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**Gamers in Ganglands: The ecology of gaming and participation amongst  
a select group of children in Ocean View, Cape Town**

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A minor dissertation submitted in *partial fulfillment* of the requirements for the  
award of the degree of Master of Arts in Media Theory and Practice

Faculty of the Humanities  
University of Cape Town  
2012

**COMPULSORY DECLARATION**

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**GRADUATE SCHOOL IN HUMANITIES**

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation explores the contextual meanings of digital gaming for a group of children from the resource-constrained township of Ocean View, situated 45km outside of Cape Town. I document the domestication (Silverstone & Haddon, 1996) of mobile phones and PlayStations as technologies for gaming in this context, showing how the children appropriated the games technologies much as other household media are domesticated, in a process of double articulation.

Using the vast body of games studies emanating from the global North as springboard, I argue for a heterogeneous approach to researching digital games. This approach seeks to articulate both the material commodities and symbolic worlds of media signification and narrative where global media texts gain local meanings when used in specific spatio-temporal and socio-cultural contexts through the double articulation of domestication (Livingstone, 2007) of digital games and technologies for gaming.

I studied the informal social and digital gaming interactions of twenty two children over a period of nine months, during which time I participated in household activities, conducted observations of play sessions and utilized informal questioning based on an ethnographic approach. The children's interactions showed how, in Ocean View, unequal access to resources shape this neighbourhood as a lived space located far from the economic centers of the city. A proliferation of gangs in the area affects children's sense of physical territory and, consequently, their mobility. This also serves to influence children's processes of identification as explored through the symbolic and material domestication of global gaming technologies.

My findings, albeit based on a short period of study, hint at the complex and nuanced role of digital games and gaming technologies in the lives of marginalized children. Gaming technologies can, at once, demonstrate superior status or respectability, whilst marking the user as a potential victim for crime – signaling dangerous conspicuous consumption. In turn, the representational in-game virtual worlds that connect the local to the global can offer potential escapism or serve to re-affirm imagined class and gender hierarchies. Yet simultaneously these media texts offer a global media viewfinder to negotiate local gangster narratives and processes of identification. This study starts to reveal the main tensions presented by the domestication of digital games and technologies for games in a marginal context, arguing for a broader and more inclusive view of gaming ecologies and a heterogeneous approach to the study thereof.

## **Dedication**

To Isabel, Leon & Minnie for their endless support and to Marion, for being my Yoda.

University of Cape Town

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## CHAPTER 1: Introduction

This dissertation explores the double articulation of meanings elicited by the material and symbolic domestication of the mobile phone and PlayStation as technologies for gaming, by a group of children from the resource-constrained neighbourhood of Ocean View. Although there is a smorgasbord of literature pertaining to gaming and situated gaming ecologies, the overwhelming majority of games studies emanates from the global North, where very few scholars actually look at the physical artifacts for gaming as a meaningful node in this greater ecology (Walton & Pallitt, 2012). As the consumption of material commodities can reveal semiotic markers of class, culture and society in marginal contexts, as explored in recent studies that look at the domestication (Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1992) of the mobile phone in the global South (Schoon, 2011; Hahn, 2008; Horst & Miller, 2005), we cannot divorce the physical objects of gaming from the virtual gaming 'worlds' on the 'inside' that have the ability to connect the local to the global as situated in specific spatio-temporal and socio-cultural contexts. This study seeks to integrate all of these views through the double articulation of the domestication (Livingstone, 2007) of both the material and the symbolic aspects of the gaming ecology amongst children in Ocean View.

The ideas and feelings behind this dissertation were first born in 2008, during my Honours year of study at Stellenbosch University. I had volunteered to co-teach graphic design to a group of grade 11 students from the small local township Kayamandi, through a local NGO called Vision K. Classes were tiresome, the teenagers appeared to have no particular interest in the kinds of activities we had planned for them, and it was a truly laborious process to elicit any form of participation from them for the first month. Yet, more often than not, they were glued to their mobile phones. Post-irritation I became fascinated with the digital worlds these teens engaged with on these spellbinding little devices. Although most students often shared stories of low-income circumstances and debilitating resource constraints, their access to this digital device was truly ubiquitous. And although they did not often venture onto the mobile web, they were downloading songs through WAP (Wireless Access Protocol) media download services such as 36060<sup>1</sup>, playing games, and chatting to friends on Mxit<sup>2</sup>.

I concede, at the time, I was not particularly mobile savvy – I hardly ever used the Internet on my phone, and game worlds lived elsewhere – on TV's and computer screens. But my circumstances were different: in my household there was always a computer and satellite television. From the age of 8 our home was connected to the World Wide Web via a vexatious little dial-up modem and since I can remember we had games on floppy disks,

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<sup>1</sup> As of the mid 2000s a host of companies launched mobile download services in South Africa. These were primarily advertised on television and provided a number one could phone to obtain whatever product was being advertised. Such products included ring tones, images, videos, and even poems or  
<sup>2</sup> Mxit is a free mobile-based social network platform with 10 million active users, making it the largest one in Africa.

'stiffy's', Gameboys, Nintendo cartridges, PlayStation discs and CD-ROMs. Apart from their value as sources of entertainment, these objects were pivotal in my negotiation of relationships with my three brothers and numerous peers. They were a lifeline, a means to establish social cohesion and a tool for asserting power through knowledge and skills. I felt that as a girl, my proficiency in the technology-driven gameworld allowed for playtime spent with my brothers and other boys, who would otherwise flat-out exclude me. I could *prove* myself in games.

My experiences with the students from Kayamandi meant that for the first time I had truly started thinking about the diversity of access to media, resources, and location: the kinds of assumptions I had about a childhood and adolescence firmly entrenched in commodities of entertainment and connectedness. How do these artifacts engage, shape, define or change us, and us them? How are objects of play and entertainment meaningful in different contexts?

After working in the advertising industry for a couple of years, I returned to academic studies in order to pursue these questions. I encountered scholars who studied games and gaming practices, and I uncovered a world that either endorsed the advantageous *effects* – such as informal learning (Gee J. , 2003; Gee J. , 2007; Järvinen, 2007; McGonigal, 2011) or literacy (Burn & Buckingham, 2007; Payne, 2010; Squire, 2007) – or condemned the harmful *effects* – such as aggressive, racist, sexist, or violent behavior (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson & Dill, 2000; Dietz, 1998) – of digital gaming. These studies often concentrated on (and were limited to) the internal cognitive and psychological processes of engaging with games – of games as something that happens 'in your head'. In response to this tunnel-vision approach of games as divorced from any meaningful context, many games scholars are increasingly acknowledging the socially situated and diverse nature of gaming (Beavis, Nixon, & Atkinson, 2005; Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Buckingham, 2006; Pelletier, 2009). However, only a few have pursued such studies in contexts of the global South (Kolko & Putnam, 2008; Walton & Pallitt, 2012). These few studies I came across have all hinted at the importance of the differential access to the commodities of digital games. The physical artifacts and infrastructures required to participate in gaming are often assumed in resource abundant contexts, where there are larger middle classes or "where lower income groups are more likely to own gaming consoles" (Facer & Furlong, 2001 in Walton & Pallitt, 2012, p. 3).

The study of physical information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as the mobile phone on the other hand, is increasingly investigated in contexts of the global South (Kreutzer, 2009; Hahn, 2008; Schoon, 2011). Through domestication theory (Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1992; Silverstone & Haddon, 1996), diverse ranges of behaviors and meanings are uncovered in a variety of socio-cultural and spatio-temporal contexts. The double articulation of both the material and the symbolic domestication of technologies (Livingstone, 2007a, p. 3), as well as the virtual "worlds" that connect the local to the global "inside" of such media artifacts (such as the internet, social networks, expansive game

worlds, etc) have provided a more integrated view of how technologies are appropriated. I sought to proffer such a view of gaming ecologies amongst children in the marginal context of Ocean View, a previously racially segregated Coloured<sup>3</sup> neighbourhood on the outskirts of the Cape peninsula.

Throughout my process, I had to carefully peel away layers and layers of assumptions: access to objects and places, the rhetoric of play as progress (Sutton-Smith, 1997), the mobility of the mobile phone (Aker & Mbiti, 2010), the neutrality of play commodities, and the cohesion of gaming ecologies across contexts to reveal what was left: how children, in a *specific* context, under *specific* circumstances, hindered and influenced by *specific* forces are *actually* playing games.

Towards this purpose I ask the following questions:

- **How are information and communication technologies such as the mobile phone and PlayStation integrated into everyday life?**
- **What meanings do children and adults give to gaming technologies in this space?**
- **How do games and technologies for games contribute to the process of identity formation in this social space?**

All of the abovementioned amalgamates into the central research question: ***What does the gaming ecology of a select group of children in Ocean View look like?***

My thesis is structured as follows:

In Chapter Two I touch upon some of the more prominent studies in digital games discourse over the last two decades: a short overview of studies arguing the positive and negative effects of games is followed by an overview of those who have heeded the call for a wider view of gaming practices as “ecology” (Salen, 2008, pp. 2 - 3). I position the invisibility and exclusion of marginal African children as consumers in the face of global cultural industries and look towards studies that have addressed these inequalities. Conversely, I propose domestication theory as a valid theoretical approach.

In Chapter Three I describe Ocean View as a physical and symbolic space deeply entrenched in Apartheid history. I introduce my fieldwork – split up into two distinct periods, a pilot study and resultant field work respectively, over a span of 9 months. I describe my method

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<sup>3</sup>In South Africa the label “Coloured” was first used during Apartheid as a term for persons of mixed race (with heritage from the British, Malay, Griqua, Khoi San, Dutch, Xhosa, Zulu, and even Shona groups to name a few). By creating a separate racial group for such persons, government was able to re-inforce racial segregation. Today, Coloured identification remains problematic: some discard the term as imposed on them by the Apartheid state, others proudly self-identify as Coloured (Bosch, 2008).

and approach as a participant observation ethnography and outline the strategies I adopted to enable an ethical approach to vulnerable youth.

Chapter Four describes findings that specifically pertain to the mobile phone as it is domesticated amongst this peer group: uncovering how the *right kind* of phone is meaningful in negotiating peer relationships and class hierarchies. I also uncover how fragmented gang territories problematize the mobility of the mobile phone in this context and affect participation in digital play.

Chapter Five shifts focus to the PlayStation: contesting global media narratives that predict the increased individualization of media consumption by revealing complex negotiations for time and space. I also touch on aspects of representation, influence and processes of identification through engagement with virtual in-game global media narratives.

In Chapter Six I conclude by revisiting the research questions stated in this chapter and venture tentative discussions based on the findings of this limited study.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter2: a review of the literature and theoretical approach

### *Introduction*

In this chapter I touch upon some of the more prominent studies in digital games discourse over the last two decades: a short overview of studies arguing the positive and negative effects of games is followed by an overview of those who have heeded the call for a wider view of gaming practices as 'ecology'. I introduce ideas from these situated studies and juxtapose them with studies from a South African context. Towards this purpose I give a brief overview of the South African gaming landscape as presented in statistics that are dictated by a strong marketing agenda. I position the invisibility and exclusion of marginal African children as consumers in the face of global cultural industries and look towards studies that have addressed these inequalities. Conversely, I propose domestication theory as a valid theoretical approach. I give an overview of studies that have revealed rich diversity in consumption practices and unpack a toolbox of cultural studies concepts that can be used to explore the study of commodities and their semiotic meanings. In balancing the material domestication of commodities for gaming such as the mobile phone and PlayStation with the symbolic "bigger [virtual] worlds" (Livingstone, 2007a, p. 2) inside of games, I propose a double articulation of both the "media qua material" (as located in a particular spatio-temporal setting) and the "media qua texts/symbolic messages" (Livingstone, 2007a, p. 3) (as located in a particular socio-cultural discourse).

### *Digital gaming as "in your head"*

As previously mentioned, a large body of scholarly articles emanating from the global North has framed games as a cognitive and psychological phenomenon that is *effectual*. This theoretical version of gaming, where the player is 'plugged in' to a game world, renders anything that happens outside of this 'virtual reality' as invisible or insignificant.

Many papers have argued for the positive 'effects' of gaming in both education and psychology: claims included that games make us happy, stimulate creativity, foster strategic thinking (McGonigal, 2011; McGonigal, 2010), evoke optimal psychological states of "flow" – "the satisfying, exhilarating feeling of creative accomplishment and heightened functioning" (Csíkszentmihályi, 1975, p. xiii), games are key sites of informal learning (Gee J. , 2003; Gee J. , 2007; Prensky, 2001; Sefton-Green, 2003), and literacy (Squire, 2007; Burn & Buckingham, 2007). Games that are expansive and complicated, coined "good games", have the ability to expand the cognitive abilities of players (Gee J. , 2007, p. 2). Furthermore, some claim that these skills and positive effects are not only limited to in- game environments, but have the

ability and potential to ‘transfer’ to almost any other aspect of the player’s life (Stevens, Satwicz, & McCarthy, 2008; Sutter, 2010; TEDtalksdirector, 2010).

In stark contrast, others have touched on many of the same psychological and cognitive processes to argue that games have negative ‘effects’: they increase aggressive behavior in both the short term (e.g. laboratory aggression) and the long term (e.g. delinquency) (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Anderson & Bushman, 2001), can socialize players to sexually objectify women (Dill & Thill, 2007; Anderson & Bushman, 2001), and can cause highly anti-social behavior and addiction (Chiu, Lee, & Huang, 2004) which contributes to poor performance in school. This conflicting positive-negative binary of engagement in digital games has led a range of scholars to look towards the situated nature of play for a more nuanced, and less polemic, understanding of gaming as ecology (Salen, 2008) which cannot necessarily be reduced as wholly ‘good’ or ‘bad’.

### ***Gaming as Ecology***

Katie Salen (2008) proposes, in her book “Toward an Ecology of Games”, a wider view of gaming activities outside of the tunnel vision player-game duality. She spearheads an investigation that looks at gaming, game design, and play “in the sense of how all of the various elements—from code to rhetoric to social practices and aesthetics—cohabit and populate” (Salen, 2008, p. 2) the world of gaming.

As Ito et al contend: “focus on activity in context means paying attention to the diversity in contexts that structure different forms of game play—the broader social and cultural ecology—rather than assuming that psychological and cognitive dispositions play the most important determining role” (2009, p. 199). Salen (2008) argues that gaming can include interaction with non-digital media, whereas literature around game-based learning are dominated by accounts of video games; that there is no “one” game: social, cultural and individual motivations affect their play; that games are *systems* of meanings that are read, interpreted and performed by players; and that “learning” is not an external force that can be applied to games, instead players choose how they learn. She calls for a more expansive emphasis on gaming-as-ecology to come to grips with these contextual *systems* (Salen, 2008, p. 10). By situating gaming practices, scholars have thus far offered diverse accounts of gaming in various contexts (Beavis, Nixon, & Atkinson, 2005; Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Buckingham, 2006; Pelletier, 2009).

Through an ethnographic study of young people from different families playing video games in their own homes Stevens, Satwicz, and McCarthy (2008) oppose a direct theory of “transfer” as something learned in-game, then applied in-life. Their study reveals that the culture of video game play is “tangled up” (Stevens, Satwicz, & McCarthy, 2008, p. 63) with other cultural practices. Similarly, DeVane and Squire (2008) addressed ‘transfer’ of negative behaviours in response to violent video game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* in three different socio-cultural settings. Their findings offered a more nuanced view where

violence, race and sexual themes are understood and processed through socio-cultural dispositions.

In response to the social dimension of gaming, many scholars have theorised that games have the ability to teach trust and social skills through collaboration. Some of the sites for such behaviours have included: massively multi-player role playing game (MMPORG) World of Warcraft (Nardi & Harris, 2006), LAN café's in Australia (Beavis, Nixon, & Atkinson, 2005), amongst peer groups of children who play in "genres of interest" in California and San Francisco (Ito, et al., 2009), and peripheral participation that happens through situated learning in the United Kingdom (Sefton-Green, 2003) in meaningful communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Yet I found many considerations markedly absent: studies pertaining to collaborative or group practice seldom account for play behaviours that can be cruel, exclusive and used to enforce hierarchical distinctions amongst children (Walton & Pallitt, 2012). In addition, discussions of the pervasively gendered nature of play (Lever, 1976; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Carr, 2006), cultural traditions that discourage women from exploring digital technology (Liff & Sheperd, 2004; Clark & Gorski, 2002), considerations of the limited access women have to public spaces (Yeoh & Huang, 1998) and the gendered design of digital games (Amory & Molomo, 2012; Carr, 2006) are scarce.

Although scholars are increasingly exploring the situated and social nature of gaming, studies looking at games in resource constrained areas were few and far between. A recent study in central Asia (Kolko & Putnam, 2008) that spanned over 8 years, looking at computer gaming in public Internet café's as well as private spaces, found that games constitute a significant portion of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) ecology in this resource-constrained environment. They contend that games offer a "first touch" (Kolko & Putnam, 2008, p. 3) of a computer, and offer a pathway to ICT for people with lower levels of education, and can motivate technological skill acquisition. In turning their attention to the differential access of ICTs amongst players in a marginal context, Kolko & Putnam start to uncover a dimension that is often excluded from discussions of games in resource-abundant contexts: the processes and negotiations (or the domestication) of commodities, media and infrastructures necessary for digital gaming.

Towards building a view of gaming practices in South Africa, and especially a marginal context such as Ocean View, it is necessary to investigate this differential access.

### ***Situating digital games in South Africa***

According to recent *market* estimates, South Africa boasts in excess of 1.5 million console gamers, 5 million PC gamers and 3 million casual gamers (consisting of mobile and social network based games) (Pickover, 2011). Market research company GFK valued South Africa's gaming industry at R1.72 billion (this figure includes hardware, peripherals and physical game sales, but does not include digital game sales) (Etherington-Smith, 2012). Arthur Goldstuck, media analyst and head of the World Wide Worx research organization,

has described the take-up of gaming platforms such as Microsoft's Xbox and Sony's PlayStation as "greater in the past five years than during any equivalent period in South Africa" – underpinning a thriving local gaming industry (Etherington-Smith, 2012). His research indicates a considerable increase of low-income children engaging in casual gaming as a result of the rising popularity of game-enabled smart phones. Today, games are one of the top three most popular features to use on all phones in South Africa.

