“It is so like disco” – dancing on the iTiles

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Abstract

By presenting a play situation where two girls are dancing to pop music on the digital iTiles, this paper firstly aims to outline some of the changes in play practice among children. Secondly it emphasizes that play is no longer only directly handed down from generation, but is also established in specific situations through the uses of technology, contemporary culture and media. As a conclusion, it seems that the play culture and cultural practice of children is not homogenous, but instead a dynamic practice which is shifting its character constantly through the players’ practice.

Introduction

In recent years, children’s play and play culture has changed and it is possible to understand children’s use of media and play equipment in that light. The characteristics are that younger children and youth’s social lives interact less with children of other age groups and because of that, it seems that the sharing of play inspiration, play expressions and way to organize undergo changes in these years.

At Centre for Playware (University of Southern Denmark) we have been working with different products all referred to as 'Playware' in order to provide answers to the changing conditions of children’s play. Playware combines modern technology and knowledge about play culture and aims to produce playful experiences for players.

The specific Playware - called the iTiles - which will be exemplified in this article contains of an arbitrary number of digital tiles in the size of 18*18 cm. In each tile, there is an in-built computer and a light diode in different sizes. The tiles can be connected and built into a large or a small play area. There has been a number of games developed for the tiles, for example ‘Color Race’, which consists of each participant choosing a random color, and when the play begins, each of the tiles will glow alternately with different colors for a short period. The aim for the participants is to hit the tiles the moment your chosen color is glowing. After a sudden period of time the system is counting, the participants’ colors showing the color that has been hit the most [9]. Another game developed for the tiles is ‘Stop dance”; the well known party game in which the players are dancing until the music stops, and then have to stand still. The first one to move must leave the game, which continues until there is only one player left.

In the following, we will present a play situation on the iTiles as an example of both the change in children’s play culture but also the new possibilities provided by both technology itself and the uses of technology by children. Based on the example, we will outline and discuss the changing conditions of children’s play as well as the ways in which children navigate and operate under these conditions. We will be emphasizing children’s active participation and reproduction of play culture. The main point in the paper is that children still play, changes or not, but that play is no longer directly handed down through generations of children, but is established in specific situations via participants’ uses of technology, contemporary culture and media.

Disco on the iTiles

“Everybody, yeah, yeah…”. Backstreet Boys are singing while two girls – Julia, the girl with the cap, closest to the camera, and Sarah, the girl further from the camera - are dancing repeatedly. Julia says to Sara “It’s so like disco”, then they dance on. Julia is taking the lead; Sarah is trying to follow her moves. In this particular case, the music origins from a CD player, which is placed in the back of the room, and is as such not directly related to the game on the tiles. The tiles, on the other hand, function as a stage with music and moving lights, and as such it frames the two girls’ improvisations on the theme: disco. The game in itself – Color Race - does not refer to any specific musical genre. Yet, in combination with the lights, the shapes and placement of the tiles (looking like a dance floor in the 1970’s) and as mentioned above, the girl’s previous knowledge of a particular musical genre and the symbols related to it; the tiles, the music and the game forms the basis of a quite different form of play than originally intended.
Girl’s dancing practices refer to a long tradition of dancing and performing. Expressions have changed over times, new genres have arrived and old ones have been forgotten. Dancing to popular tunes while performing specific moves might be taking over as school girls’ preferred activity, leaving traditional clapping games out in the cold. This is an example of the dynamic character of culture, and the fact that culture only exists to the extent to which it is practiced.

The changing face of childhood

Seen from the perspective of play and play culture, the most important change is that large groups of children of all ages, which fifty years ago we would see playing in streets or villages, no longer play the same role in children’s lives. In many places in the western world, large groups of children are almost impossible to find on the street or at play grounds, outside the contexts of institutions or adult organized settings.

In addition, families tend to consist of fewer children, which mean that children grow up with fewer siblings with whom to share their everyday lives. In connection, many women today are working outside the home, which means that the number of children staying at home during the day has fallen drastically. The institutions, in which children are now spending ever more of their daytime, tend to organize children into groups according to age. It is worth noting that pedagogical theories have had an effect on the dissolution of the groups of age-differentiated children, and in schools, children are put into grades according to their age because this approach is considered most conducive to learning. Sports clubs operate with a similar age-group policy.

All together this means that children spend more time with their own age group and less time with children of different ages, and this has a big impact on the play culture. [4, 5, 6, and 12]. Also, adult-organized activities like music classes, sport lessons and so on are growing. It fits very well with parents who do not want their children without supervision, particular in large towns and cities, and therefore they are not let out on the street on their own with their playmates [2]. As Cunningham underlines: “Telling parents that they are being overprotective and that the roads are becoming safer for their children is, in this context, like telling them that they can let their children play with matches again because deaths from fire have been falling” [1].

