviewer: Yeah, OK. And did you sort of share those programmes with your friends, did you like talk about them or anything, or did you just assume they watched the same ones as well?

Neil: Well I think we just sort of assumed they watched them, because every time we came out... normally what... it's quite strange, what would happen, if there was say a football match on – not many in those days – but all the kids, after the football was over, they'd all come running out in the street with a ball. And if 'Robin Hood' was on, when the programme had finished they'd all come running out in the street with their bows and arrows. So everyone sort of knew, I suppose we'd all been watching the same and they all... didn't sort of talk about it, just got, you know, starting playing what was ever on the telly.

This is obviously not the case in contemporary society. Multiple channels proliferate in the 2010s, with a number aimed at children, such as CBBC/CBeebies, CITV, Disney and Nickelodeon. This means it is not certain all children will share knowledge of the same programmes in order to inform their play. Griffiths and Machin (2003) argue it is the shared aspect that is important and in the more recent study, children did report sharing information about media texts with each other in order to be inclusive in their play. Kathy Marsh (2009) suggests that whilst one or more children may get content from television to inform their play, it is often transmitted and learnt by subsequent children in the same way as other play, by oral transmission and customary example.

There is another important consideration – the affordances of television in each of the periods considered. We now have the ability to pause and restart programmes at will, view them over and over via 'catch up' and iPlayer and view small segments of them repeatedly if we so wish. Viewers capture their favourite television sequences and post them to YouTube. Older programmes, such as earlier series of *Dr Who*, are also much more readily available. This means that children can access television content via other media and whenever they want to; they do not have to wait for it to be programmed. For example, Emma, in Year 6 (aged 10–11), explained to a researcher how she learnt a clapping game sequence from the Nickelodeon programme *I Carly* by rewinding the relevant sequence on YouTube:

Emma: You see a clapping game and then if you camera wind it and fast forward it you watch it a couple of times and you start doing it. It sinks into your head and then you know it. And you go to school and you're like, 'Oh, I've got a new clapping game, I've watched this at...'. Like, 'Look at this that I've just learnt off *I Carly*'. And then you start doing it and it spreads all around school.

Finally, in comparing these datasets, a key difference can be identified in relation to the nature of new media assemblages, as identified by Carrington (2013). Television has become increasingly integrated into a narrative-based semiotic system in which television programmes relate to books, toys and so on. Therefore, television influenced fantasy and physical play in the more recent study, but it also influenced play with playthings as children traded cards related to television themes, or clutched 'Hannah Montana' CDs as they sang and danced. It is no longer possible to examine the impact of television on play in isolation from other media.

This brief review of data from these two studies highlights both the discontinuities and continuities in the relationship between media, popular culture and play over time. Whilst there have been few changes in the way in which children draw from media in their play, the nature of the media landscape itself has changed beyond recognition since the 1950s, which means that children draw from media narratives as they are instantiated across a range of platforms. The historical developments in relation to the media landscape – that is, the move from isolated media to cross-media platforms, can be seen in relation to research undertaken in this area. Research on young children's popular culture-related play in the latter half of the twentieth century tended to focus on a limited range of media and examined them in isolation. The majority of this research focused on television and film. Some studies, such as Paley's (1988), emphasized the way in which young children draw on television and film narratives imaginatively in their play, although a number of researchers felt that media-related play could be more limited than non-media-related play (e.g. Singer and Singer, 2005). Due to ongoing concerns about perceived negative effects, a great deal of research in this area focused on issues of violence. Numerous studies analysed, for example, the impact of viewing animated films, such as cartoons, on children's behaviour and beliefs, reporting negative effects (see Kondo and Steemers, 2007, for a review).