Yet, "South Africans encounter digital games in the context of an unequal and fragmented consumer culture, characterised by sharp inequalities in income and access to consumer goods, the internet and electrification" (Walton & Pallitt, 2012, p. 349). Even though "digital gaming" is progressively more pervasive, there is a massively broad index of gaming practices relative to available resources. "Access to gaming platforms is strongly associated with household income" (Walton & Pallitt, 2012, p. 352) and games include behaviors as wide as upper-middle class children playing Xbox kinect to low-income children swapping content via Bluetooth on battered hand-me-down Nokia's. In a highly unequal society such as South Africa, location and geography plays a pivotal role in gaming experiences. Local studies such as Schoon (2012), Walton & Donner (2012) and Walton & Pallitt (2012) have suggested that spatiality and location are centripetal to understanding media adoption in local contexts: "theories of mobile and locative social media would benefit from considering a) past spatial strategies persist in places, structuring communication across decades and b) spatial tactics associated with new digital communication practices may be reshaping these established patterns" (Walton & Donner, 2012, p. 2). As communities are polarized in their access to material goods, commodities and costs for gaming become a significant aspect in the consideration of digital gaming ecologies. Walton & Pallitt (2012, p. 354) discuss the case of Andile, whose favourite feature on his battered Nokia 1100 is the games, especially *Snake* (III). However, the phone itself was a source of deep shame and self-denial to Andile, as the old handset and its monophonic ringtones were a testament to his family's poverty. Therefore, he would put the sound off when he was in front of his peers, as the ringtones and sound effects of the games he enjoys so much would illicit ridicule. In situations such as Andile's, James Gee's "good games" (2007) become not only a question of quality, but also the costs associated with such quality. Here, we invariably have to turn our focus to exploring issues of children's consumer culture and globalization in South Africa.

As Francis Nyamnjoh contends, "If globalization is a process of accelerated flow of media content, to most African cultures and children it is also a process of accelerated exclusion (Nyamnjoh, 2008, p. 29)." We are witnessing a global and globalizing sectarian Euro-American culture, or "the McDonaldised cultural burgers (Nyamnjoh, 2008, p. 30)", served to children in the interest of profiting the global corporate media. Yet, globalization is not synonymous with global affordability, and commodities, media and infrastructures for participation for the prophesised "global village" (McLuhan, 1984) are scarce. For this reason, when marginal children "twist their parents'" arms, or express strong consumer desires, it is not a neutral act, but deserves some semiotic consideration. For those who have some means of access, such as the children in this dissertation, these "cultural dishes"

seldom reflect their immediate socio-cultural contexts. For this reason they become “consumer subjects”, victims of “second-hand consumption”, even if they are “first-hand consumers”: digital games are conceived and produced without being informed by their particular interests, context or resources (Nyamnjoh, 2008) as they do not represent any significant market interest.

Far from the cultural homogenization predicted by globalization discourse, we are seeing the creative appropriation, or “glocalization” (Strelitz, 2005), when children are confronted by texts that were not necessarily made *for* them. As Strelitz (2005, p.40) contends: “meaning is no longer a privilege of the text alone” and local audiences do not necessarily read what was intentionally written. Strelitz (2005) explores the concept of “symbolic distancing”, where adolescents re-imagine aspects of their lives through media consumption. In his interviews with Black students, for example, many expressed that the way in which they perceived media to represent African-Americans helped to “puncture the reality” of being Black in South Africa (Strelitz, 2005, p. 81). Such examples reveal a more nuanced approach to the binary of local/global as it is expressed in globalization discourse. Although such examples do not eliminate the need to consider power relations in media consumption, it calls on more open-ended and inclusive investigation of media domestication: as a socio-cultural and situated process.

Towards understanding how the meanings of digital games and technologies for gaming are constituent of the social relations and social order of the children in Ocean View, I felt that a cultural studies approach, with a focus on domestication theory, would offer a heterogeneous and pluralistic theoretical framework.

### ***Invoking a Cultural studies approach***

Cultural studies consider not only practices, social or otherwise, but also how these practices relate to dominant systems of power and ideology. It seeks to understand culture in all of its complex forms through analyzing the social and political context in which the subject matter manifests itself (Hall, 1980). Its focus encompasses divergent considerations of ideology, social class, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality, and/or gender as related to a medium or message. Kellner & Durham (2006) contend that media and culture are of increasingly centripetal importance to the maintenance and reproduction of contemporary societies: popular entertainment, such as digital games, has disparate meanings in the complex societies where they are located (Kellner & Durham, 2006, p. ix). They promote a pluralistic approach to theory and method when engaging with the complex “constellations” of media consumption. In my study, the term “consumption” is multi-faceted – it not only refers to media (digital games), but also at physical objects that “contain” such media, namely the mobile phone and the PlayStation. In order to remain vigilantly aware of this I look at a few main concepts that help in theorizing the meanings of *things* (Slater, 1997).

As Slater (1997, p. 148) contends, “The meanings of things are not socially arbitrary but

deeply related to, or even reflect and represent, the underlying social divisions of a community.” He argues that consumption forms a part of the cultural reproduction of social relations, through the very mundane social practices that constitute everyday life. Processes of consumption involve “reinterpretations, modification, transgressions” and can challenge, reproduce or fortify social order (Slater, 1997, p. 148).

Consumption of *things* marks a flow of information that has the ability to integrate people into an intelligible social world (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979): “the individual uses consumption to say something about himself, his family, his locality...the kinds of statements he makes are about the kind of universe he is in.” On the other hand, the expression of such intelligibility can also generate an account of his inequality. For Veblen, the use of consumption to demonstrate one’s alignment with a higher class is defined as “conspicuous consumption” (1899). This term described practices whereby a person would “ape” a lifestyle of leisure, when that person’s material conditions demand a laborious reality. In low-income communities such conspicuous consumption is a complex socio-economic process through which displays of wealth can psychologically combat the impression of poverty, often to the practical disadvantage of the consumer. However, not all consumption is aspirational in the sense that the higher classes are necessarily emulated. These “desired” things do “not only trickle down, but also trickle up, and sideways” (Slater, 1997, p. 158).

Here Bourdieu’s concept of “cultural capital” (1986) is useful in theorizing consumption as cultural, and taste as socially constructed. It indicates that not all capital is monetary, but is a process of socio-cultural mediation within a larger society. However, choices are also informed by disposition or “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1977) – “a structure of cognitions, formed by long and indeed collective and transmitted experiences of the economic limitations of their class position” (Slater, 1997, p. 162). Thus, consumption is both embedded in social structure, yet also grounded in relative social agency. A concept that is useful in theorizing distinction between the consumer, and those he perceives he is distancing himself from (through deeming them subordinate) through consumption is the process of “othering” (Lacan & Wilden, 1968).

On the other hand, the things that are consumed do not necessarily have the same meanings in different contexts, and even within similar contexts semiotic meaning is never static, but polysemic (Willis, 1990). Slater suggests that we “confront this situation ethnographically”, investigated through the practices of “people’s symbolic labour” – through such approaches one might uncover the structure of the consumer object and the social relations within which any act of reading or using takes place. These structures and relations place social limits of polysemy and interpretive freedoms (Slater, 1997, p. 170).

I proffer domestication theory (Merete & Sorensen, 1996; Haddon, 2001; Silverstone & Haddon, 1996) as a framework to address the processes and structures through which digital gaming is integrated into everyday life and applied to daily practices. To report on how technology *is* being used as opposed to how technology *should* be used. It proffers a

viewfinder to effectively grasp “the significance of the processes of globalization and localization (or homogenization and fragmentation)” (Morley, 1991).

Domestication theory describes four dynamic phases in the “transactional system of commodity and media relations (Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1992)”. In other words, how technological objects and media are ‘tamed’ by their users. Firstly, *Appropriation*: an object becomes appropriated at the exact moment it is sold and becomes *owned* – where it leaves the world of commodity and is taken into possession by an individual or group that gives social meaning to it. Through this process it achieves significance: by participating in the process of self-creation and role in establishing relationship between the owner and *others* (Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1992).

Secondly, *Objectification*: once appropriated the artifact becomes objectified through *display* (Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1992). This display reveals the owner’s sense of self. It draws on perceptions of the owner’s place in the world, or status, and in turn defines differences – rich/poor, male/female, young/old, etc. Objectification can be displayed with material objects, such as the model of the phone, or children ‘pimping’ (customizing) their phones physically (buying covers, protectors, stickers, etc), or the content that they choose to fill their device with (Ling R. , 2001).

Thirdly, *Incorporation*: Technologies might have many functions, they might even become functional in ways that were not intended by the designers or marketers (Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1992). The functions that are chosen and exercised by the user, also reflects how the user positions himself in relation to others: when and how the object is used (Hahn, 2008). Incorporation reveals status or representation through time: schedules and routines. I would like to refer back to the example previously discussed in Walton and Pallitt (2012), where Andile set his phone to silent as an *incorporation* strategy in an attempt to control the *conversion* of meaning to avoid ridicule from his peers.

*Conversion*, a monetary metaphor, defines these different aspects of meaning as currency: whether the meanings made through objectification and incorporation can be converted into a wider public. In other words, whether other people understand or accept the meanings you have attached to certain technologies, objects and practices. Silverstone et al (1992) contend that this expression is particularly of value to teenagers, as re-iterated by Ito et al (2009), whose consumption of media (choice in music, games, pictures) become their ‘ticket’ into a certain peer-group: a display of their similar interests. This conversion of meaning is especially useful to explore participation: who is allowed in, and who is kept out, and the varying index of participation in between (Ling R. , 2001).

As studies pertaining to children’s domestication of games and gaming technologies are relatively scarce, I looked toward studies of children and media in general. Of particular value are papers looking at the domestication of the mobile phone.

I have found cues for my own theoretical framework in the recent work of Alette Schoon (2012). In Schoon's examination of mobile phones amongst young adults in the township of Hooggenoeg in Grahamstown, she draws on domestication theory to contest generalized claims from the global North that mobile phones promote mobility and an individualized society. Instead she found that, through the consumption of mobile phones as a process of meaning-making by young people, the phone becomes part of a semantic process that serves to define young people in this context, at times limiting mobility and creating a collective sociability.

Rich Ling (2001) explores the mobile phone and mobile media as a teenager's sense of fashion and personal display in his paper "It is 'in.' It doesn't matter if you need it or not, just that you have it.": Fashion and the domestication of the mobile telephone among teens in Norway." Using domestication theory he draws attention to the negative aspects of the mobile phone as a peer-mediated "personality kit" for young people, enabling their resultant integration into, or cruel exclusion from, a peer group.

In "Playing with Fire" Hijazi-Omari & Rivka (2008) reveal the intricate processes of concealment and collaboration amongst teenage Palestinian girls in their domestication of mobile phones in Israel. Girls are gifted illicit mobile phones by their boyfriends as a symbol and practical means of sustaining their forbidden romantic relationships. In this context the girls are constrained by men, their parents and their community's conservative disposition. The mobile phone both "re-establishes these teenage girls' layered subordinations and tampers with them, allowing the girls to develop a mediated and face-to-face community that provides them with essential practical and emotional support (Hijazi-Omari & Rivka, 2008, p. 150)". This study shows the tensions between a technology that is conceived in the literature as being "emancipating" (Ling R. , 2004, p. 34) and the traditional patriarchal society these girls inhabit.

In Yoon (2006) the use of mobile phone amongst "cyberkids" in South Korea creates a national angst as represented in government and news discourse: To the older generation the mobile phone represents an absorption of young people into a "global" (but more specifically Western) material culture, a direct threat to the proliferation of a national cultural identity. Based on the popular national ideal that "the spirit of the Koreans would not be affected by the westernization of material life (Moon, 1998, p.46 in Yoon, 2006, p.766)" Yoon describes how major newspapers emphasized frugality of mobile phone use, and described young people and women's use of mobile phones as "inappropriate", reworking hegemonic social relations in which "young people and housewives are located in domestic and vulnerable positions (Yoon, 2006, p. 766)." The domestication of the mobile phone in South Korea reveals the tensions between young people's mobile phone use, and the local filters of national morality as a social condition for the "responsible" use thereof.

These examples of the domestication of the mobile phone amongst children in different contexts underpin the necessity of supplying an integrated view of the domestication of

objects that are “bigger on the inside, than they are on the outside” (Livingstone, 2007, p. 17). Both the mobile phone and the PlayStation are *objects* of consumption that carry semiotic markers, located in the spatio-temporal and the socio-cultural context of Ocean View. Yet, they are “far from inert”: they are “portal to other worlds that open up the realms of the imaginary, connecting the domestic living room – staggeringly – to the rest of the globe” (Livingstone, 2007, p. 17) these “inside worlds” are also subject to the spatio-temporal and socio-cultural every day life of Ocean View. Through the concept of *double articulation* (Silverstone & Haddon, 1996) I seek to explore both the “media qua material objects” and the “media qua texts or symbolic messages” – connecting theories of consumption and domestication with theories of representation and influence.

In the next chapter I seek to uncover Ocean View as both a physical (spatio-temporal) and symbolic (socio-cultural) place. I position my own group, the Dalston peer group, in this space and give a narrative account of my involvement with them. Thereafter I discuss my methods and approach.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 3: place, sample and method

### *Introduction*

As previously discussed, the domestication of digital games is a complex process pertaining to social, technological, cultural, economical, psychological, and historical variables amongst others. It is therefore important to situate and scrutinize the place of Ocean View and the Dulston peer group<sup>4</sup>. In this chapter I will describe my research site, Ocean View, as a physical and symbolic space deeply entrenched in Apartheid history. I will then describe my fieldwork – split up into two distinct periods over a span of 9 months, and mention how each of these came to be. Thereafter I will explore and describe the significance of my research site as a (uncommon) safe space for play and socializing.

Towards building an understanding of my interactions and presence in this environment, I will describe my method and qualitative approach as an ethnography based around participant observation (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1975). Participant observation involves participating in the social world of those who one is studying and reflecting on the products of that participation through “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of social interaction within natural settings. It constitutes a way of finding meaning through situations and encounters in the research setting as a social system.

I joined in the children’s hang-outs (Ito, et al., 2009), playing games with them and joining in discussions and organic activities as unfolding in their everyday lives. Supported by literature and personal findings, I will motivate why I chose this approach and how data was captured. Towards support for my method, I will outline the ethical considerations amongst such vulnerable youth and what strategies and processes I adopted to address this vulnerability amongst my sample.

### ***The place of Ocean View: “it’s a gangster place”***

Despite the fact that South Africa has existed as democracy for 18 years, the legacy of apartheid is still profoundly visible in our geography – many areas remain segregated along racial lines and the spatial injustices of apartheid continue to shape contemporary neighbourhoods as lived spaces (Walton & Donner, 2012, p. 2). Although, theoretically, the legal obstacles that hinder physical mobility have now been removed, “spatial injustices” (Lefebvre, 1991) endure through the spatial strategies deployed by the previous Apartheid government. Geography imposes unfair burdens and social disempowerment on certain people through the cost of mobility between peripheral ‘Coloured neighbourhoods’ and the economic centers of the city (de Certeau 1984 in Walton & Donner, 2012).

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<sup>4</sup>The given nickname of the group of children in my study: I will explain this nickname in detail later in this chapter.

Ocean View was established in 1968 under the Group Areas Act (1950) as a 'Coloured area', consisting of dormitory housing, for people who were forcibly removed from re-zoned 'White areas' along the South coast of Cape Town (these included areas such as Simon's Town and Noordhoek) (The Scenic South, 2012). It is situated 45 kms outside of the Cape Town Central Business District and located on the Kommetjie Road, between the 'White neighbourhoods' of Fish Hoek and Kommetjie and the 'Black township' of Masiphumele (Moses, 2005). Official statistics of the area in the 2001 census show a population of 16 161, but more recent estimates place this number at over 35 000 residents (Bray, Gooskens, Kahn, Moses, & Seekings, 2010). Although residential area is no longer restricted by skin colour – analysis of the 2001 national census show that 98% of households in Ocean View remained Coloured (Moses, 2005).

Ocean View is physically isolated – it does not share boundaries with any of the neighbouring residential areas. As one can see from figure 1 it is a "geographic island". Susan Moses (2006, p.17) attributes the economic stagnation in the area to this "island"-like condition: "the peripheral location and physical isolation from centers of economic activity" has reinforced unemployment and thus poverty, homelessness and overcrowding. Homes in Ocean View consist of houses, semi detached houses, and blocks of council flats. An informal settlement of shacks, nicknamed "Little Khayelitsha"<sup>5</sup> by residents, resides on the Southern margin of the small town. Ocean View has two primary schools, one high school and a special needs school. Facilities for community uses include a multi-purpose center, a library, civic center, police station, health clinic, a soccer field and various public spaces with run-down, vandalized playground equipment.

However, as pre-empted by Susan Moses' study (2005, 2006), the Dulston peer group reported feeling insecure in public spaces – often due to adults utilizing these spaces for drinking and drug use. The ubiquitous presence of gangs who loiter, sell drugs or 'look for trouble' also contribute to this high perception of danger and resulting insecurity in public areas. These restrictions on children's mobility in the area have led to inequalities in the physical, as well as social, environments available to them. As Duke (a member of the Dulston peer group) explained:

*Elke dag is daar 'n bakleiery oral in die hele plek. Daars die KGB, die NTC, die SBs – my broer is 'n NTC – dan is daar die PBLs – die pitbull lovers. Meeste kinders drop uit die skool uit om in gangs te wees. Dom kinders. Mens sien die name op die mure gespraypaint en die kinders by die skool praat daaroor, mens het vriende en familie in die gangs. By ons baklei hulle nie meer nie, want die Dulstons is hierso. Hulle staan die mense by*

**Every day there is a fighting everywhere in this whole place. There's the KGB, the NTC, the SBs – my brother is a NTC – then there is the PBLs – the Pitbull lovers.**

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<sup>5</sup>Khayelitsha is a partially informal Black township located on the Cape Flats in the city of Cape Town. As it is reputedly the largest and most famous township in Cape Town, inhabitants of Ocean View have appropriated this name to describe the collection of informal shack dwellings in their small town.

Most kids drop out of school to be in gangs. Stupid kids. You see the names spraypainted on the walls and the kids at school talk about it, you have friends and family in the gangs. But in our area they don't fight anymore, because the Dulstons are here. They stand by the people.