As a consequence it means that children are shifting “play domain”, so to say, from time to time, and playing outside becomes an adult arranged and controlled affair as opposed to a spontaneous one, an activity performed by a small group of good friends of a similar age, background and school [8].

There seem to be a lot of reasons why children are spending more time with children and less time accompanied with older children, but in any case it seems to constitute a radical break with historical norms. In human history older children have had a central role in younger children’s lives, and large groups of children have been significant for younger children to reproduce and produce the culture in which they are growing up [3].

What is play?

The changes in childhood – demographically and socially – have a large impact on children’s play. In order to get closer to the impact, we need to clear out our understanding of play. Emphasizing the following three dimensions primarily mean that we understand play as a cultural phenomenon [10, 12] and in reference to the specific example outlined in this paper these seem essential to the definition of play: 1. While the ability to play may be rooted in the human genes, the games we play are certainly not. You need to have insight into the shared culture of techniques and knowledge of play, called the cultural heritage of play, to participate in play with others. As Mouritsen says: “For play to be initiated, the children must already have a preparedness acquired from tradition in the form of skills; a know-how which forms an available store of expressions, genres, aesthetic and organizational techniques” [12]. Play has its values in itself and not outside itself. According to Jessen/Lund, play is “a separate life sphere, which existence cannot and shall not be legitimized with outer purposes” and “a self-sustaining phenomenon which carries its purpose in itself” [10]. This means that play is a voluntary practice – one cannot be forced to play. 3. Play is a social practice, and it is learned, primarily through imitation of other players. Through interaction with its parents the infant child is taught how to play, and from a young age, children learn from other children, as they participate in different communities of play [9, 12, 15].

In order to play, children must know and be conscious of the cultural heritage, which contains a way to organize during the play, the aesthetics and the techniques of playing, all of which are handed down from one generation to the next. Because older children are no longer present in the surroundings of younger children to the same extent as earlier, the traditional “cultural leaders”, i.e. the “masters of play”, who have spent years refining and developing their play capabilities, are more or less gone. They have taken with them much of the inspiration for play, as well as important knowledge about how to organize a game. In that sense we can say that the cultural heritage has been weakened, and this is why it is much less usual for us to find children playing the same games as we played, when we were young.
However, this does not mean that children have stopped playing altogether, or that play culture is no longer passed on from generation to generation. Rather, children are now simply seeking inspiration elsewhere, especially technology, media and medialized toys.

Play with and within contemporary culture

Children’s culture – including play culture – is incorporated in contemporary culture. As such, cultural products produced for and used by children, are woven into material, audiovisual and virtual media and culture, mirroring and reflecting a range of cultural expressions. When Julia and Sarah are referring to ‘disco’, they are drawing on their knowledge of the characteristics of a specific musical genre and putting this knowledge into play with the virtual and material reality of the tiles they are dancing on. And by naming the specific genre of reference – disco – they are demonstration not only knowledge but also their ability to reflect upon their own practice. By making this reflection, the situation is framed as play, as something different from ‘regular life’.

Much of children’s – and adults’ – knowledge of genre is generated through media texts [5,6]. Knowledge of the specific disco-genre might be generated through film, television or magazines. Both older (such as the movie ‘Saturday Night Fever’ or the pop band ‘Abba’) and contemporary (such as Madonna’s use of a 70’s Abba tune) media texts might contribute to this passing on of cultural knowledge. This means that it is impossible to deduce the origins of the knowledge of the two girls, which might be understood as a visual culture of mutual references and intertextuality. Swedish cultural researcher André Jansson [3] has defined visual culture as such: “In an ever more complex environment of information specific messages and their social impact have become almost impossible to distinguish. ‘Senders’ and ‘receivers’ seem anything but obvious analytical categories. People produce, consume and are surrounded by information in principle anywhere, in both private and public environments with similar confidence as when they eat, breathe and sleep. Texts melt together, are recreated and flow like clouds of steam into a never ending symbolic universum”.