This focus on exploring adult anxieties regarding children's play continued in work that examined superhero play. Several research projects were conducted on young children's superhero play in the 1980s and 1990s, related to the film and television series they encountered. Some of these studies raised concerns about the way in which such play embeds narratives of aggression (Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1987), whilst other accounts were keen to point to the way in which superhero play can enable children to work through emotions and fears and can foster social relationships (Dawkins, 1991). Although a number of commentators lamented the influence of media on superhero play (e.g. Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1990), such play has a long tradition, given that children have always been interested in war play and play that explores conflict (French and Pena, 1991).

There was limited research on the impact of other media on play in the twentieth century. There were isolated reports of children incorporating into play information they heard on radio. For example, in Palmer Bonte and Musgrove's (1943) report on a study of war play in Hawaiian preschools, which took place six months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, they recall a play episode which involved children constructing a ship and during which a boy made the sound of a siren and shouted, 'This is an air raid alarm! Take cover!', which was an exact imitation of the warning played on radio at the time. This is a rare example, however, and apart from a consideration of young children's orientation to radio for musical interest (Young, 2008), research on radio and play is extremely limited. Research on the relationship between play and computers and other digital media is discussed elsewhere (Stephen and Plowman, this volume) and so is not discussed here, but needless to say there was little attention paid to this area in relation to children's play before recent developments in the field. Therefore, the research on media and children's play in the twentieth century can be characterized by a focus on a limited

range of media, examined largely in isolation from other media, and a preoccupation with the potential negative influences of media on young children's play and development.

It was only in the last decade of the twentieth and at the beginning of the twenty-first centuries that research in early childhood began to take account of the way in which popular cultural narratives spanned various media, despite evidence of the cross-media integration of television programmes from the 1980s (Grimes, 2008). A growing understanding of the way in which children were positioned as consumers (Langer, 2005; Cook, 2008; Cook, this volume) led to more nuanced accounts of children's positioning in relation to globalized media discourses, with the agency of children becoming increasingly recognized. For example, Wohlwend (2009) outlines the findings of a three-year ethnographic study of literacy play in early childhood classrooms in the USA. She details how girls playing with Disney princess dolls resisted the discourse of emphasized femininity associated with these characters, with one girl transforming Princess Aurora from victim to rescuer. In their play, children created their own storylines and developed characters based on aspects of their own and their friends' and families' identities. This does not mean the commercial products held no sway over this play. As Wohlwend suggests:

Productive consumption is located in the tension between agency and subjection; children are neither cultural dupes at the mercy of global corporations nor cultural geniuses who shrewdly access and expertly manipulate vast networks of gendered multimedia for their own purposes. Although Zoe exercised more agency than the *Sleeping Beauty* story line actually provided, she still maintained masculine/feminine hierarchical relationships by excluding Peter from doll play, by using princess dolls to write and play family-focused stories, and by culminating her books and plays with weddings for happily-ever-after endings (2009: 45).

The notion of 'productive consumption' that Wohlwend refers to here recognizes the way in which children are not simply consumers

but also producers – or as Bruns (2006) suggests, 'producers', in which the acts of consumption and production interact. This is a theme addressed by Edwards (2011) in her analysis of the way in which children engage with the *Thomas the Tank Engine* brand. She examines how children in contemporary societies are able to develop new cultural products which contribute to the *Thomas the Tank Engine* narrative, such as the creation of videos in which children develop new episodes of the story through filming their play, with the films then uploaded to YouTube for other children to enjoy.

Current research studies on the relationship between media, popular culture and play in early childhood, therefore, recognize the complex ways in which children engage in consumptive and productive activities in relation to new media assemblages and identify the elements of the emergent cultural forms proposed by Raymond Williams (1977), which provide scope for acts of agency and transgression. An area of growing interest in this field is the way in which children's popular cultural practices move across online and offline spaces, an area which is explored in the final section of this chapter.

TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY CONTEXTS: VIRTUAL PLAYGROUNDS AND BEYOND

In recent years, many young children with Internet access have been drawn to the use of online virtual worlds (Black, 2010; Marsh, 2010). Virtual worlds are 3D simulated environments which sometimes contain gaming and social networking elements and there are now over 150 virtual worlds either operating or in development that are aimed at children and young people under 18 years of age. These sites have around 355 million registered users under the age of 10 (KZero, 2012). Popular virtual worlds for children aged under eight include Club Penguin, Moshi Monsters and Webkinz. Research on

the use of virtual worlds and other social networking forums has tended to be undertaken with teenagers, young people and adults (Grimes and Fields, 2012), but there are now studies emerging that examine the way in which young children use these sites. Burke and Marsh (2013), in an edited collection, draw together a number of authors who have undertaken empirical and analytical studies in this area, and a number of key themes emerge from this collective work.

The first theme to be addressed is that it is not possible, in contemporary play practices, to separate online and offline domains. Children move across these spaces in fluid ways and genres of offline play (such as socio-dramatic play, fantasy play and games with rules) can be discerned in their play in virtual worlds, just as themes and characters from virtual world play appear in offline play contexts. Second, these virtual spaces are part of the narrativized semiotic system that is embedded in children's use of media texts and children draw on their understandings and experiences with narratives across a range of media in their online play. Third, the ability to manipulate avatars and virtual homes enables children to construct and reconstruct social identities and allows them to experiment and take risks in ways that are not possible in face-to-face social play. Fourth, the virtual worlds that young children play in are frequently one element of a commercialized super-system and children are increasingly engaged in commercial practices that merge online and offline. For example, children are able to buy from local shops Club Penguin toys and artefacts, which unlock online credit and enable them to purchase virtual items for their avatars and homes. Fifth, often children's online play takes place with peers, siblings and family members, not unknown others. Finally, we can discern in this play the consequences of increasing mobility in technological platforms. Children can access the virtual world using a desktop computer or laptop, but they can also use a games console or mobile phone app for this purpose, meaning that

play is not connected to local spaces and contexts in the ways in which it traditionally has been.

These recent studies lead us to reconsider the nature of the relationship between media, popular culture and play in the twenty-first century. Having moved from a substantial body of early research in the late twentieth century that examined children's playful interactions with single media to a more nuanced understanding, developed over the past decade, of how play crosses textual and media boundaries, we are now at a point where we are beginning to understand the way in which young children's play navigates the ontological and epistemological borders of online and offline media worlds. Future research in this field needs to address a number of key questions that are emerging. For example, how will play develop when the technology advances further to enable players to wear items of clothing or jewellery that gain them entry into online play worlds? This technology is already in use, such as the clickable bracelets that Disney use to enable children who play their virtual world *Pixie Hollow* to exchange virtual data with friends wearing the same bracelets. These developments will, inevitably, accelerate in future years, and it will be of interest to play researchers to determine how children navigate this landscape. We may see further developments in relation to the use of immersive technologies that enable players to embed themselves in mixed-reality environments and there will be questions raised with regard to the impact of this on children's imaginative play. The increasing sophistication of robots could also lead to fruitful areas for research on children's play, focusing on how children integrate robots into existing cultural play scripts. Whilst these questions relate to advancements in technology, the concerns and issues to be pursued are ones which are longstanding in this field, focused as they are on children's social identities and imaginative and creative engagement with media and popular cultural play artefacts.

CONCLUSION

The analysis offered in this chapter suggests that whilst access to and use of media have grown exponentially over the past 60 years, there are continuities as well as discontinuities in the ways in which media and popular culture inform play. Therefore, the commentators who bemoan the current state of childhood because of the influence of media (e.g. Palmer, 2006) need to be reassured that traditional forms of play persist and continue to be syncretized in creative and innovative ways with popular cultural texts and artefacts, whilst increasingly mobile and polycentric new media assemblages facilitate inventive imaginative and novel forms of play. This analysis reinforces the importance of historical studies of media-related play in order to ensure that a longer-term, and therefore more balanced, understanding is developed of an area of study that traditionally attracts dichotomous and polarized views.

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