(Transcription of play session, 4 October 2011)



Figure 1 Ocean View on the Peninsula

Duke describes the perpetual fighting amongst gangs in the area, in which his brother also takes part. He explained how children are absorbed into gang culture from a very young age and how a group called the “Dulstons” is managing a ceasefire amongst local gangs. On further questioning I found out the Dulstons were amalgamations of certain gangs who run in the Northwestern quadrant of Ocean View – they have taken it upon themselves to stop fighting amongst each other, in favour of protecting the inhabitants against gangs from other areas in the greater Ocean View and surrounding areas. Through the creation of gang turfs, gangs create their own spatial boundaries. Such practices are discussed as a performance of masculine power in the Coloured township, Manenberg, in Elaine Salo’s ethnographies of the area (2003; 2004).

Salo argues that less well-off youth in Manenberg, who did not have the financial resources to free themselves from racial ghettos, turn to powerful male gangsters to acquire these resources through illegal means. The ubiquitous presence of gangs in Ocean View hint at similar processes of political and economical emasculation remedied through gangsterism. Similar themes are explored in studies of Coloured gangs on the Cape Flats by MacAllister (2004). MacAllister contends that gangs emerge not only from a need for economic survival, but is also strongly tied to the need for men to assert their powerful masculine identities. As they are not capable of attaining the “dominant material and symbolic capital” of higher education, permanent job, nor the ability to sustain a family, they turn to the structural economy of the gang to “earn” respect and recognition.

In conversation with the Dulston peer group, they would often refer to the police, teachers and other community leaders as being in cahoots with the gangs. The institutions that have been put in place to protect and enforce lawfulness have been replaced with a local system run by gangs, enforced by turf borders. As MacAllister explains: “Crime bosses also gain community tolerance and respect by performing functions traditionally associated with the state, providing ‘governance from below’” (2004, p. 285). The Dulstons offer protection and justice for the inhabitants of their turf, becoming local heroes to children such as Duke, quoted above. Duke and a group of his friends even named themselves in homage to the Dulstons: himself and his two best friends call themselves “The Dulston boys”, and the female members of their group refer to themselves as the “The Dulston girls”. Ghania, a member of the Dulston girls explains it as such:

Kyk hier die Dulstons, hulle staan vir vrede, en net protection. Hulle issie violent soos die *bad gangs* nie. En ons, ons is nie eers ‘n *gang* nie...dis net soos...hoe sal ek nou sê? ‘n *friendship* thing. Dis ons *friendship* name

**Look here the Dulstons, they stand for peace, and just protection. They’re not violent like the bad gangs. And us, we’re not even a gang...it’s just like...how should I say? A Friendship thing. It’s our friendship names.**

(Transcription of play session, 31 March 2012)

Ghania clarifies that the Dulstons are not a ‘gang’ in the bad sense of the word, but offer “protection” to her community. Their choice of appropriating this word to describe their “friendship group” shows their allegiance with the Dulston cause. Dulston is the name given to the Northwestern quadrant of Ocean View by the members of this gang, but is not reflected in any official mappings of the area. I am unclear on exactly where the name originated.

As of 2012 Ocean View is identified as one of fifteen areas indicated as high priority by the Cape Town government for action against drug abuse and crime, especially amongst its youth (The Scenic South, 2012). Increasingly police and non-government organizations (such as the *Living Hope Trust*, *Mzansi Afrika...I am Ich bin* and *the Valley Development Projects*)

have targeted the area's youth with afterschool programs designed to divert their attentions from gangsterism and drugs. It is this need for afterschool activities to distract children, lacking resources, and the looming dangers of children absorbed into a gang- and drug-culture that sparked my interest in this community.

### ***The first period: a lesson in social cohesion***

My study of Ocean View took place over two periods (August – September 2011 and February – May 2012) spanning 9 months, and an effective 112 hours spent with my participants. To fully illustrate and relate my sample I will have to backtrack to my initial contact with the community of Ocean View in 2011. The evolution of my involvement, which eventually manifested in my chosen sample, is an apt exemplification of the idiosyncrasies of Ocean View's inhabitants.

This research found its beginnings in a pilot study for a Mobile Media course in August 2011. In finding participants for my study, I started with the grandchild, Rudie (11), of my childhood caretaker, Mina Corker<sup>6</sup>, who lives with his family in Ocean View. For this reason my sample was based on convenience - I knew Rudie to be an ardent mobile phone gamer, and attempted to garner a snowball sample of other gamers through him. I was mindful of the strong power gradient presented in my relationship to Rudie, and address some of these thorny issues later in this chapter.

To recruit my initial group I contacted Rudie's mother, Terry<sup>7</sup>, and asked whether she'd be able to put me in touch with some of his friends' parents. As my study revolved around mobile phones and games, I outlined that the children I was looking to interview needed to be in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, have access to a mobile phone and should be keen gamers. However, I would soon discover the nature of Ocean View's remarkably close-knit community.

Before long, news of my impending arrival and research project had spread like wildfire amongst the inhabitants of Ocean View. Due to the scarcity of afterschool activities, Terry revealed to me later that parents, who accused her of favouring certain children above others in her selection, had verbally accosted her. This led her to formulate a more democratic system through which she would recruit children for my study – she approached the principal of the local Primary School. The principal told me that he asked children to submit their names if they matched my pre-requisites, and randomly drew names from a hat containing the names submitted. They presented me with the names of four boys and four girls, to which I added Rudie. Thus the sample was not the snowball sample I'd initially intended, but rather resulted from the process followed by the children's volunteering of their names and the teachers' selection. Table 1. indicates the children who were present for the first focus group. My initial meeting with these 'selected' children at the Ocean View library proved to be problematic at best, and I discovered many issues with my research design.

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<sup>6</sup>pseudonym

<sup>7</sup>pseudonym

Firstly, the symbolic inclusion of the institution of the school lead to a very specific atmosphere during my initial contact with the children – formal, stiff and restricted. I sensed that the children saw me as an authority figure and they acted accordingly. This perception, I believe, was strengthened by my choice of the library as initial meeting venue, symbolically associated with the function of education, and not leisure or entertainment.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Has a phone</b>	<b>Plays games on a phone</b>
Rudie	11	Male	Yes	Yes
Chester	10	Male	No	Yes
Tina	11	Female	No	Yes
Duke	12	Male	Yes	Yes
Clint	11	Male	Yes	Yes
Lea	10	Female	No	No
Lawna	11	Female	No	No
Robyn	11	Female	No	No

*Table 1 Participants from the first period of research<sup>8</sup>.*

Conversely, my focus group based discussion was a terrible fit – children were shy in front of myself and the other children. In addition, the kids were not socially aligned with one another: apart from Rudie’s friend Duke and a strong friendship between Tina and Robyn, none of these kids played together. Another factor that influenced communication was the combination of pre-adolescent male and female participants: with these children being on the cusp of adolescence, interaction between the sexes is strained. I found the girls to be in a constant state of giggles and the boys red-cheeked and introverted<sup>9</sup>.

At the end of this initial meeting I drove all of the children to their respective houses scattered across Ocean View, and it became a lesson in the nuanced class differences within Ocean view itself (Moses, 2006; Bray, Gooskens, Kahn, Moses, & Seekings, 2010). The children who reported owning their own mobile phones were from a distinct part of Ocean View – considered to be a slightly more affluent area in the North-West quadrant. After I had dropped all of the other children, with only Duke and Rudie remaining in the car, Duke said of this,

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<sup>8</sup>All names are pseudonyms

<sup>9</sup>In addition to above-mentioned difficulties, I found that three of the participants had no significant gaming or mobile phone activities. In later conversations with parents and custodians, it was revealed to me that this situation was likely the result of children’s (and their parents’) strong desires to be involved in out-of-school activities, despite the fact that they did not fit the description.

“Jy sal sien, al *ons* vriende het phones. Ek het nie enige vriende wat *nie* phones het nie”

**“You’ll see, all of *our* friends have phones. I don’t have any friends that *don’t* have phones”**

(transcription of recorded informal conversation in car, 24 August 2011)

Duke’s need to differentiate himself and his friends in this way, alludes to the notion that having a mobile phone carries cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) amongst this group. It also became clear to me over the next 9 months that proximity in geography was a fundamental aspect within groups of friends. Children would, because of the dangers associated with walking long distances, choose friends who were in their close vicinity.

During my first wave of research in Ocean View (a pilot study that lasted from August until the end of September 2011), my activities included a single focus group discussion, followed by four afternoons of participant observation spent accompanying three boys from this more affluent area as they went about their daily activities. This group included Rudie, Duke and their friend Tommy. During these sessions the boys would show me games on their phones, we had informal discussions about how they obtained games, what games they preferred, and how gaming on the mobile phone related to everyday life in Ocean View. During this time I also piloted multi-player Bluetooth games with them.

However, I soon realized that these boys had a much larger community of gaming allies, especially in relation to console-based games. I realized that my narrow scope of mobile games lead me to ignore the greater socio-cultural context and physical space in favour of a tunnel vision mission.

### ***The second period: the Dulston peer group***

My reasoning for initially choosing to focus on children of a specific age cohort (age 11 to 12) was based on personal assumptions about the importance games play in pre-pubescent children’s development, as well as my convenient access to children of this age in this area. Although I initially sought to limit my sample to children of a this age, I became aware that the communities formed around gaming practices in this area are age fluid rather than divided strictly according to age cohorts. Connections are built around geographic proximity and kin networks. During this second wave of research (February – May 2012), I did not put any limitations on activities or persons, and immersed myself in the organic connections between Rudie, Tommy, Duke and the extensive gaming and playing community in which they participated. The majority of this group fell into the age range 9 to 12.

The central group, consisting of three boys (Rudie, Tommy and Duke) and three girls (Ghania, Brenda and Rosie), refer to themselves as the “Dulston boys” and the “Dulston girls” respectively.

#	Name	Age	Gender
1	Rudie	11	M
2	Duke	12	M
3	Tommy	11	M
4	Ghania	11	F

5	Brenda	12	F
6	Rosie	12	F
7	Cale	22	M
8	Danny	9	M
9	Stokkies	8	M
10	Liam	9	M
11	Kyle	19	M
12	Joy	14	F
13	Ashley	17	M
14	A.D.	12	M
15	Will	14	M
16	Ryan	14	M
17	Lindie	13	F

Table 2 The Dulston peer group<sup>10</sup>

However, their play sessions were not only limited to these “Dulston kids” (as I will refer to them throughout this paper) but included a multitude of friends, family members and neighbours, who I collectively refer to as the “Dulston peer group”. Over a period of 3 months I interacted with 17 young people, of whom the youngest was 8 and the eldest was 22 (see Table 2).

To visualize the relationships amongst these participants in my study and their relationships to the adults of the household (Terry and Malcolm, Rudie’s parents and Mina, Rudie’s grandmother), I have illustrated a sociogram indicating the strength of ties amongst various individuals in Figure 2. This network graph cannot be read as representing relative strengths of relationships through numerical values, but rather as an illustration of subjective values attached to relationships, assigned by the Dulston peer group themselves and reported to me.

Throughout my research period I sought to establish the relationships between various members of the group. Although the relative strength of a relationship is dynamic, especially amongst young children who declare new “best friends” often (Corsaro & Eder, 1990), I established rough descriptions: Direct family (household family), Family (collateral relatives not in the household), Peripheral family (distant cousins), Best friends (self-identified strong friendship), Friends (often play together, but not considered “best friends”) and peripheral friends (very seldom/hardly ever play together). I calibrated the strength of these ties as strong (direct family, best friends), mid (family, friends) or weak (peripheral family, peripheral friends) and drew these relationships between each member of the group, utilizing thickness of line to indicate the relative strength of the connection, and the accumulative “connectedness” as illustrated by the size of the nodes, using the open-source network graph program Gephi ([www.gephi.org](http://www.gephi.org)).

<sup>10</sup>all names are pseudonyms

Figure 2 supports the notion that the Dulston peer group is a very close-knit community consisting of kin-networks (Bray, Gooskens, Kahn, Moses, & Seekings, 2010). Amongst my sample Rudie, Duke, Cale and Danny are the most connected and have the strongest ties within the Dulston group. I coded specific groups according to colour. Of primary interest are the Dulston boys in red, the Dulston girls in orange and the younger participants in turquoise.

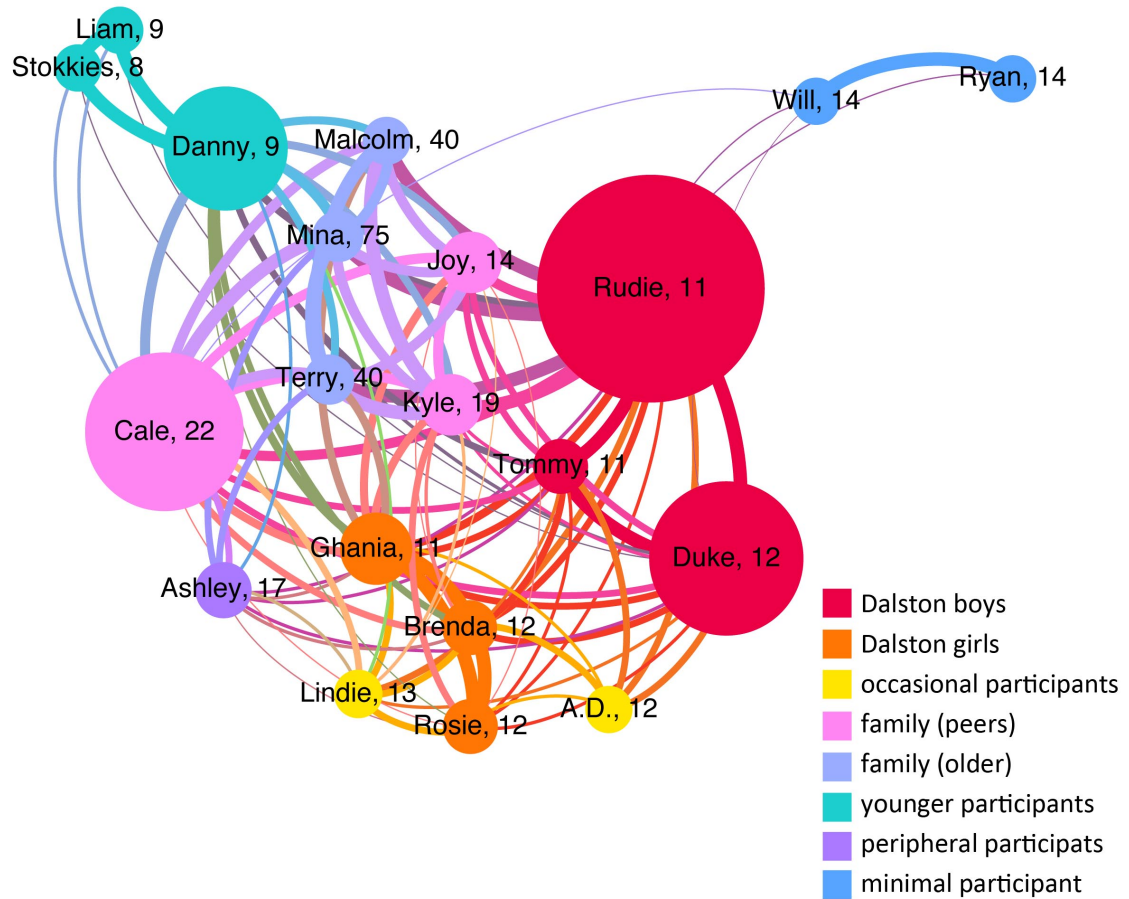


Figure 2 Sociogram of the Dulston peer group

Although these children are all from the Dulston-protected area, they still describe their experiences of walking between each other's houses as potentially dangerous (see *Figure 3*). Ocean View is fragmented into physical spaces where the children feel safe and others that are encumbered by dangerous behaviours. They fear violence in many spaces that they construe as being used for selling and consuming alcohol and drugs: this includes the block of flats where Duke and Brenda live; the soccer field opposite these blocks; and open fields where trouble might lurk.

Although the children sometimes venture into these spaces to play cricket, soccer or marbles, what they mainly have in common is that the majority of their playing time is spent at Rudie's parents' house.

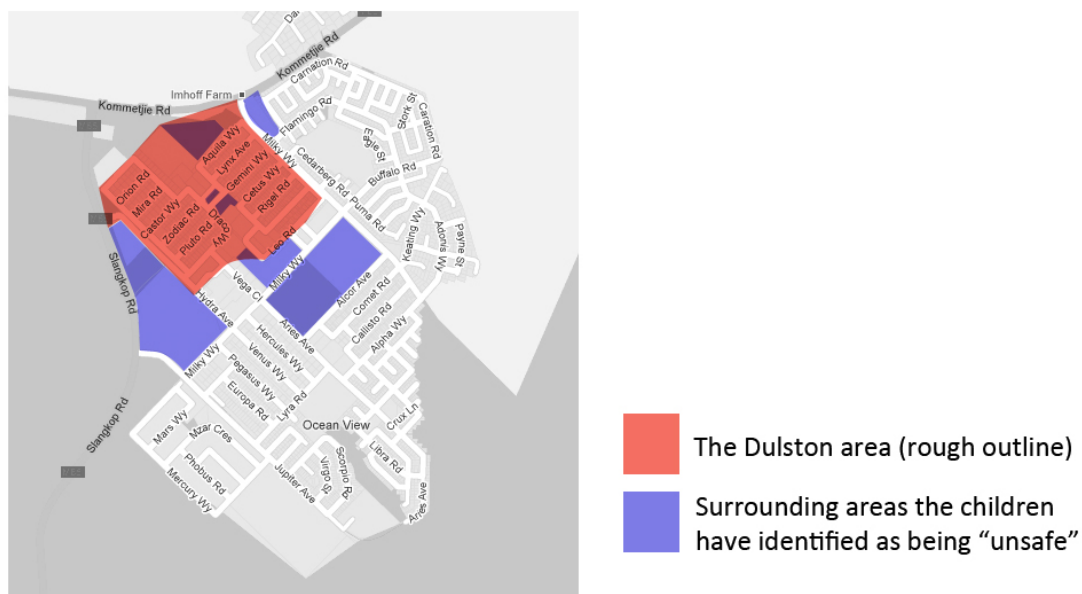


Figure 3 Dulston area and "unsafe" places

### **Rudie's house – the hang-out place**

Rudie's parents' house is the primary site where my research took place. Although other activities included playing at the soccer field, outings to the library, Internet café (see *Figure 4*) and the local gameshop, 90% of our time was spent in the *voorkamer*<sup>11</sup> of this house.

<sup>11</sup>An Afrikaans term derived from Dutch that directly translates to "front room". In old Cape Dutch houses or farmhouses these front rooms were used to entertain company. Terry's husband, Ryan, used this term to describe their lounge.