Also Swedish children’s researcher Anna Sparmann [14] states that children’s media culture must be understood as a complicated circuit, in which it does not make sense to distinguish between original and copy and in which media products are incorporated in a transmedial chain of intertextuality. Through children’s relations with things and texts, this chain is prolonged, since they are woven into children’s and adults interpretive reproduction in communities of practice. These circuits or networks, by Sparmann defined as ‘transmedial intertextuality’,must be seen as dynamic processes. Sparmann writes: “transmedial has to do with the movement. This means how the picture transforms from being inwoven in one medium to appearing in another: from being part of a computer game to becoming a symbol on a sweatshirt, a pen, a back pack, TV or collectors pictures. This movement not only means the building of a network between products, but also that all media refer to and quote each other.” [14:135] (our translation). When discussing these transmedial circuits in relation to children’s play culture it is important to underline the active interpretation and reflection by the children, not to mention the interplay between children. In doing that a new approach to play and the handing over of play between children appears, emphasizing more dynamic flows of cultural practice than the traditional handing down through generations.

Imitation of play culture

When playing on the iTiles, Sarah imitates Julia. She is busy keeping an eye with the series of dance movements and her face focuses on the body of the big girl, Julia. The movements of Sarah are a bit behind compared with Julia and the movements are stiffer. She does not know the dancing movements totally, and it is necessary for her to be guided by the bigger girl, Julia. Not even when Julia says “this is so like disco” and looks at the lights in the tiles, Sarah moves her eye from the movements and expressions of Julia. Sarah achieves her knowledge about how to dance by imitating Julia. On one hand it means that her participation in the dance is important in order to get access to the community of dancers, which Julia represents, on the other hand the imitation of practice also becomes crucial to the future dancing.

The question about imitation as access to and participation in the community of dancing and playing can be understood in the light of Jean Lave & Etienne Wenger, who developed the concept legitimate peripheral participation, which ”concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice” [9]. It lays in the concept of legitimate peripheral participation that it is all about how beginners become competent dancers, but also how they reproduce the community of dancers. The idea is that the players move from a peripheral position in the community and the peripheral position in a way is the access to the community. Sarah plays a peripheral role in the community of dancers since she imitates Julia and does not have a personal way of expressing herself in the dance - yet. The stiffness of her movements indicates that she has a way to go. She does not come up with new ideas for the expressions of the movements, just as the decision of stopping the dance is not hers to make.

Julia on the contrary does the dancing practice, but she does a bit more. Notice her slimmer movements, her singing along with the music and her reference to disco music. This also indicates that imitation on one hand is access to dancing practice but on the other hand, it also
consists of the possibility of developing the practice itself. Therefore, it is possible to say that imitation is both the access to the participation and the possibility of developing the dancing practice.

The participation as peripheral can give rise to full participation when she has practiced her dancing skills through participation, and if some other children are going to be introduced to the community of practice, she will be able to act as an introducer to them. Imitation is a reproduction of the dancing community and the community only consists to the extent that it is being reproduced. The tiles support the imitation through its construction. Firstly, it supports the imitation, through the light, because they hold on to the memory of what to do in the series of dance movements. If we imagine the older girl, Julia, walking away from the dance situation and the younger girl Sarah trying to repeat the dancing practice, she just has been doing, the lights will help her remember what to do. The same goes for the music. Both the music and the lights become a kind of materialized memory for Sarah in order to remember what to do. It means that the construction supports players on their way from being beginners to becoming masters of play.

Conclusion

Children’s play culture has undergone major changes during the last 40 or 50 years. Through processes of industrialization and especially because of women’s increased work rate in the Western World, children’s everyday lives have become more fragmented. Children of different age groups spend less time together and hence the handing down of play culture through generations of children has changed. Nowadays children might inspire and imitate each other, but inspirations and knowledge of play and play genres might as well come from media, toys and technology.

Children of the new millennium are drawing on their knowledge of the characteristics of a specific genre – like dancing - and they are putting this knowledge into play with the virtual and material reality they live in. In the particular case described in this paper, the iTiles provide specific materialities and even a specific gameplay, still the girls dancing use these at their own purposes. Instead of sticking to the rules outlined by the game, they use the game and the tiles as a starting point for their own play and performance, whereby the inspiration/imitation process between the two girls is enabled.

The dynamics of their play exist in the interplay between different movements; their knowledge of contemporary culture/musical genre and ‘the stage’/the materiality of the tiles. This means that play culture becomes more heterogenous, since the repertoire and play genres is wider and more changing than it ever was. Still, new relations and communities of practice are occurring, not based on geographical communities, but more likely on communities of specific practices and interests, and divided by parameters such as age. Furthermore, the girls’ performance can be seen as an updated, present version of folkloristic genres like dancing and hand-clapping. As such, children’s play of today must be understood in the light of a more and more complex and dynamic context of both culture, media and technology.

References


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