This room is approximately 3m X 5m with a door that leads directly out into the front yard. It is fitted with an entertainment unit that contains a television, DVD player, karaoke machine and Hi-fi. On the wall perpendicular to this entertainment unit is a dartboard with two coaches lining the wall opposite. A large round table that can seat 8 people stands in the corner opposite the entertainment unit.

Moses (2006) describes the difficulty children have in finding safe playing areas in Ocean View. As children have restricted mobility, their immediate vicinity plays a large role in their playing practices. Moses' study found that children used the communal yards at the blocks of flats or quieter streets to play cricket, soccer and other games. However, these areas were still considered dangerous. She found that the movements of children was dependent of where they lived – which, in turn, was often strongly linked to income and class. Children whose parents lived in houses were often limited to their own yards, whereas children without yards were allowed to play in the streets or communal areas.



*Figure 4 Dulston girls at the Internet Café*

Many of the children involved in gaming with the Dulston kids during these six months had reported feelings of overcrowdedness at their own homes. In many cases three or four generations would share a single home, and often many of these members of family were unemployed and spent the majority of their days in these spaces. Leaving nary a place for children of the household to play. With two bedrooms only sleeping five people, a sizeable

front and back yard, Rudie's home is considered to be spacious. Terry encourages Rudie to invite his friends to their house to play – a space where they can be safe.

Ghania had on many cases drawn comparisons between the spaciousness of playing at Rudie's home in comparison to her own overcrowded home. Her grandfather, mother, two uncles, two of her cousins, her two brothers, their girlfriends and their two respective children, all live in her grandfather's two-bed roomed council flat. Tallying to a grand total of thirteen people – four generations – living under one roof. Her dislike of being at this apartment further strengthened by the ubiquitous presence of her two unemployed brothers' and their girlfriends' perpetual drug use – “Die een broer hy rook tik<sup>12</sup>...en my ander broer, hy en sy meisie rook dagga” ***“The one brother smokes tik...and my other brother, him and his girlfriend smoke dagga<sup>13</sup>”***. On many occasions during my research Ghania would sleep over at Rudie's house, in reaction to her strong dislike of her own living environment.

Similarly Cale, Rudie's cousin, and Danny, Cale's 9-year-old nephew, spend the majority of their time 'hanging out' at Terry's house. Both of Cale's parents – Terry's sister and her husband – are unemployed. Cale laments the “bad influences” that are omnipresent in the communal areas of the flats, and therefore prefers to avoid conflict and confrontation from gang members by acting as babysitter for Danny and spending his days at Terry's: “Hulle kan my maar tatie noem, dat ek so saam met die kleintjies games speel, maar ek sal eerder dit he as om 'n fokken tik kop te wees/ ***They can call me retarded, that I play games with the little ones, but I'd rather have that than be a fucking tik-head<sup>14</sup>”***.

Amongst the Dulston peer group, having access to Terry's house as a safe site for playing is an exception and not the rule for most children in Ocean View. The Dulston peer group's access to Terry's house as a relatively well-off and safe site for playing should not be considered representative of the situation of most children in Ocean View where plots of land are generally very small, and very few people have private yards.

Therefore, I would like to draw attention to the fact that Rudie's house as a safe playing space limits my data and analysis to a very specific and exclusive group.

### ***Ethnographic Approach***

Towards collecting my research data I took an ethnographic approach largely based in participant observation and informal conversations with children, teenagers and adults (Swartz, 2011). As previously discussed, my attempts at involving such young children in a focus group proved to be less effective than anticipated. Although I do use some of the data

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<sup>12</sup> “Tik” is the street name for a particular manifestation of crystal methamphetamine found in Cape Town. It is commonly ingested by being smoked, using a straw in a light bulb.

<sup>13</sup> Transcription of informal conversation, 28 March 2012

<sup>14</sup> Transcription of informal conversation, 4 April 2012

generated through focus group discussions, this method was not very fruitful in eliciting personal thoughts and feelings.

I was influenced by Strelitz's (2005) qualitative approach: through tending to the daily activities social subjects perform and the meanings produced, I seek to explain such significances and practices in terms of larger theoretical frameworks and structures of power and inequality. He invokes a "critical ethnography", which takes "extremely seriously the interpretations of the media constructed by consumers in their everyday routines" yet, at the same time, "it is not afraid to interrogate and situate their spoken accounts" (Moore, 1997, p. 5, in Strelitz, 2005).

I found an ethnographic approach to reveal multi-dimensional aspects of both subjects and their behaviours: Instead of merely asking questions and receiving answers, I became a first-hand witness to activities, actions and reactions (Alasuutari, 1996; Deacon, Pickering, Murdock, & Golding, 1999). Towards situating and exploring the media ecology amongst a marginalized group of vulnerable youth, I contend that producing qualitative knowledge through participation and observation offers a great contribution to the limited pool of knowledge we have of gaming habits in practice (see e.g. Walton & Pallitt, 2012; Putnam & Kolko, 2008; Stevens et al, 2008). Only through an ethnographic approach of Cultural studies (Kellner & Durham, 2006; Alasuutari, 1996) can one ascertain how media is situated "in the very socio-economics and political context in which they are consumed and produced" (Algan, 2008). Establishing the peculiarity of the social, economic and political forces in enhancing or hindering an individual's experience of media (Kellner & Durham, 2006).

My participation amongst this group grew organically – from a position of mainly observing at first, where I watched the children playing video games and took notes. Later I gradually participated more and more in every day activities and began to ask informal questions, participated in gameplay and positioned myself as peer and playmate. My focus was set clearly on exploring the nature of this social phenomena, "rather than setting out to test hypotheses" (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1975, p. 248) about them.

My data was largely unstructured and I was well-known to be a researcher by those who I studied. Later in this chapter I will discuss how my activities located me in relation to the group and how I consciously adopted an orientation of both insider and outsider at various points of my research process (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1975, p. 249).

Digital gaming practices are situated amid crucial cultural and social transformations worldwide (Kellner & Durham, 2006). Often these practices are utilized to negotiate and make sense of such transformations – a way of expression. Through Cultural studies (Hall, 1980), we might be able to shed some light on how digital games in certain contexts correspond to changing realities and power struggles. The intersection of media and culture in everyday life can hypostatize larger economic, political, and social structures. Cultural

studies see these dynamics as intricately linked (Kellner & Durham, 2006), and can function as a way to uncover dialectical relationships between local and global forces (Haupt, 2008; Strelitz, 2005; Nyamnjoh, 2008).

Towards unknottling and rendering these structures I positioned myself as observer and playmate amongst the Dulston kids (I discuss the going-ons of an average day in the following chapters). Over this period of 9 months, I sought to ascertain consistent or patterned behaviours by immersing myself, over as much time as possible. Through informal conversations with the Dulston group I was furthermore able to suss out inconsistencies.

Only at two points did I intervene in every day practices – during the first period I piloted a Bluetooth mobile phone game, and in the second period I introduced PlayStation game titles that were considered to be more ‘girl-friendly’. I account for these decisions in the following chapters.

Initially my research design included a video camera on which I recorded play activities, but I soon found that this posed to be too invasive, and children acted out when they felt that they were being filmed. As picture and video cameras are not a natural feature in this ecology, the children found its presence to be novel and it distracted from their natural play practices. For this reason, I used my less-obtrusive mobile phone to take photographs and videos. The device also doubled as an unbeguiling recording device, fixed in my hand, for easy record-and-pause whenever I found a conversation to be relevant. Furthermore, I recorded my observations in a journal. Although this was distracting at first, especially to the girls, my openness about sharing the notes that I took soon lead the children to lose any interest they had in my “ugly handwriting” and “boring notes”.

I took my cues from Clifford Geertz’s notion of *thick description and inscription* (1973) when diarizing my experiences, documenting and expressing every tiny detail I observed. Thick descriptions were the basis of my study. Remaining aware that these could only ever be interpretations, and as Geertz asserts: second and third order ones at best. Towards compiling my data, I transcribed all of the audio recordings I found to be notable along with my notes, and photographs (these included stills from videos) that I compiled chronologically into Microsoft Word documents. These were transcribed and compiled directly after sessions to recall details while they were still fresh in my mind. I then coded each of these documents by date and participants present.

Once my fieldwork had concluded, I followed the rigorous process of analysis described in de Wet and Erasmus (2005) and identified themes across these documents and coded them. This was done through a process of *inscription* (Geertz, 1973), an interpretative paradigm in which I perceive the collected data through the lens of the theoretical toolbox unpacked in the previous chapter. I consider theories of domestication (Haddon, 2001; Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1992), habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), conspicuous consumption (Verblen, 1899), and spatiality (Schoon, 2011; Walton & Donner,

2012; Lefebvre, 1991) when engaging with the data. This does not allude to a notion that such experiences are raw social discourse, nor that such engagements should be compartmentalized. These ‘compartments’, or themes, are merely utilized to frame “guesses at meanings, assessing [these] guesses, and [drawing] explanatory conclusions from the better guesses” (Geertz, 1973, p. 20): turning passing events into accounts that can be reconsulted.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Before I embarked on my study I obtained signed permission from all of my participants, with guardians co-signing for minors. These were procured after explaining the aims of my study in detail to both participants and guardians, and making myself available to answer further questions at any point. It was made clear to all involved that participants could withdraw, and could refuse engagement in any activity, at any stage. As my sample grew organically, and new faces were introduced throughout, this process was ongoing until my study concluded.

To protect the participants in my study, all of the names in this dissertation are pseudonyms. To the best of my ability I have sought to disguise the identities and locations of persons involved. I received permission from all involved to use photographs and video stills, but decided to obscure all identifiable visual markers to ensure complete anonymity.

As my research takes place amongst marginalized and vulnerable youth – as outlined by Sharlene Swartz (2011) – I followed five of the ethical strategies outlined in her paper “‘Going Deep’ and ‘Giving Back’: strategies for exceeding ethical expectations when researching amongst vulnerable youth”: I chose appropriate research methods, built relationships with my participants, conveyed my own subjectivity as researcher, flattened the power gradient through developing mutuality and carefully considered issues of language and representation. These strategies were especially useful in re-configuring the powerful position I held as a familiar entity: the privileged “*Wit kind/ White child*<sup>15</sup>” of, and a representative of the main source of income for, Rudie’s grandmother.

Towards the purpose of reconfiguring this power imbalance, I *chose appropriate research methods as an ethical strategy* (Swartz, 2011, p. 50). After much consideration I choose a research design that I felt would be the most comfortable and natural for those involved. I sought to identify complexities by fully immersing myself in activities with the Dulston group, and included multiple stimulus activities. These included various digital games on a variety of platforms, informal conversations, participant-motivated demonstrations, physical games, participant photography, and diverse outings to the library, gameshop, Internet café, soccer field, multi-purpose center, and various participants’ houses. These activities were all

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<sup>15</sup>Often the Dalston group referred to me as Mina’s “Wit kind”

conceived by the participants' themselves and also served as a way to "give back" from myself.

As previously mentioned, children in Ocean View have very few opportunities for leisure activities and often cite high levels of boredom as potential motivation for bad behaviours. I was able to offer small outings that children were not usually able to undertake without adult supervision or a car. Whenever we undertook these outings, I was conscientious to have discussions with the children on how and why these outings were different from their usual routines.

These multi-sited activities also contributed largely to amplify the children's own voices and enabled me to *Build relationships as an ethical strategy* (Swartz, 2011, p. 52). Initially my presence was a foreign element to the majority of children (besides Rudie, Kyle and Cale) and they treated me as such. This was strengthened by my antecedent observation-only position. Only over many hours of interaction and conversations did I feel as if they opened up and began to see me as a friend and ally. I believe that playing video games together was a cardinal factor in building this relationship and rapport. By engaging in play I was able to transform from adult into friend, especially as children patiently taught me combinations and short cuts on the controller – or would yell and cheer for my victory. Digital games serve as an effective means to balance out perceived inequalities as discovered in psychological studies – as all players are forced to play by the same rules (McGonigal, 2011).

I was careful not to impede on the natural going-ons of these children, and allowed them to set the agenda throughout. As Swartz contends: the researcher is the primary instrument in ethnographic research, and it is therefore *paramount for the researcher to situate themselves within the research and to constantly reflect on how personal subjectivities affect (or even transform) the research* (Swartz, 2011, p. 54).

Mainly, my otherness was largely manifested in my Whiteness, and my association with Rudie's grandmother. As previously mentioned, colour in South Africa is a proxy for class and a signifier of historical inequality. For this reason, I was initially perceived to be a source of wealth and material goods. When my first period of studies concluded, I presented my three participants with a surprise incentive of airtime – a valuable commodity amongst these children. For this reason, when my second period of research commenced, I was met with expectations of rewards. Initially this perception was strengthened by my "adult-ness". I found that once my status was established as friend, the children soon realized that my position did not allow for such lavishness and ceased to drop hints about airtime. The only money I spent during this period was on snacks and cold drinks, which Terry would usually provide on days that I was not present. Apart from this, my enterprise was completely economically neutral.

I was in the position to provide a "reward" nearing the end of my research period when a group of researchers from the Center for Internet and Society's Access to Knowledge study

(for more information visit <http://cis-india.org/a2k>) inquired whether I would be able to arrange and host a workshop with children in the area. I decided to build this day around participants of my own study. I then re-routed the budget from CIS by offering Terry's home as venue, Terry as caterer, and requested that the children each be provided with airtime towards the purpose of demonstrations. Through this session I was able to "give back" and amass a sizeable benefit for those who assisted me throughout my research<sup>16</sup>.

As Swartz contends "reflecting on one's own subjectivities as a researcher is a good research practice" and contributes towards *developing mutuality and flattening the power gradient* (Swartz, 2011, p. 56). I sought to be completely transparent with the children in my study, and answered any questions they had about the research and my own personal life, truthfully. Although this allowed for greater trust and honesty from both sides, I also made it clear that they were completely free to *not* talk about certain things. In many cases children chose not to share stories about their home situations with me. In as far as possible I allowed the children to establish their own priorities and limitations for discussion.

I was further able to flatten this power gradient between researcher and research subjects by *engaging with them in their own language*, namely Afrikaans (Swartz, 2011, p. 60). In my *representation* of the children I sought to use terms they themselves used, such as the recurring reference to 'children' or 'kids', from the Afrikaans '*kinders*', and my definition of our time spent together as 'hang-outs', a term which the children themselves adopted. In writing about it now, I use direct transcriptions of the original Afrikaans with succeeding translations in bold. Although it is not easy to put forth the subjects' own representational voice whilst also reading beyond this voice in order to elucidate meaningful patterns, I attempted to remain conscious of this complexity while negotiating my findings.

In writing my findings, as detailed and densely as I could, I realize that writing towards specific theme-bound descriptions is difficult at best. Many of these themes contain overlapping and intricately woven aspects and behaviours. For this reason I would like to remind the reader that the separational approach to findings is merely strategic, and I will repeat, review, and at times pick up where I left off over the next two chapters. In as far as possible, I will situate this approach within thick descriptions of events that account for such complexities.

### ***Limitations of the study***

Although I carefully constructed my method, some aspects of my qualitative approach also served to limit the scope of my findings. My conscious decision to steer clear of the institution of school backfired in the sense that I had no concept of these kids' school world.

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<sup>16</sup> Conversely, I have returned to Ocean View a number of times after my study had completed. And although I will not see the children on as much of a regular basis as I did with the study, my friendship with Rudie's family means that I will sporadically see the Dulston peer group in the future.

As the majority of children's lives are occupied by school and school-mediated activities that were largely invisible to me, I can only report on a certain understanding of the every day practices as limited to "free" time. Conversely, as children spent large portions of their afternoons practicing institutionalized team sports or doing homework, my study is relatively small in physical hours spent with the children. Although I attempted to approach my study as "ethnographically" as possible, my time spent (112 hours) with the Dulston peer group is minute by the standards of a full ethnography and my findings are therefore very limited in scope.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 4: mobile phone findings

### *Introduction*

The ubiquitous mobile phone is often mythologized as an entity that removes us from a stable sense of location, while connecting us to others (Gillwald & Stork, 2008). It is frequently narrated as the digital object that has revolutionized communication in the developing world (Goldstuck, 2010; Ford & Botha, *MobilED - An accessible Mobile Learning Platform for Africa*, 2007). Yet, little is known about the adoption behaviour of mobile games amongst resource-constrained youth in emerging economies. The combination of a high mobile phone saturation in South Africa, at 100.48% according to the most recent statistics (UNICEF New York, 2012), along with the potential gaming offers for development (Fiorito, 2011) makes this intersection of research particularly valuable.

As previously discussed, my initial contact with the Dulston kids was based around the intention to investigate mobile phone gaming amongst a select group of children in Ocean View. During this particular period (my first period of research as outlined in the previous chapter), I paid most of my attention to the mobile phone as a socio-technological artifact. Owing to the nature of my focus on *phone* and not *ecology*, the children had taken care to bring their mobile phone with them to all of our hang-outs. I later learned that this behavior was not the norm, and therefore much of my interaction during this first period can be seen as intervention behavior. I do not discredit these behaviours as they served to illustrate certain practices and could be used as benchmark for comparing behaviours documented in the second period of research, where phones were only carried for specific purposes. This chapter is partially chronological, partially comparative with later behaviours.

Prevalent during this comparison is the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) embodied by *the right kind of mobile phone*. Increasingly, the concept of “mobile phone” was problematized as a general term: phones were only of interest if they could perform certain desirable functions. Access to these “fancy” phones came to represent the class background of certain children, entrenched in associations of access to valuable globalized popular media commodities supported by geographic situatedness, as explored during the second part of this chapter. Notable was the differential use of mobile phone as gaming device amongst boys, whereas girls hardly used their devices for these purposes. In addition, the gendered difference in technology appropriation was supported by the boys’ sole custody of phones - constantly ‘upgrading’ to newer and better model phones, whereas girls were more likely to share phones with siblings or family members.

Notable behaviors were observed with the mobile phone as device for surveillance or protection, in paradoxical existence with the phone as invitation for danger from potential prowlers. Different circumstances would call for different measure of precaution. The children were all in possession of their phones over the holiday period, but only because

they were able to form a “walking club” where they could walk together in a pack for protection against muggers. During school periods this is not possible, and the majority of children who had some distance to walk seldom brought their phones along.

In the last section of this chapter, I discuss the piloting of Bluetooth technology for multi-player games as a precedent for potential development.

### ***Being “in” or “out” – mobile phone as proxy for class and coolness***

As Susan Moses (2005) contends, although it is often painted as a socio-economically homogenous area in official descriptions, Ocean View is fragmented into classes indicated by access to certain resources. Amongst my group, it was very important to be perceived as from a higher class, and children displayed signifiers of this affluence through material goods: “one way of contesting this label is for people to buy nice televisions, DVD-players, brand clothing for their children and the latest cellular phone models” (Moses, 2005). The inclusion of a cellphone in this range of material goods was especially relevant to my sample.

As previously mentioned, after concluding my first meeting with a random sample in the Ocean View library, Duke felt the need to ascertain that he did not have friends who were phone-less. Indicating the strong social capital the mobile phone carries in this community. If you have a phone, you’re in. If you don’t, you’re out. During this first meeting, children who did not have phones were all of the opinion that by their age they *should* have access to phones. Chester described feeling left out because of not having a phone:

*Die kinders by die skool sal so praat praat..sê nou maar...daai nuwe Rihanna song...of daai Jack Parow...en veral met die games...en dan sal jy nie eers wiet waar die ding ruk nie. Dan maak maak jy so soos jy sal wiet, nê? ‘ja ja ek ken daai’...*

**The kids at school will talk talk...say about...that new Rihanna song...or that Jack Parow...and especially with the games...and then you wouldn’t even know what was going on. Then you pretend that you know, hey? ‘Yes yes I know that’...**

(transcription of focus group, 28 September 2011)

Chester illustrates his desire to be “in the know” of popular media, and he strongly associates the ability to do so with having a mobile phone that allows for such features. Although Chester’s father owns a phone, it is a rudimentary model that Chester “don’t even know the name of, it’s so crap”. In this greater group the generalized term of ‘mobile phone’ is not a useful concept, as the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) of a phone is strongly tied to specific functions performed on the phone: access to the mobile web, Mxit, games, radio or a music player are pivotal in the negotiation of cultural capital represented by the phone amongst these children. Additionally, to many children, it was not only the cost of obtaining a mobile phone (often phones can be bought from black markets supplied by gangs in the area, or in the form of hand-me-downs from family members), but also the

perceived wealth necessary to maintain a 'phone-life' through constant airtime purchases, that kept them firmly out of the loop. Effectually for Chester, his not owning or having access to a feature phone is excluding him from socializing with his peers in the way he perceives as being desirable and from becoming a member of this peer group (Corsaro & Eder, 1990).

As previously mentioned, passage between certain areas in the small town is considered dangerous as it indicates crossover areas between gang turfs. Danger areas are mostly vacant fields, blocks of flats, or public spaces such as parks and graveyards. Considering this, it makes sense that children stick to being social with children in their immediate surroundings. These areas are distinctly connected to class and therefore, resources.

I came to realize that all of the children over the age of nine in my second period of research, who were from the more affluent Dulston area, had frequent access to a mobile phone. Children in this group attached a great deal of importance to differentiating themselves as being of a higher class standing to others in the small neighbourhood. As Cale retorted, after his grandmother suggested he greet a group of girls who were loitering outside the house<sup>17</sup>: "*Mammie, daai's my ras, maar nie my klas nie!/Gran, that's my race, but not my class*<sup>18</sup>". Having access to the right kind of mobile phone contributed to this perception of superiority. Often this access was through sharing (Ghania and her older brother share a phone; Brenda and her father share a phone; Rudie and Cale share their phones with Danny). The mobile phone acted as an important signifier of social capital amongst the children as it represented an access point to music, videos, photos and games. It also allowed children to socialize with others via phone calls, SMS and amongst a small percentage, to Mxit. My study showed that girls attached more value to the latter – mobile phone as means for communication, whereas the boys' main interest was in games.

Because of the boys' enthusiasm for games, their phones appeared to be a much more invested interest: with better technology, they would have better gaming experiences. They would often speak of asking their parents for new phones; lament that their phones weren't compatible with certain games; and constantly be in the process of making dealings with older family members who had better model phones to swop them. Rudie had successfully swopped phones with his aunt, upgrading him from a Samsung E250 to a Nokia E66. However, within the first month this phone was stolen from him as he walking to a friend's house. Similarly, once the study had concluded I gifted my Nokia S60 to Rudie. Within two weeks I was informed that gangsters, in transit to the shop, had taken Rudie's new phone. As Rudie had already sold his previous phones, his brother Kyle now offered to share his Nokia with him.

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<sup>17</sup>Cale appeared to be quite popular amongst the girls in the neighbourhood, and often groups of girls would hang around in the street in front of the house, presumably to grab his attention.

<sup>18</sup>From field notes, 11 August 2012

Over the period of 9 months Duke had possessed three different phones: first a Samsung E250, then Nokia music Xpress and finally a Nokia C3. Of all the participants, he was most often glued to his phone, gaming, and therefore found it very important that his phone should be the best for gaming:

*Die skerm is groot, die klank is goed, die graphics is kwaai, al daai. Dis nou die beste een tussen almal.*

**The screen is big, the sound is good, the graphics are awesome, all of that. It is now the best amongst everyone.**

(Transcription of informal conversation, 23 March 2012)

I was present the day that Duke debuted his phone amongst his friends. There were 7 boys in attendance: Duke, Rudie, Tommy, Cale, Danny, Stokkies and Liam. From my field notes:

*I return to the lounge and hang around watching the boys play. It seems none of them have any interest in their own phones at this stage anymore, since the arrival of Duke's new phone has taken over any games that they might have. They are entranced for about 15 minutes, with little Danny practically hanging off the side of the table to lean and get a closer look. Duke says he now has Need for Speed Underground, The Sims and The Simpsons. But he'll download more games when he has more airtime.*

(From my field notes, 23 March 2012)

The boys attached a lot of value to 'brand name' game franchises – *FIFA*, *Need for Speed*, *Grand Theft Auto*, and games based on famous cartoons such as *the Simpsons* carried the highest cultural capital. After I piloted Bluetooth multiplayer games with the boys (which will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter), one of their responses related to the "no-name" nature of the games. They asserted that one of the reasons they didn't have any interest in the game was because it wasn't well known and hence they perceived it as being of low quality. This underpinned the notion that the boys followed queues from a globalized sense of popular culture when it came to gaming content, informed by films, television, the internet (as relayed by children who had access) and social networks: in other words, the "talked about" nature of media commodities.

### ***Non-mobility and Negotiating Play***

Strongly tied to the postulate of class and mobile phone is geographic situatedness. Throughout my dissertation so far, one of the most dominant themes that has emerged is that of mobility. As public spaces carry high levels of perceived danger, children in Ocean View tend to group together according to geography. Although Ocean View is physically very small, and kin networks dominate social demographics, there is still fragmented movement between areas.

As most residents do not have cars, or do not have the adequate means to use cars on a daily basis, children most often walk around to get where they're going. For this reason living in physical proximity of those who constitute one's social networks is of the utmost importance amongst this age group. As geography is consistent with class status, most children socialize with others who are from the same socio-economic background (Amongst my sample this meant that at least one member of the household had some form of stable and significant income.)

Unbeknownst to me at the time, children had devised a number of "spatial tactics" (Walton & Donner, 2012, p. 4) through which to minimize their risk of attacks when transporting their mobile phones: "Spatial tactics are the way individuals engage with powerful strategies and structures in their everyday life". After school, and before my arrival, Terry would collect the children from school by foot, they would then walk past each kid's house and pick up their mobile phone together, in a large group. Over holiday periods Rudie and Cale would walk to collect all of the children en route, so that they wouldn't have to walk alone. Many of the children had rules put in place by their parents about carrying their mobile phones. In general, if they were able to walk in a group, or had an adult with them, they were allowed to move in public with the phone on them. The boys would increasingly throw caution to the wind, and had revealed to me that they often risked carrying their phones between each other's houses. Yet, in such cases muggings were more likely, as twice experienced by Rudie, or close calls with gangs as recalled by Tommy:

*Daar was een man, laas week, toe ek hierheen stap. Hy't 'n mes gehe en hy wou my amper steek. Toe hardloop ek net huistoe. Maar 'n ander keer was daar die een gang, die PBLs, hulle het sulke groot honde, hulle jaa jou. Sulke pitbulls. Hulle laat die honde ons jaa*

**There was this one man, last week, when I was walking here. He had a knife and he almost wanted to stab me. So I just ran home. But this other time there was this one gang, the PBLs, they have these big dogs, they chase you. These pitbulls. They let the dogs chase us.**

(Transcription of informal conversation, 4 October 2011)

Tommy recalls being chased or harassed by dangerous characters on several occasions. He alludes to how these incidents are a part of everyday life in Ocean View. Similar to Schoon's (2012) study, where boys perform their masculinity by "bravely" displaying their headphones in dangerous public spaces, boys in my study would share accounts of older boys who 'proved' their fearlessness by loudly playing music from their mobile phones. Such displays could perhaps be described as a "conspicuous incorporation", marrying concepts from theories of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899) and domestication theory (Silverstone & Haddon, 1996): here it is not only the purchase of valuable commodities that allow individuals to perform their desired social status, but through brazen display and the *conversion* of meaning (Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1992) of such display they are actively "inviting" trouble, whilst performing their fearlessness. In contexts

such as Ocean View such behaviours can potentially lead to very real danger, simultaneously 'upping' an individual's perceived social standing and placing them in harm's way.

Girls had a different set of rules when carrying their phones. As it was already considered to be unsafe for girls to walk alone, even sans phone, they could only ever travel in groups or with a responsible adult. Therefore, the girls had phones on them more often than not, as a means for their parents or guardians to get a hold of them. In this case, the phones pose both danger and a perceived sense of safety for parents. The differences in mobility and purposes of phone amongst the boys and the girls in my sample call attention to the notion that girls are still socialized to occupy public spaces much differently to boys (Yeoh & Huang, 1998). And Ocean View is no exception.

Rules for mobile phone use is also prevalent at school, where teachers forbid phones without written consent from parents outlining why the children would need a phone: "*Byvoorbeeld as jou mammië in die hospitaal is of só/ For example when your mommy is in the hospital or something like that*<sup>19</sup>" as Brenda explained to me. The perceived reasons identified by the children for these rules consisted of three distinct factors. Firstly, that the phones would distract children from paying attention in class. Secondly, that children would be targets if they carried their phones on them outside of the school, and lastly, phones were considered to be an invitation for theft, even inside of school:

*Daar is outjies wat jou boelie, hulle is die outjies wat rook op die skoolgronde. En hulle rook nie sigarette nie. Hulle teken private parte in die boys se kledkamers en skryf hulle gang name daarso. Hulle sal sommer jou foon vat en dan kan jy niks se daaroor of iets nie, jy kannie 'n klikkie bek weesie want dan sal hulle erger goed aan jou doen.*

**There are guys that bully you, they're the guys that smoke on school grounds. And they don't smoke cigarettes. They draw private parts in the boys' restrooms and they write their gang names there. They'll just take your phone and then you can't say anything about it, you can't be a tattletale cause then they'll do even worse things to you.**

(Transcription of informal conversation, 4 October 2011)

The children's recollections and descriptions of hazardous mobility – and in the case of girls, no autonomous mobility at all – is highly problematic in positioning the mobile phone as tool for developmental digital games, unless this game play is solitary. In progress rhetoric (Sutton-Smith, 1997) descriptions of games, however, one of the main components thought to cultivate learning abilities is collaboration and community (Nardi & Harris, 2006; Squire, 2009; Sefton-Green, 2004; Shaffer, Squire, Halverson, & Gee, 2004).

Throughout my study the boys reported that they found mobile gaming in general to be a more solitary pastime. They aren't able to play games *together* on their phones: interaction

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<sup>19</sup>Transcription of informal conversation, 5 May 2012

is limited to sharing testimonies of new games, and proffering web pages the others can visit. At present their favourite websites to download games from is zonkewap.com and freegames.com. Rudie's older cousin Cale introduced them to both. At times they would take turns to play one game on someone's phone, or observe when someone had downloaded a highly anticipated game, but the smallness of the screens hindered the enjoyment of such activities. The boys contended, during this first wave, that if there had been a way to play multiplayer games on their phones, that they would probably make more effort to play against one another.

Although the girls would often have their phones on them, their activities fall outside of that which is perceived, from a Northern-centric position, to be traditional digital games. Heeding a call for a more expansive view of gaming ecologies as called upon in Walton and Pallitt's paper (2012) to include Mxit chats, exchanging contacts, and collecting photographs. Ghania and Brenda would often speak of "playing" Mxit, a "chat game" that could be found under the game sections on their phones. However, the other girls conceded that they found Mxit to be "dangerous" due to predatory individuals asking them for nude photographs. When I brought up the topic of Mxit at a later stage of our hangouts, only Ghania still had a Mxit account left, Brenda having deleted hers after hearing horror stories from other girls.

The girls mostly used their phones as picture albums featuring two kinds of pictures: 1.) photographs of family and friends, and 2.) pictures of celebrities or interest images. Photographs of loved ones have often come up during our hangouts, and the girls would share with myself and each other important events such as weddings, birthdays or matric balls; New additions to the family, such as love interests or new babies; accomplishments at sporting or school events; and new possessions such as formal shoes, bicycles or family cars.

Images of celebrities or interests stored on phones become a different commodity and function similarly to playground games where children swop stickers or trade collecting cards. In this case, images are exchanged via Bluetooth. Children would negotiate the relative "value" of images amongst one another (similar to sticker exchanges where furry, oily, puffy or glitter stickers would carry more "capital" than plain stickers) and exchange them in accordance with this value. Certain images were considered to be rarities; either downloaded from Google images at high download costs, or bought from sites such as Zonkewap.com, and could therefore only be exchanged for ones that carried equal monetary value.

Girls would most often swop images with girls, and boys with boys, predominantly due to the content of the images – in my group the girls were collecting images of female pop artists such as Nicki Minaj and popular television franchises such as *High School Musical* or *Hannah Montana*. Whereas the boys were collectors of hegemonic masculine images containing cars, rap artists, soccer players or flags (correlating with their favourite sports teams). Through this process the children create their own culture economy (Bourdieu, 1986), which offers a low-cost alternative to physical artifacts and merchandise. For

example, a pack of *Hannah Montana* stickers currently retail at ±R30 for 6 stickers. R30 is a relatively large sum of money to most of the Dulston peer group, who reported spending that amount *per month* on airtime. In relation, 6 stickers is hardly “entertainment” for a month (Whereas R30 could supply the Dulston peer group with scores of images to swop, collect and barter with).

The boys are able to “play” this sharing game most often when they had the opportunity to travel with their phones on weekends. This would occur during soccer practice or matches, when a large group of boys would walk down to “Die Blok” (The Block), a block of flats close to Rudie’s home, with their fathers.



Figure 5 The boys trading images via Bluetooth

From here they would be piled into the back of a bakkie and be taken to either Simon's Town or Wynberg. Throughout this trip in the back of the bakkie, Rudie describes him and his soccer friends being able to listen to music together and swap content via Bluetooth.

However, as discussed before, I increasingly perceived a shift in confidence from my male participants to brave the streets alone with their mobile phones, as they are growing older and on the cusp of adolescence. Although this has led to some disastrous incidents (run-ins with gang members, and Rudie's loss of his new touch-screen Nokia), there was a definite increase in boys who brought their phones to our hang-outs.

For this reason, I perceived Bluetooth multi-player games to be the next logical step in establishing whether collaboration could be cultivated on the platform and whether the mobile phone offered a suitable medium as a low-cost alternative to console games. This was piloted with Tommy, Rudie and Duke. Peripheral participants included Cale, Kevin, Danny and Stokkies.

### ***The case for Bluetooth games***

When I first introduced the idea of Bluetooth multi-player games the boys admitted that they had never even known that something like that was possible, although they were very comfortable with Bluetooth technology and largely relied on it to share content.

I had researched multiplayer cellphone games, prior to the last hangout with these three boys during my first wave of research, and attempted to do this solely from my own Nokia S60. I did this in order to simulate the level of access and experience the boys in my sample would have from their own mobile phones, browsing the mobile web. I found a single website that offered direct download Bluetooth multiplayer games called mobiles24.com.

However, the catch with this site was that, in order to register, one needed to access their website from a computer as their registration process included a CAPTCHA (Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart) that could not display on the mobisite. I had to resort to registering an account on my personal computer. Hereafter, one has to log into their WAP site (wap.mobiles24.com) from one's phone. Each game is downloadable directly for free (apart from the airtime spent on data) by entering a unique download code. In order to download games to one's phone, you would have to visit their www site and browse available games, click through three different screens to obtain the download code, after which you would have to re-open the WAP site, re-login and then enter the code. Once you've gone through these steps, the java-based game would download to your phone. As none of the boys had access to an internet-connected computer, I registered usernames and passwords for each of them prior to the hang-out. As all of the boys had a great interest in soccer, I found the download code for a soccer game to trial with them.

Although I had taken care of the administration process, the boys had other reservations about downloading these games. As this experiment took place on my final afternoon during the first wave with the boys, I had gifted each of the R50 airtime as a thank you for the time they had spent with me. The boys were extremely hesitant in going online, and Rudie contended, “*Hulle steel jou geld so/ They steal your money this way*<sup>20</sup>”, and argued that they would use all of the airtime I’d given them if I wanted them to play against each other. He wouldn’t believe that the multi-player function would be purely Bluetooth based, and suspected that the game would need to go online, costing him airtime. He became quite adamant and told me “*Ek wil nie die airtime vir daai gebruik nie!/I do not want to use that airtime for this!*<sup>21</sup>” This immediately panicked the other two boys, who also asked me whether I was sure that this activity would not “*vreet ons airtime/consume our airtime*<sup>22</sup>”. After a hefty deliberation and promising them that if the game “ate” any more than R1 of their airtime I would refund them, they agreed to participate.

The boys’ hesitation hint at two distinct factors at play: Firstly, that they have a distrust of unknown sites and stick with sites that they’ve established to be “safe”. Cale and Kevin have both told me about instances where they had attempted to download content from new websites, and had been surprised to see all of their airtime “eaten up”. Such amounts are typically small, as children reported buying airtime in increments of R5. This constitutes the second distinct factor amongst this group: airtime is a valuable commodity. Although these kids all have access to a mobile phone, they do not always have the resources to procure airtime. The popularity of games on mobile phones is largely due to the fact that the children only need airtime to download these games, and gain hours of enjoyment without having to spend any further money. Similarly, the transactional ‘play’ of swopping and sharing content via Bluetooth offers a way of engaging with phone and friends, without having to spend money.

Terry had related to me instances where she would reward household chores with airtime, and children reported other such instances where they would exchange work for small amounts of money, specifically to buy airtime. Joy described an instance where she offered to copy over contacts from her grandmother’s old phone to a new one, in exchange she wanted to download images from Google with her grandmother’s airtime. She then transferred these images to her own phone via Bluetooth. She downloaded images of Rihanna, *High School Musical*, *Hannah Montana*, and Drake. These images, in turn, she would swap with other friends for images that she considered to carry equal value via Bluetooth.

Returning to my discussion of piloting the Bluetooth multiplayer games, the boys had no issues navigating the mobile internet to locate the website I had indicated, logging in with

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<sup>20</sup>Transcription from bluetooth multi-player pilot session, 7 October 2011

<sup>21</sup>Transcription from bluetooth multi-player pilot session, 7 October 2011

<sup>22</sup>Transcription from bluetooth multi-player pilot session, 7 October 2011

the details I provided, and entering the download code I supplied. However, the game only worked on two of the phones we had available.

The game, *Euro Football*, is a classical top-down view football simulation game. The players can choose to represent one of sixteen European soccer teams (although the official names and colours are replaced by generic country names and flag colours). Tommy selected Germany, and Rudie elected to represent Italy. One player offers to “host” the game and the other requests to “join” the game. The boys, seemingly enthralled, played the game – varying between three different play modes – for an hour and a half.



Figure 6. Playing Bluetooth Multi-player games

Danny and Stokkies, the two younger boys, were glued to Tommy’s screen. Duke observed the play over Rudie’s shoulder. The boys proceeded to trash talk each other and a continuous dialogue unfolded with “spectators” (Stokkies, Danny and Duke) offering advice to the players. After a few games the boys swapped the phones around, and previous players offered advice and quick demonstrations on how the controls worked.

At the time the boys contended, that if their phones would allow it, they would be excited about playing games like this with each other more often. However, it would have to work on all of their phones and they would like to be able to download their own choices of games without my help. Without access to an internet-connected computer, thus the inability to display the CAPCHA, this would be impossible without my initial registration

process. Even if the boys were able to display the CAPCHA on their phones, it would still cost a lot of money for them to browse through ad-riddled sites to locate games. The WAP-site does not have a game browsing option.

When I revisited the notion of Bluetooth games during my second wave of research, suggesting we try another game, the boys had a very strong inclination that this mode of play would not work. Duke insisted that setting up these games was “*te moeilik/too difficult*<sup>23</sup>” and Rudie felt that it wasn’t a fair way of playing as it didn’t work on all of their phones.

Their biggest concern was still airtime, followed by their perception that the games on offer were “uncool”. Cale had browsed through the list of games after my previous pilot and decided they were “cheapie games”. As the boys did not pay any more money for these games than the games they already downloaded from sites such as *zonkewap.com*, I deduced that this perception of “cheapie” was related to the quality of the games, not their price, as well as their relative unknown status. As the boys most often download games that are considered “brand name” games – *FIFA, Need for Speed, Grand Theft Auto, Pacman, Mario, and The Simpsons* – the no-name ‘cheapie’ brand of these games did not carry enough cultural capital, and the relative perception of uncoolness posed by an older peer cemented this notion amongst their group.

During my second period of research, when I had the girls as part of the larger group, I attempted to repeat this process with Joy, Lindie, Rosie and Brenda. But the girls declined to participate in this mode of gaming. Joy and Lindie contended that they didn’t have enough space on their phones, Brenda didn’t want to install games on the phone she shares with her father, and her mother had confiscated Rosie’s phone as she did badly at school.

## **Conclusion**

The mobile phone and its role as a gaming console, serves as both an economic and social indicator, and functions to reproduce social relations in this community along the lines of class and gender.

Firstly it has shown that children who live in more affluent parts of Ocean View are more likely to own the right kind of mobile phone than those who live elsewhere. Geographic position and lacking mobility due to debilitating gangsterism in the area further supports this fragmented socialization. Children gravitate towards others who have the same access/lack of access as them. Because phones are typically associated with more affluent individuals, it also becomes a signifier and proxy for “coolness” – indicating the owner’s ability to have his/her finger on the pulse of popular culture.

This desire to remain ahead of the curve manifests in different ways amongst boys and girls. Amongst boys, the mobile phone is used as a gaming console. Boys in my sample

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<sup>23</sup>Transcription from bluetooth multi-player pilot session, 7 October 2011

perpetually download new “brand name” games, and socialize around recommending or critiquing games. For this reason, boys are constantly in the process of negotiating for better, faster phones. This invested interest in the mobile phone also contributed to the fact that boys are more likely to have sole-ownership over a phone.

Girls, on the other hand, are more likely to share phones with family members. Their interest in the mobile phone is predominantly as a communication device and as a place for storing/collecting images.

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## Chapter 5: PlayStation findings

### *Introduction*

This chapter shifts focus to the PlayStation as it is domesticated amongst the Dulston peer group. Just as the mobile phone is marked by its peculiar negotiated mobility amongst these children, the PlayStation is a site marked by a peculiar negotiation of time and space amongst children and adults. Yet, as Livingstone (2007a, p. 17) contends in her discussion of Silverstone's (2006) work, some objects are "bigger on the inside, than they are on the outside", the mobile phone and PlayStation are material *objects* that are peculiar and novel in the time-space relations of the present. Both are objects of consumption that carry markers of gender, race or class. They are also "portals to other worlds that open up the realms of the imaginary, connecting the domestic living room – staggeringly – to the rest of the globe" (Livingstone, 2007a, pp. 17 - 18). Through the concept of "double articulation", Silverstone (1994) integrates both the analysis of "media qua material" (as located in a particular spatio-temporal setting) and the "media qua texts/symbolic messages" (as located in a particular socio-cultural discourse) (Livingstone, 2007a, p. 18). In this chapter I explore how the material and the symbolic of the PlayStation are articulated together.

As a disclaimer, I start this chapter off by giving a narrative account of a typical day at Terry's house during my second period of research. I describe the physical space and provide some insight into our curation of play.

Next, I explore the PlayStation as a physical object and its negotiated meaning in the spatio-temporal setting of Terry's home. I tease out how particular family schedules; gender and generational hierarchies; and a habitus of "respectability" (Schoon, 2011) serve to first, structure the physical spaces and times for play, and second, how these dynamic structures are symbolically meaningful in re-affirming, challenging or changing the socio-cultural discourse of everyday life in this context.

I then turn my focus to the semiotic worlds on the inside of games in relation to these spatio-temporal processes of domestication (Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1992): I discuss how gangster-themed games such as *Grand Theft Auto* become discursively meaningful in the processes of identification in the specific location of Ocean View. Conversely, I relate the semiotic richness of character customization in-game as an extension of every day performances of gendered respectability (Pallitt, 2011).

### ***A typical day***

The advent of my second period of study took place during the March school holidays. I was able to witness active console play during a period of time when the children were able to utilize the space at Terry's home fully. At this time Rudie's father, Malcolm, had full days of work at the Simon's Town naval dockyard and the children had full reign of the lounge – free from schoolwork and extramural sports practice.

During this period the children were playing on Duke's PlayStation 3 – a recent birthday present. Along with the console he had received three games: *Need for Speed Shift*, *Grand Theft Auto IV* and *FIFA 2011*. An ordinary day during the holiday consisted of myself arriving at Terry's house around 10am. Duke, Tommy, Rudie, Kyle and Cale would typically already be busy playing, and the other children would join us throughout the day. Usually I would stay until just before sunset, around 6pm. Our play was interrupted at a few intervals: Rudie's aunt Verna, who lives in the household, would request to watch the local Afrikaans-language soap opera *7de Laan* at a certain time every afternoon. At other times, Malcolm would return home early and have friends over to play darts, evicting the children and myself from the lounge. Nonetheless, most of time was spent holed up in the lounge, crammed around the television.



Figure 7 The setup for gaming at Terry's house

The space was set up with a coffee table in front of the television, able to seat three children

with the couches and other chairs turned towards the screen to offer seating to any peripheral participants. As the PlayStation 3 was so new, the kids were only starting the games that Duke had brought. A.D and myself proffered additional games over this two-week period (such as *Little Big Planet*, *Ratchet Clunk*, *Modracers*, *Paradise Burnout* and *Sega Rally*). The games that were played are highly popular current international titles. For the first week we had to make do with only one controller, limiting play to turn-based multi-player functionality. During this period the children asked me whether I would be able to find them another controller, which they could use for the holiday. I was conflicted, as I did not want to introduce new technologies into the children's environment, but I succumbed to their persuasion after a week when I learned about how many PlayStations the children had used over the last couple of years and that in previous years they had owned multiple controllers.



Figure 8 Typical gaming day at Terry's house

### ***Gaming consoles problematized by finding the time and space to play them***

I was initially surprised that the majority of the Dulston peer group reported gaming on consoles. This relative frequency is unusual in what is considered to be a resource-constrained area (Moses, 2005). During my first wave of research I surmised that such consoles would be relatively scarce (as reflected in AMPS2011 in Walton & Pallitt, 2012), and therefore concentrated most of my attention on mobile phones as gaming consoles. Although recent household surveys show that gaming consoles “are only owned by the highest income groups” (Walton & Pallitt, 2012, p. 253), many children in the group I met

spoke of having access to and use of gaming consoles such as PlayStations, Wii, or Xbox to various degrees. This reflects the relative affluence (in the South African context) of households where one or both parent is formally employed. Other resources available for gaming typically associated with a lower middle-income group (Walton & Donner, 2012) – such as library computers, an Internet café and a local Arcade Games shop – were used less than initially anticipated.

Rudie and Kyle had owned a PlayStation 2 that broke over a year ago. During the time that it was functional Tommy, Cale, Danny, Stokkies, Liam, Ghania and Brenda all report having played on it at one point or another. Ghania describes her memories of this console:

*Ghania: Ons het daarso...wat's daai game nou weer? Met die Tjarra met die snor?  
Daai's die enigste ene wat ek gelike het. Met die skilpaaie...*

*Rudie: Mario*

*Ghania: Ja, daai Mario game. Ek en Brenda sou hier kom speel het.*

*Anja: Wanneer kon julle dit speel?*

*Ghania: maar eintlik net in die vakansies. Andersins is Antie besig met tv shows, of uncle gooi darts met sy vrinne.*

**Ghania: We had...what's that game again? With the Tjarra<sup>24</sup> with the moustache?  
That's the only one I liked, with the turtles...**

**Rudie: Mario**

**Ghania: Yes, that Mario game. Me and Brenda would come and play it here**

**Anja: When were you able to play it?**

**Ghania: Actually just in the holidays. Otherwise the Aunty is busy with tv shows,  
or uncle throws darts with his friends.**

(Transcription of informal interview, 5 April 2012)

Ghania addresses the regulation of time: PlayStation gaming is limited to “just [...] the holidays”. She reveals that the activities of adults take precedent, and that children’s activities are subordinate to such adult mediated regulations. Thus, access to space and time to play with the PlayStation is carefully negotiated between adults and children.

The boys reported that after this PlayStation 2 broke, they were forced to revert back to Duke’s older brother’s dated PlayStation 1. This had been their main source of entertainment over the September and December holiday periods of 2011. After a disc failed to eject and Rudie decided to take the console apart to get it out, this PlayStation stopped working as well. Using Terry’s house as base, the boys would transport the PlayStation from Duke’s home and have it set up over the entire holiday period. Moving it between the two houses for short periods of play would be too much effort. Tommy justifies this by recalling instances when he transported his old second-hand PlayStation 1 to Terry’s house: *“Mens is bang die outjies steel dit, mens stap daar by die bome om, dis drie keer verder, maar dan stap mens nie verby die telefoonhokkies waar die outjies staan nie/ You’re afraid the guys steal it, so you walk past there by the trees, it’s three times further, but*

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<sup>24</sup> “Tjarra” is used in South Africa as a derogatory term for people of Indian descent.

**then you don't walk past the public telephones where the guys stand<sup>25</sup>**". The danger associated with transporting a big, conspicuous object such as a PlayStation with the added responsibility of carrying a bag filled with games appeared to carry too much danger to be a frequent event. These "moves" would typically be chaperoned by an adult, otherwise the children would take great care to ensure the safety of their transit by adopting strategies such as the one described above by Tommy.

Rudie described other limitations ascribed to playing video games during times other than holiday periods:

*Rudie: Dis soos, daars baie dinge wat dit moeilik maak met skool en so. Almal is ernstig by my huis. Ek moet huiswerk doen, en kan nie so baie met vrinne speel nie. Maar met vakansies is my ma altyd soos 'almal kan hier kom' eerder as wat ek uitgaan. Sy is baie cool. Sy laat al my tjommies hierso kom en ons kan dit soos oorvat.*

*Anja: En dan bring julle die PlayStation hierheen vir die hele vakansie?*

*Rudie: Ja, want by Duke se huis, soos sy broer werk nie, dan wil hy heeltyd met sy meisie en sy vriende tv kyk of sy eie games speel, en hulle sal se nou maar drink, soos wyn en so, so dis nie altyd lekker nie, want hulle is ook lastig met ons saam. Hierso is daar meer spasie, en my ma maak vir ons lunch en dit en dit. En almal kan maar kom solank hulle hulleself gedra.*

**Rudie: It's like, there are so many things that make it difficult with school and stuff. Everyone is too serious at my house. I need to do homework, and them I'm not allowed to play with friends. But with holidays my mom is always like "everyone can come here" instead of me going out. She is very cool. She let's my friends come here and then we can take over.**

**Anja: And then you bring the PlayStation here for the whole holiday?**

**Rudie: Yes, cause at Duke's house, like his brother doesn't work, then he wants to watch tv with his girlfriend and friends the whole time, or play his own games, and they'll like drink, like wine and that, so it's not always nice, cause they're also mean to us. Here there is more space, and my mother makes us lunch and that and that. And everyone can come over as long as they behave themselves.**

(Transcription of informal interview, 28 March 2012)

Rudie describes how his home environment is more "serious" during the school term, when he is expected to do homework and has little free time. Terry reinforces this rule as a parental regulation strategy: no video games during term. Video games are considered a zero sum game – play detracts from ability to do schoolwork. During the holidays, however, different rules apply and Rudie's house functions as a safe space for him and his friends: they're allowed to "take over" the space. He also communicates how, although the PlayStation is Duke's, his home is not a conducive space to play because of the hierarchical power of Duke's older brother, whose preferences for the space take precedence. Here, we are seeing tensions that are not represented in the clear-cut public/private formulation of

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<sup>25</sup>Transcription of informal interview, 29 September 2011

*domestication* theory: as Duke is unable to *incorporate* (Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1992) this “appliance” in his own domestic space, he transfers it into another domestic space where he is able to *incorporate* it. The binary of public and private become problematic in this context where the intimate spaces for kids to play might live outside of their “own” domestic spaces. Here Lefebvre’s (1991) notion of the “everyday” as relationship and social practices that shape and reproduce the “production of space” becomes especially useful – spaces are not strictly public or private, but are constantly reproduced and socially contextual.

Conversely, as the necessary infrastructure and resources to participate in gameplay is limited to a certain areas during a certain time, these arrangements differ considerably from those described by researchers who have explored “bedroom culture” (e.g. Livingstone, 2007b), where domestic media (such as the television or gaming console) is conceived as shifting from communal (in the collective space of “living room”) to individualized (to the private space of “bedroom”). Children in Ocean View share bedrooms with multiple family members. In the case of Rudie, he shares his bedroom (and three-quarter bed) with his brother Kyle (18) and his aunt Verna (58). As most of the houses or flats in Ocean View are relatively small, with multiple family members sharing rooms, areas for entertainment are often the same areas that constitute places for study, to lounge, or function as dining room. Although increasingly portable and affordable media allows for increased “individualization” (Livingstone, 2007b, p. 302) of media, children are in perpetual competition and negotiation with family members to use these *spaces* at certain *times* for such individualized purposes. In addition, due to the high percentage of unemployment and thus stay-at-home parents, children are on the “bottom rung” of the power hierarchy. Adults and older siblings have preference as to their “individualized” media uses: such as Duke’s brother having his friends over to play Xbox, Verna’s afternoon soapies or Rudie’s dad playing darts with his friends.

In spatio-temporal ecologies such as this one, the strong binary of public vs. private as conceptualized in domestication theory becomes problematized. Spaces of domesticity are not limited to a holistic “moral economy of the household” (Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1992), but include a wider range of neighbourhood, kin and peer “purpose-spaces” that overlap. Material objects of technology such as the PlayStation that are appropriated, objectified, incorporated in the “Household-as-Dulston-peer-group-space” and from which meanings are converted to a wider society, do not necessarily reflect the same “moral economy” in the “Household-as-family-leisure-space”. These “versions” of the household (amongst others) are dynamic and constantly negotiated.

### ***Keeping kids ‘off the streets’ and ‘out of trouble’ during school holidays***

One such “version” of the household is as a symbolic “safe” and “respectable” (Schoon, 2011) place for children to play during the holiday periods. It is in direct symbolic contrast

to the “dangerous” and “skollie<sup>26</sup>” associations of playing or “rondloop” (Ross, 2010, p. 48) in the streets (Moses, 2005; Salo, 2003). Respectability here functions as a way for members of a society to differentiate themselves from perceptions of ‘lower class-ness’ “as morally suspect and vulgar, and to cancel this class ‘mark’ by adopting a particular disposition of respectability, with associated practices signifying a caring morality and asexual decency” (Skeggs, 1997 in Schoon, 2011, p.32 ). Towards this purpose the PlayStation is incorporated (by children *and* adults) as a means to keep children indoors, “off the streets” and “out of trouble” during the school holidays. The associated meaning of participation in this version of the space (see *Figure 9*), as well as the middle-class associations of video games in general, reflect the respectability of these children to the wider society.

Often children would speak of the dangers of hanging around the “Block” – the local council flats. As the flats were often overcrowded, communal areas were breeding grounds for conflicts between inhabitants and children who had nowhere else to go. As many of the Dulston peer group lived in these flats, they often communicated that they believed engaging in video game play was a way for them to stay out of trouble during the holiday period: Boredom posed the biggest threat to their morality and/or safety. Various entries from my field notes recall this narrative:

*Ghania says her grandmother sent her over to come and play at Rudie’s house. There are some “bad girls” that hang around the council flats where Ghania’s grandfather and mother live in the Southern parts of Ocean View. [...] Ghania contend that these girls smoke cigarettes and “flirt with the boys”. She would much rather play games at Rudie’s house. When I asked her whether she thinks she would do “bad things” as well if she didn’t have the option of going to Rudie’s house, she laughs and admits that she doesn’t know, “maybe”*

(Compiled field notes and transcriptions, 30 March 2012)

Ghania’s grandmother encourages a particular version of femininity, middle-class-ness and associated safety by sending her to Rudie’s house. Here, the sexual impropriety of young girls “flirting” with boys is especially seen as immoral and dangerous (Lindegaard & Hendriksen, 2009, pp. 32 - 33). In opposition to this “rondloper” street girl image, Ghania is urged into a domestic space associated with classic domesticity and femininity. Ghania’s echoes her grandmother’s fears that being around bad influences might make her “bad”, and feels that having the option of coming to Rudie’s house to play games offers her an alternative to this lifestyle. Similarly, Rosie, who had once ‘fallen by the wayside’ in her poor performance at school and her friendship with girls who were known to be cigarette smokers, perceives association with this group of children as being “good”:

*Coming to Rudie’s house is a way of protecting her [Rosie’s] reputation. Her mother feels that she had been mixed up in the wrong crowd the previous year, and Rosie attributes her mother’s confiscation of her phone to her not doing well at school.*

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<sup>26</sup> The word “skollie” is of Afrikaans origin and can refer the behaviour or person of a naughty, dirty or ill-mannered child; a gangster or somebody who deliberately breaks the law; or somebody who is devoid of class and manners.

*She feels that people have been treating her unfairly as she has a reputation of being a “bad girl”, which she believes is unfounded. Hanging out at Rudie’s house she’s aligning herself again with good people.*

(Compiled field notes and transcriptions, 20 March 2012)

Rosie is in the process of redeeming her “bad reputation” and views the activity of playing video games, and being associated with this group, as a viable antidote. Here video games offer a form of conspicuous consumption (Verblen, 1899) whereby children enact a typically middle class leisure activity through expensive consumer goods. As previously mentioned, within this context, play spaces in houses and yards signify a certain affluence – that your parents have enough money to own/rent a house, that your parents work, and/or that your house is not overcrowded. Access to such a space, and it’s associated status, is symbolically performed through engagement in a play activity that is exclusively “in-doors”.

Ghania’s grandmother, Rosie’s mother and Terry are only some of the strong older female figures who strategically protect the children’s reputations by encouraging (or perhaps forcing) them to participate in these “respectable” and “approved” activities. Children’s agency is strongly influenced by a respectability habitus (Schoon, 2011, pp. 32 - 35). Through a strong moral and often religious discourse the older women have designed a spatio-temporal version of the household where a moral economy of socio-cultural respectability is expressed through the domestication of the PlayStation.



Figure 9 Children crowded around the television

## ***Grand theft auto IV and simulations of gangsterism***

Despite the “games-as-good” narrative perpetuated by the parents and children alike, the children barely played “after-school special<sup>27</sup>” games or even games aimed at children. Instead, their selection included the controversial adult title *Grand Theft Auto IV* (rated R18 by the Film and Publications Board of South Africa) – popularly known as GTA. The GTA series recreates Hollywood gangster narratives in extremely popular (and often parodist) game worlds centered on the corrupt activities and depravities of gangsters who attempt to rise through the ranks of the criminal underworld. In the game missions, the player character commonly has to overcome and defeat antagonists who are either members of other “organizations” or have betrayed the “hero” or his “organization”. During this process, the player must steal cars, deal drugs, plunder and kill to achieve his goals. This represented “world” *inside* the material object (Livingstone, 2007a) of the PlayStation offers complex semiotic and discursive interactions and identifications for players. Physical “appliances” such as the PlayStation are doubly articulated in the domestication of both *media qua material* and *media qua text*.

Although adults and guardians such as Terry, Ghania’s grandmother and Rosie’s mother have a strong influence in the domestication of the PlayStation as a symbolic object that denotes respectability for their children, they scarcely monitor the content of the games their children play. During my time with the Dulston peer group, none of the guardians ever watched while we were playing games. As the participants in my study are confronted, on a daily basis, with the harsh realities of gangsterism and crime I wanted to explore the “contextual meanings” (DeVane & Squire, 2008) of *Grand Theft Auto IV*: I was curious as to what meanings this game had for the Dulston kids, and whether they could relate it back to their lived experiences.

Anja: *dink julle gangsters hier in Ocean View is soos dit?*

[...]

Duke: *hulle is dik jitz...soos die mense het ka-chiing!*

Anja: *Die grand theft auto outjies of Ocean View se gangs?*

Kyle: *Na, daai’s nie soos die regte gangsters nie, ek dink van hulle lewe so. Soos die movies. So badass. Maar die kinders hier rook tik en maak babies. Daar is gangs wat lekker ching maak, en in lekker karre ry...soos die high life lewe, maar nie hierso in Ocean View nie.*

Anja: *Dink julle dit lyk cool om “gangster” te wees*

Rosie: *Soos nou se nou maar...Nicki Minaj...sy’s dik gangster. From da hood, en daai. Maar dis ‘n ander ding as om soos nou, te steel, of tik te rook....*

Cale: *Kyk, die kinnars try so te wees...hulle dink dalk wah-wah ek is nou soos so-en-so daai tiepe gangster soos op die movies of soos grand theft auto...ek dink baie mense dink dis hoe daai is. All money en bitches – ai verskoon tog die french – ja, maar die reality is nie daai lewe nie...*

Kyle: *Soos hulle think maybe dis hoe dit sal wees...om in n gang te wees*

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<sup>27</sup> A term that is used to describe content that usually deals with controversial or socially relevant issues, directed at school-age children.

Anja: *Dink jy GTA laat mense gangster wil wees?*  
 Kyle: *Ja, veral die youngsters...die juniors...hulle check daai dan dink hulle as hulle vloek en stoot en mean is sal hulle ook kwaai wees*  
 Duke: *Haai, nah...*  
 Anja: *wat like jy van die game Rudie?*  
 [...]  
 Tommy: *Die karre!*  
 Cale: *Nah, daars die girls...die cars...die shoot-outs...dis maar stuff wat boys like. Die music is ook kwaai.*

**Anja: Do you think the gangsters here in Ocean View are like that?**  
 [...]  
**Duke: They're super fly...like the people have ka-chiing!**  
**Anja: The GTA guys or Ocean View's gangs?**  
**Kyle: Na, those aren't like the real gangsters, I think some of them live like that. Like the movies. But the kids here smoke tik and make babies. There are gangs that make nice ching, and drive in nice cars...like living the high life but not here in Ocean View.**

**Anja: Do you think it looks cool to be "gangster"?**  
**Rosie: Like say now...Nicki Minaj...she's very gangster. From da hood, and that. But is another thing to say now, steal, or to smoke tik...**  
**Cale: Look, the kids try to be like that...they think that wah-wah I'm now like so-and-so that kind of gangster on the movies or like in Grand Theft Auto...I think a lot of people think that's what it's like. All the money and bitches – please excuse the french – yes, but the reality isn't that life...**  
**Kyle: Like maybe they think that's what it's like...to be in a gang**  
**Anja: Do you think GTA makes people want to be gangster?**  
**Kyle: Yeah, especially the youngsters...the juniors...they check that stuff then they think if they swear and push and are mean then they'll also be cool**  
**Duke: Haai, nah...**  
**Anja: what do you like about the game Rudie?**  
 [...]  
**Tommy: The cars!**  
**Cale: Nah, there's the girls...the cars...the shoot-outs...it's stuff that boys like. The music is also cool.**

(Recorded observation and informal interview, 19 April 2012)

During this conversation, I felt that that Cale and Kyle both conveyed that they clearly distinguished how the representations of gangsterism in GTA differed from their own reality, but they still attributed the romanticization of gangsterism to such media representations and indicated that these could influence children negatively through a "third person effect" (Brosius & Engel, 1996). Similarly to the findings present amongst "the athletes" (working class African American youths between the ages of 13 and 15) in DeVane and Squire's investigation of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2008) the older children felt that the characters and the violence were not realistic in any meaningful way to *them*, but similar to "the Gamers" (all-White suburban children between the ages of 16 and 18) they had a strong opinion that younger children would not be not able to distinguish the 'real' from the 'fake': they were more "influenced" as they had "no secure sense of self" (DeVane & Squire, 2008, p. 273). Suggesting that Others (Lacan & Wilden, 1968) are considered more

“malleable by mass media than oneself – the first person” (Brosius & Engel, 1996, p. 142). It is suggested, by Brosius & Engel, that in such recollections of effect on third persons, “respondents' conceptions of self appear to be important” (1996, p. 144).

As both Cale and Kyle have told me about their run-ins with gangs who have tried to convince them to join the ranks, they perceive themselves to be from a different realm of experience to the younger participants or “juniors” as Kyle referred to them: they had experienced first-hand the “realities” of gangsterism. Gunther & Mundy suggest that such cases might be a result of the first person wanting to preserve an image of the self that is as positive as possible (Gunter & Mundy, 1993, p. 65). By painting the younger children<sup>28</sup> and invisible “others” (Lacan & Wilden, 1968) as morally suspect and highly susceptible to gangster glamourisation, they are indicating their own resilience to such “unrealistic” media representations.

Such concerns are in line with discourse that explores global media culture as a means for local cultures to legitimize their practices: Salo (2003, pp. 361 - 363) recalls the strong influence of African-American Gangster rap in Manenberg, where young men would appropriate terms, hand signals, imagery, and activities expressed in these songs to assert their own identities as gangsters. They call one another “niggaz” rather than the Afrikaans “broer” (brother) and rename their turf “East-side”. Using the cultural capital of signifiers from global media, young men sought to assert their own dominance and gain the respect of smaller less powerful gangs. Through this process, they are locating men’s statuses as gangster “at the heart of masculine personhood” (Salo, 2003, p. 362), while at the same time aligning these international symbols of the rap music industry with their own cause, by reconstituting images of gangsterism into something glamorous, so-doing increasing its allure in the community.

On the other hand, Haupt (Haupt, 2008) suggests that the incorporation of marginal subcultures (such as gangsters) and cultural production (such as gangster rap and hip hop) into mainstream media culture has the ability to diffuse (or, as an extreme, delegitimize) the subversive power of the communities or art forms represented. Through re-framing such marginal cultures as normative (and lucrative), global corporate produced commodities such as *Grand Theft Auto* (or “rap artists” such as Nicki Minaj) have the ability to offer audiences (even marginal ones) selective amnesia – a means to erase the societal power struggles behind the cultural production, leaving the viewer with a culture of “the girls...the cars...the shoot-outs...” as Cale aptly condenses it. Cale, Kyle and Rosie suggest similar processes through projecting themselves as aligned with a globalized bubble-gum version of gangster identification, rejecting the local tik-smoking, baby-making alternative as lower-class.

Alternatively, Strelitz (2005) touches on the “symbolic distancing” (Thompson, 1995) of such media representations that can allow children to re-imagine certain aspects of their lives:

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<sup>28</sup> Conversely, the influence of age has been found to be a large contributor to third person effects (Innes and Zeitz, 1988 in Gunter and Mundy, 1993).

transporting them out of the confines of local socio-cultural and racially segregated hierarchies. As *Grand Theft Auto* does not carry the “overt traces of racial south African politics” (Strelitz, 2005, p. 123) it could become a resource for ‘symbolic distancing’: In repositioning gangsters as “*kwaai/cool*”, these kids are re-imagining the marginal status of the community of Ocean View as it is reflected to the outside world: a place of criminality, drug-abuse, unemployment and poverty (Moses, 2005; The Scenic South, 2012). Instead, it proffers a version of gangsterism that is glamorous: with money, fast cars, and beautiful women.

This re-iterates instances in Walton & Pallitt (2012), where they found that *Grand Theft Auto* offered a means for middle class children to construct a social satire of South African life. In this way “commercial games [...] articulate a perhaps unexpected link to political public discourse and can play a powerful role in shaping young people’s relationships with others” (Walton & Pallitt, 2012, p. 361). Here, *Grand Theft Auto*’s gangster theme reproduces already existing perceptions of class distinctions and social hierarchisation.

Although my exploration of *Grand Theft Auto* as a meaningful site is limited (as my time spent with participants was so short) it starts to tease out the tensions in the double articulation of commodities such as the PlayStation. In stark contrast to the matriarchal articulation of the domestication of the PlayStation as a “respectable” pastime, which defers from “gangster” activities, the older members of the Dulston peer group articulate video games depicting gangsters as glamorous protagonists in *Grand Theft Auto* as a “danger” to the so-called youngsters of Ocean View through a process of *Othering* (Lacan & Wilden, 1968).

While the boys were playing *GTA* and *Need For Speed* the girls approached me about perhaps bringing them more “girl-friendly” games. I found titles that I deemed to be age-appropriate (according to industry ratings). These titles were also by large considered to be gender-neutral games for children and all of them included expansive options for customization (Pallitt, 2011). The options for customization in these games revealed identities negotiated through representations of the differential powers of domestic feminine good girls and empowered tough masculine gangsters as explored in this chapter so far.

### ***Gendered identity and representation***

During my hang-outs with the children I perceived prominent separations between the boys and girls during play, which were reminiscent of those discussed by Pallitt (2011). Girls would more often either be peripheral participants, or not contribute to the play at all – opting to socialize separately. Although I came to understand that, because of the limitations posed by the new PlayStation and the game selection being exclusively curated by Duke, these conditions were perhaps not entirely normative in this context. For this reason I decided to introduce more game titles, as mentioned above. Below is an excerpt

from my field notes, indicating the responses from the first day I brought these games to a session:

*All of us girls sit at the table while the boys continue their usual game activities. I show the girls all of the games that I had procured for the day: “Little Big Planet”, “Ratchet Klank”, “Paradise Burnout”, and “Mod Racers”. Immediately the boys drop their game and crowd around the table to check out all the games. The boys are adamant that they want to play Paradise Burnout – another car racing game that is in the same vein as Need For Speed. The girls protest, with Ghania heading the fight. She demands that the girls get a say, as they’ve been sitting around for three days not playing any games because they only had “boy games”, now that there’s some “girl games” the boys should let them play. I offer that perhaps mod racers offers a nice in-between game for everybody, it has customizable characters and cars and it’s also a car racing game without all of the violence and crashes of Need for Speed. Everyone seems to be in agreement. However, after Cale and Kyle comment that it looks “soos ‘n baba game/like a baby game” the boys appear more reluctant.*

(Field notes, 4 April 2012)

The boys’ association of these games as being “baby games” due to their cartoon-like aesthetic and unrealistic renderings, posits their own (relatively) realistic, gritty, and often violent games as masculine. This division between girl-friendly games and boy-friendly games had been hinted at before I introduced these games in an early conversation with Rudie:

*Rudie: ons het g’n meisies goed nie*

*Anja: hoekom sal hulle nie van daardie games hou nie?*

*Rudie: Want Anja sal sien, hulle nie rerig van games nie, as hulle sulke games speel dan is dit meer soos...soos meisie games...Barbie games...of dress up games...*

**Rudie: we don’t have any girl stuff**

**Anja: why won’t they like those games?**

**Rudie: Cause Anja’ll see, they don’t really like these games, if they play these games then it’s more like...like girl games...Barbie games...or dress up games...**

(Informal interview, 23 March 2012)

Rudie draws a strong comparison here between the girls and the stereotypical association with femininity – invoking *Barbie* as a key cultural artifact he feels represents what girls like. The girls themselves re-iterated these performed (Butler, 1988) notions. When I had asked them why they weren’t participating on the console during the first couple of days of the second period of my fieldwork, they responded that they felt the games weren’t “girly” enough. In an attempt to delineate what constituted such girls games, the girls brought forth the following suggestions:

*Ghania: Ek dink meisies speletjies is meer soos aantrek speletjies. Of soos, ek weet nie, goed wat amper... mooier is. Ek hou nie van al hierdie gangster goed nie. Dis bietjie...rof. Dat mens so doodmaak en skiet en crash.*

*Brenda: Ek hou ook van aantrek. Ek dink kar games kan ook fun wees. Maar...ek weet nie, eerder miskien racing. Met cute goed. Ek hou ook nie van al die bloed en skiet nie.*

**Ghania: I think girls' games are more like dress-up games. Or like, I don't know think that are almost...prettier. I don't like all of these gangster things. It's a bit...rough. That people kill and shoot and crash.**

**Brenda: I also like dressing-up. I think car games can also be fun. But...I don't know, maybe rather racing. With cute things. I also don't like all of the blood and shooting.**

(Informal interview, 29 March 2012)

Here the girls strongly align themselves with a notion of femininity characterized by aesthetics ("dressing up", "pretty", "cute"). They strongly assert that they feel the aggression and violence of *Grand Theft Auto* is not representative of their tastes. As I started to suspect that the girls might not have a specific interest in gaming, they asserted that they often participated in video game play:

*Brenda: Ek speel ook by die game shop daar op Saturn Way. Dis soos daai bokse en so, maar ek is nogal goed. Ek hou van daai games, soos Pacman...en...Street Fighter...*

*Anja: Maar dink jy nie Street Fighter is ook 'n boys game nie?*

*Brenda: Ja...seker...maar dis nie so violent nie. Dis meer soos 'n cartoon.*

*Anja: Want dis minder realities?*

*Brenda: Ja, dis...ek weet nie...dis fun. Ek hou van die mannetjies se outfits ook. En mens kan met meisies speel.*

*Anja: Speel jy altyd met die meisie karakters?*

*Brenda: Ja*

*Anja: Hoekom?*

*Brenda: Want hulle lyk mooier.*

**Brenda: I also play at the game shop there on Saturn Way. It's like those boxes and that, but I'm quite good. I like those games, like Pacman...and...Street Fighter**

**Anja: But don't you think Street Fighter is also a boys' game?**

**Brenda: Yeah...probably...but it's not so violent. It's more like a cartoon.**

**Anja: Because it's less realistic?**

**Brenda: Yeah, it's...I don't know...it's fun. I like the little characters' outfits too. And you can play with girls.**

**Anja: Do you always play with the girl characters?**

**Brenda: Yes**

**Anja: Why?**

**Brenda: Because they look prettier.**

(Informal interview, 29 March 2012)

The girls here further align identifiers for girly as pretty, cartoon-like and unrealistic representations as found in stereotypical “pink” games (Carr, 2006), whereas boys’ games in opposition are perceived as being ugly, violent and realistic. However, Diane Carr explores how often children respond in interviews with what they assume they are “supposed to say” (Cassell and Jenkins, 2000, p. 19 in Carr, 2008, p. 171) and give researchers “gender appropriate” responses. She mentions the example of Pelletier (2005) who encountered girls who, when they were interviewed in front of boys would only admit to having played *The Sims*, yet these very same girls would later inadvertently exhibit detailed knowledge of self-defined “boy” games. Perhaps the girls felt the need to exhibit their respectable “girly” identities in front of myself, and in the company of the boys. In such a case, gender is performed (Butler, 1988) by the girls: as culturally constructed through the repetition of stylized acts over time through regulative discourses of what is socially permitted. However, I was unable to generate evidence that clarified whether such gendered “stylizations” were for my own benefit, as a result of the boys’ gaze, or merely gendered pleasures.

I witnessed behaviour that could be classified as gendered performances (Butler, 1988) during conflicts surrounding the customization of characters and cars in a game called *Modnation Racers*. It is a kart-racing game that allows for full customization of vehicles and characters. Players are able to race against each other and are encouraged to collect weapons during these races in order to attack other players. Below follows transcriptions of a conversation the children had while customizing the game:

*Ghania: maar as julle die kar gaan opdoen, dan wil ons die outjie se klere doen*  
*Rudie: Luister hierso, hulle moet saam pas. Mens kan nie ‘n gangster car he nie en dan sulke moffie wat hom ry nie*  
*Rosie: Ha uh! Julle speel alweer die hele ding!*  
*Brenda: Wat maak dit dan nou saak Wally?! Ons kan dit later weer verander*  
*Rudie: Is dit? Kan mens, Anja?*  
*Anja: Ek weet nie, Chetjie sal weet*  
*Cale: Ja, ek’s seker ons kan nou nou weer dit verander*  
*Rudie: laat ons eers ons guy doen*  
*Duke: Julle kan later ‘n pers kar maak*

**Ghania: but if you are going to do the car up, then we want to do the guys’ clothes.**  
**Wally: Listen here, they have to fit together. One can’t have a gangster car and then have some moffie<sup>29</sup> driving it.**  
**Rosie: Ha uh! You guys are playing the whole thing again!**  
**Brenda: What does it matter Rudie!? We can change it again later**  
**Rudie: Is it? Can we, Anja?**  
**Anja: I don’t know, Cale will know**  
**Cale: Yes, I’m sure we can change it again just now**  
**Rudie: Let us do our guy first**  
**Duke: You guys can make a purple car later**

(Recorded Observation, 6 April 2012)

<sup>29</sup>“Moffie” is an often derogatory, occasionally endearing, term for a homosexual person.

Again we see the boys positioning their perception of the girls' potential customization as hegemonically feminine ("purple") as incompatible with their expressions of a masculine "gangster" identity. The boys associate this femininity with stereotypically female colours such as pink and purple and suggest that the girls would inevitably style a "feminine" player for their car – with their repulsion expressed at this entity by their use of a derogatory term for homosexuals – "moffie" which could be translated to "fag" in English. As the boys continue through the customization of their car, their view of an idealized masculine identity becomes more apparent through their choices of paint colours, textures, stickers, accessories and engines:

*A.D: Maak dit gangster!*

*Tommy:Ja, kry daai badass camo verf...of miskien die flaaames*

*Rosie: Ek hou ook van die vlamme  
(while scrolling through the stickers)*

*Rudie: Wat beteken daai ene nou weer? (his selection tool in on a ying-yang)*

*Kyle: Bit of good, bit of evil*

*Rudie: Ek soek heeltemal evil!*

*Duke: hulle het net blomme en shit*

*Brenda:los dan eerder die stickers*

**A.D: Make it gangster!**

**Tommy:Yes, get that bad-ass camo paint...or maybe the flames**

**Rosie: I also like the flames  
(while scrolling through the stickers)**

**Rudie: what does that one mean again? (his selection tool is on a ying-yang)**

**Kyle: Bit of good, bit of evil**

**Rudie: I'm looking for totally evil!**

**Duke: they only have flowers and shit**

**Brenda:Then rather leave the stickers**

(Recorded observation, 6 April 2012)

Once again the invocation of a hyper masculine ideal is called into play. Choice to express this identity is offered through military influenced war-associated camouflage and violent flames, which are both signifiers of destruction and violence. Furthermore, when considering the symbolic use of a ying-yang on the car, Rudie rejects it for not being "evil" enough. The stereotypically feminine symbols of, as Duke refers to it, "flowers and shit" that are included in the sticker pack are rejected and Brenda offers that instead of using any of these inadequate stickers they should "rather leave the stickers". After completing the customization of their car, the children started to create a "matching" character, from my field notes:

*A further hour was then spent customizing their character. The customization is characterized by appearances that the children deem "mean", "ugly", and intimidating "hy moet bangmaak!/He must scare". Ghania makes a comment when Rudie chooses a pair of shoes for his character: "Hy's nie 'n meisie nie, kry vir hom dik*

*skoene/He's not a girl, get thick shoes for him" And later "kry vir hom daai lelike biking gloves/get those ugly biking gloves for him"*

*After the character had been sufficiently "uglified" the boys decide to take their champion onto the racing track. I suggest that the girls have a turn, to which the girls protest. Brenda: "Nee, dan moet onseers 'n meisie speler maak, dan is dit eers 'n lang storie, laat Duke eers speel/No, then we have to design a girl character first, then it will be a long story, let Duke play first"*

(Compiled field notes and recorded observations, 6 April)

Once again attributes of masculinity as scary, mean, ugly, aggressive and tough emerge as the children create a "gangster" identity for their character. When I call for the girls to be the first to race this character on the track, the girls reject my offer. Notably the girls do not see the boys' character as representative of them during play, in order for them to truly participate, as Brenda argues "then we have to design a girl character first". After a few races, the children re-entered the customization station, and it was now time for the girls to customize a character. From my field notes:

*Their choices are influenced by the boys input:*

*"Daai oe met die lashes/Those eyes with the lashes"*

*"daar's 'n pers broek/Those purple pants"*

*"daai hare het 'n bow...wat noem mens daai band ding?/That hair with the bow...what do you call that band thing?" (Alice band)*

*The girls end up with a character that is very much constitutive of the most token "girly" options in each of the sections. At one point Rosie's cycles through option for stickers and suggest that they should put a tattoo on the girls face:*

*Ghania: "Gee vir haar 'n tjappie op haar voorkop!/Give her a tjappie on her forehead<sup>30</sup>"*

*Duke: "Sommer daarso 'n skewe tjappie by haar ooghare!/just there a skew tjappie by her eyebrows"*

*The kids all laugh at the skull and bones "tattooed" over the girls face.*

*But Bettie, who is in charge of the controller, removes the "tjappie" just before they switch to customizing the car.*

(Compiled field notes and recorded observations, 6 April)

In stark contrast to the boys' "gangster" character, the girls' character is stereotypically feminine, signified by markers that include pink and purple clothes, defined eyelashes, and hair with bows and an alice-band in it. Rosie's suggestion of putting a "tjappie" on their girls face is met with derisive laughter. The children play around with this parody of a girl jokingly, but as they finalize the character, the "tjappie" is removed. While customizing the car, the boys take charge in designing a car that matches the girls' stereotypically feminine

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<sup>30</sup> "Tjappie" is slang for tattoo, typically referring to the do-it-yourself tattoos performed in prisons amongst inmates, or used to mark gang members. A "tjappie" on one's face indicates a high-ranking gang member.

character: They paint the interior of the car *purple*, acquiring *purple* mags for the wheels and adding a giant *lollipop* to the back of the car.

In the process of domesticating (Silverstone & Haddon, 1996) the PlayStation into this peer purpose-space, we see how the larger symbolic “inside world” (Livingstone, 2007a) of the PlayStation through games such as *ModRacers* offers a process of socio-cultural objectification (through gendered customization), incorporation (in turns-based participation separated by gender) and conversion of meaning (through the stereotypical performance of strong masculinity as “gangster” and soft pretty femininity as “pink” (Carr, 2006)).

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have discussed particularities that I witnessed during my participants’ interaction with the PlayStation as both physical and symbolic (Livingstone, 2007a) object. Gaming in this context serves to represent a wholesome activity that is narrated as strategy to keep children “out of trouble”, the need to be seen as “good” was especially important to the girls, who ascertained that certain behaviours could affect their reputations, and thereby treatment from the community. As was demonstrated with mobile phones, there are certain limitations that restrict use of these devices that might be invisible in resource abundant environments (Walton & Pallitt, 2012). These include the relative value of consumer commodities such as the PlayStation and digital games as conspicuous (Verblen, 1899); the individualization of media consumption (Livingstone, 2007b) in a place where individualized time-spaces are fiercely negotiated and hierarchically determined; and the socio-cultural physicality of respectable past times.

Furthermore, in this context, gangsterism as thematic content in games such as *Grand Theft Auto*, becomes an aspect that is translatable to out-of game life and should be considered in its contextual meaningfulness (DeVane & Squire, 2008). Here, older children are able to draw comparisons that differentiate “glamorized” gangster life from their own experiences of Ocean View’s gangs. However, they fear that younger children might be influenced by these representations of powerful masculine identities. These power relations were further explored during customization processes in *Modnation Racers*. Activities revealed assumptions about gendered identities that represent power and respectability during customization sessions. Girls would be encouraged to perform stereotypically girly roles, while boys performed masculine roles defined as “gangster” – dressing their character to be mean, rough, and dangerous. The traditional postulate of masculinity as power becomes synonymous with gangsterism as empowering performance. Girls, on the other hand, are expected to remain in the realm of “girly”.

Through the double articulation of domestication processes as both *of* the material object as a site of meaning, as well as the symbolic “world” *within* the object as meaningful, we are starting to tease out the plurality of, often conflicting and opposing, meanings elicited through games ecologies.

# Conclusion

## *Introduction*

In the opening passages of this dissertation, I pronounced that I wanted to *investigate the double articulation of meanings elicited by the material and the symbolic domestication of the mobile phone and PlayStation as technologies for gaming by a group of children from the resource-constrained neighbourhood of Ocean View*, and throughout this dissertation I have started to tease out peculiarities of spatiality, temporality, society, culture, identification, gender, communities, kinship and peer relations as they become meaningful through engagement with games and technologies for games. However, admittedly, that is what I have succeeding in doing: to *start*. The time and word limits of a mini dissertation can only *start* to skim the surface of the immensity and complexity of games and their players in marginal contexts. Yet, it functions in illustrating that we cannot look at such ecologies through a normative, standardized global viewfinder. At the very least, this dissertation suggests a wider view: not only are games and gamers situated, but the physical artifacts that enable gaming become meaningful sites of interest in places where access to them is highly unequal.

Throughout this dissertation I have offered bite-sized discussions pertaining to children, parents, marginality, games, consumerism, technologies for gaming, globalization, spatiality, geography, gangsters, respectability, society, culture and media, to name only a few. The vast network of considerations when approaching the Dulston peer group and their objects of digital play has been dizzying in its multiplicity and entangled nature. I contend, that only through continued research in living rooms, playgrounds, bedrooms, backyards, parks and streets, in this multifarious manner, can we begin to draw comparisons and offer insights into the meanings given to global cultural commodities amongst resource constrained children. In my study of a select group of children in Ocean View, I asked the following questions:

- How are information and communication technologies such as the mobile phone and PlayStation integrated into everyday life?
- What meanings do children and adults give to gaming technologies in this space?
- How do games and technologies for games contribute to the process of identity formation in this social space?

### ***How are information and communication technologies such as the mobile phone and PlayStation integrated into everyday life?***

Amongst the Dulston peer group the right kind of mobile phone is an exotic object that is only available to an elite group of children. The kids who had access to such phones mostly live in more affluent parts of Ocean View. Conversely, children gravitate around those who live in their immediate area and are of similar class-status. This is further strengthened by their limited mobility in an area that is perceived as dangerous due to the pervasive presence of gangsters.

Although mobility of the mobile phone is a constant struggle, the children are increasingly traversing the streets with their mobile phones, indicating a shifting independence. Yet, sometimes these behaviours have devastating consequences such as muggings. There are a number of spatial tactics for overcoming the risks of attacks: girls are not allowed to walk alone and are often chaperoned by adults (also in an attempt to preserve their “respectability” (Schoon, 2011, pp. 32 - 35) and boys walk in large groups with peers. Girls are more likely to share phones with their parents or siblings, and are often given the phone as means of protection or surveillance when they leave the house. Their phones are not configured for digital gaming in the global sense: they use the storage space for images and messages (supporting findings from Walton & Pallitt, 2012). Typical of gendered discourse surrounding technology and games (Carr, 2006), the boys are significantly more interesting in “upgrading” their phones to have the best phone for gaming. They rely on a network of parents, grandparents, parent’s employers, siblings and extended family members to “swop” for better phones.

Mobile gaming in this context, is by large a solitary pastime. As phones are not configured for multi-player option and mobile phone mobility is risky, interaction is limited to sharing testimonies of, and suggestions for, gaming. However, both the boys and the girls describe Bluetooth “swopping” games (as supporting by findings in Walton & Pallitt, 2012). They engage with this form of play during “safe times” such as church or soccer practice. Such practices support the call for a wider view of what constitutes digital gaming as proposed in Walton & Pallitt (2012). Obtaining content to swop is a process of careful negotiation that includes chores in exchange for airtime, or being gifted a download from someone else’s phone. Although it appeared that children valued the social aspects of these activities, the introduction of Bluetooth technology for multi-player functionality revealed a preference for global game titles that carried more cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Engagement with global popular cultural narratives was especially witnessed with the introduction of the PlayStation console. Similar to the mobile phone, the physical PlayStation was subject to careful negotiation of spatial and temporal regulations between children, older siblings and adults. The transfer of the physical object between houses called for numerous safety strategies, marking it as conspicuous (Verblen, 1899) and exotic in this

context. PlayStation activities were mostly limited to designated holiday periods. Problematizing scholarship emanating from the North, predicting an increase in the “individualization” of media (Livingstone, 2007b), the Dulston kids often struggled to negotiate the time and space in overcrowded, hierarchical households where engaging in their individualized media tastes were on the bottom rung of household ecologies.

The integration of the PlayStation and mobile phone into everyday life is often times difficult and the physical object itself is exotic. In contrast to global gaming discourse that looks at in-game processes (eg. Gee J. , 2007; McGonigal, 2011; Prensky, 2005; Anderson & Bushman, 2001) and increasingly situating these socially (e.g. Ito, et al., 2009; Järvinen, 2007; Nardi & Harris, 2006) or in a greater ecology (e.g. Salen, 2008), we are dealing with a context where such processes are secondary to the hardships of negotiating time, space and mobility for facilitating play (as first explored in e.g. Kolko & Putnam, 2008; Walton & Pallitt, 2012). The physical objects for play are in themselves conspicuous and are difficult to integrate into the spatio-temporal context where collaborative play is possible.

### ***What meanings do these technologies acquire in this space?***

In a continuation of the previous section, the “right kind” of phone problematizes discourse that speaks of “the mobile phone” as a singular entity (e.g. Aker & Mbiti, 2010; Facer, Joiner, Stanton, Reid, & Kirk, 2004; Fiorito, 2011). Here, the mobile phones obtain a varied index of meanings, and cultural capital, in relation to its ability to perform desired functions. These functions are also connected to perceived wealth, and the ability of the user to have their finger of the pulse of global popular culture. Conversely, phones that don’t have these features can denote the opposite effect – of shame and self-denial (e.g. Walton & Pallitt, 2012). It becomes a marker of class and access, linked to a child’s perceived “coolness.”

For boys in my group their phones represents access to global game titles, and for the girls, it functions as a family photo album and means to communicate. Yet, both boys and girls use their phones as “sticker books” of popular culture images, indicating their tastes. These form a culture economy (Bourdieu, 1986), whereby children exchange images via Bluetooth as a cheap alternative to expensive consumer commodities of popular international brands such as *Hannah Montana*, *High School Musical*, *Ferrari*, and *Manchester United*. For the boys walking with their phones in public spaces could denote “bravery”, indicating a desired masculinity (As supported by e.g. Schoon, 2012). Whereas for girls, the phone offers perceived safety, as their parents can “check up” on them.

The PlayStation offers a similar meaning of “technological babysitter” in the sense that it is perceived by parents as a means to “keep children off the streets” and reflects their engagement with middle-class practices that are seen as “respectable”. This disposition or “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1977) is reflected in the children’s own narrative accounts. For girls, this is strongly tied to the negative associations of “rondloop” vs. the positive associations of being in a domestic space.

## ***How do games and technologies for games contribute to the process of identification in this social space?***

The right kind of mobile phone offers children a way to differentiate themselves from the “have-nots” and resultantly a means to perceive themselves as “above” the rest of Ocean View. This perception is strengthened by their engagement with the PlayStation as an expensive upper middle class pastime, and functions to signify children’s relative wealth and their access to a spacious non-overcrowded home.

The strong distinction between “boy” games and “girl” games (Carr, 2006) fortifies strong gender performances (Butler, 1988) amongst these children through customization features. Where girls perform a stereotypically “pink” identity, and boys enact a mainstream media representation of “gangster”. The “gangster” discourse in global game titles such as *Grand Theft Auto IV* becomes an anomalous site of global texts vs. local meanings. Although my findings are inconclusive, I start uncovering the complex renderings of local gangster narratives as they are positioned in relation to, and expressed through, engagement with *Grand Theft Auto* (in comparison with eg. DeVane & Squire, 2008). These early findings hint that games might offer a means of “symbolic distancing” (Strelitz, 2005) or “diffuse” the subversive power of local gang subcultures (Haupt, 2008).

## ***Conclusion***

All of the abovementioned amalgamates into the central research question: ***What does the gaming ecology of a select group of children in Ocean View look like?***

In short: very different to many of the gaming ecologies that have been studied in the global North. Although this study is very limited in scope, it serves to illustrate the complexity of gaming ecologies and participation in marginal contexts. We cannot look at aspects of gaming in isolation, but need a double articulation of both the material and symbolic to start teasing out the nuanced nature of play.

In Ocean View, the gaming ecology amongst a select group of children serves to underpin the unequal access to consumer commodities necessary for playing digital games. Gaming technologies can, at once, demonstrate superior status or respectability, whilst marking the user as a potential victim for crime – signaling dangerous conspicuous consumption. Whereas the “inside” world of games, that connect the local to the global, can offer potential escapism or serve to re-affirm gendered hierarchies, whilst challenging or “othering” (Lacan & Wilden, 1968) local gangster narratives. My research suggests that all of these aspects are significant and argues for a more expansive view of gaming ecologies that necessitates a heterogeneous approach to research.

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