Questioning video game use: an exploration of the spatial and gender aspects of children's leisure

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Sara Ann McNamee, B.A. (Hons) University of Humberside

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Abstract

This thesis explores the gendered and spatial aspects of children's leisure through an examination of the ownership and use of computer and video games. The study used a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods involving a questionnaire survey delivered to 1,600 children and young people aged between 8 and 18, and in-depth interviews with children aged from 5 to 16. Interviews with nine parents were also carried out.

The thesis is situated within the new paradigm of the social study of childhood in that the child is taken as a competent social actor. The thesis argues that moral panics over children's leisure, more specifically around the child's use of computer and video games, are misplaced. The children's own opinions and readings of computer and video games are discussed, and the thesis shows the ways in which children are able to make sense of these games and incorporate their use into their everyday social lives in respect of friendship, family and sibling relations.

Central to the thesis are the concepts of space and gender, and the ways in which these interact and can reveal the operation of power and control in children's everyday lives. These are aspects of children's leisure overlooked in previous work on video game play and to some extent also within the new paradigm.

Chapter One sets the parameters for the following argument and includes a discussion of the moral panics around childhood generally and video games in particular. The chapter traces the development of the social study of

childhood. Here it is argued that children are increasingly subject to control, by parents and by society, in all aspects of their everyday lives, the contention being that looking at children's leisure enables us to see the issues of power and control in performance.

Chapter Two argues that what has been missing from the social study of childhood is an examination of the social contexts of children's leisure. Here it is argued that separating 'play' and 'leisure' reinforces the distinction between child and adult. Some of the literature around children's use of computer and video games is discussed, which largely ignores gender and power relations around the leisure use of these items.

Chapter Three explains the rationale behind the methods used in this study. A discussion of children as questionnaire respondents is also included.

Chapter Four shows the wide variety of leisure activities which are important to children and young people. It begins to explode the myth that children who play with computer and video games do this to the exclusion of any other activity. We also begin to see how an exploration of children's leisure can reveal spatial and gendered differences in preferred leisure activities.

Chapter Five examines more closely children's ownership and use of computer and video games. By taking the children's own accounts of what it is that they like about these games, we are able to see that panics around children as passive recipients of the negative messages found in computer games is misplaced. We also see that there are gender differences in the kinds of games which girls and boys like. It is argued that one important factor in the popularity of these games is, for boys, that they are used as a tool in friendship and peer relations, and this argument is useful in countering fears of social isolation in children who play video games.

Chapter Six examines the use of domestic space as a leisure site for children and explores the implications of this for issues of power and control. Using data from interviews with parents, it is argued that there is a tension between the child's use of video games for amusement and parents' hopes that they will be used for education. This chapter introduces a hitherto unexplored reason for gender differences in video game play - that girls use of these leisure items is controlled by their brothers.

Chapter Seven argues that one of the attractions of video games is, for boys, that hey provide a means of escape from everyday life while girls find their escape through other leisure activities. Drawing on the work of several writers who have visualised 'other spaces', this chapter shows the ways in which the space of the imagination may be the one escape that children have from the boundaries around everyday life.

Chapter Eight draws themes discussed throughout the thesis together. The stated aims are examined in order to see how far these have been answered. This chapter also includes recommendations for further research where appropriate.

Chapter 1: The temporal, spatial and gendered boundaries around childhood

'Ban kids from this sickness'
(cited in PC Format, 4/94:16)

'Video games hook 1 in 5 teenagers'
(The Guardian, 15/12/93)

'Killing for Kicks'
(PC Format, June 1993:20-25)

This thesis is an exploration of the spatial and gendered boundaries of childhood which become visible through an examination of children's and young people's ownership and use of computer and video games. The headlines reproduced here convey well current concerns over children's use of these particular leisure items. The issues behind the headlines are, as I will show, those which the academic literature focuses around (see Chapter 2). The effect of such academic and popular reporting of children's leisure is to mobilise a particular moral panic which is based on both the leisure activities of 'the child' and, implicitly, on the conceptions of what childhood is, or perhaps should be. This type of reporting of the 'effects' of video game use was, as I go on to discuss in Chapter 3, one of the issues which prompted and which has sustained my interest in this subject.

The first headline quoted above appeared in the Sheffield Star newspaper and was cited in an article in a video game player's magazine. It refers to children's use of violent video games and succinctly highlights common sense fears of the effects of electronic media on children. The other headlines provide a sample of the kind of media reporting of children's use of computer and video games which has become commonplace[1]. The following transcript

written by one of the children who took part in this study provides, in comparison, a very different view.

> *computer games are a part of every kids life, they cannot be ignored. If games are over-violent they are censored, like videos. I can't see why parents are so wary about computer games, its simply entertainment and it can improve reflexes and hand-eye co-ordination. TV was all the rage when parents were young, and I'm sure TV is more influential than computers. There is a lot more violence on TV. AND computers CANNOT give kids epilepsy, it only triggers seizures, but so does discos and any other flashing lights.*
> *Back to the point about violence, do you see kids beat up others with killer combos, after playing streetfighter? Did Fred West own a gameboy? I think not. If parents restrict their children from video games, they are also boring them to death. Computer games can release stress, which is common in teenagers. Some parents only stop kids playing games because they don't like new technology!*
> *Cheers for listening.*
> *(14 year old boy, rural school)*

It is little wonder that the boy who wrote this thanks me for listening for, as this thesis discusses, children's views are infrequently sought on this or any other subject. This reflects the way in which both childhood and individual children are perceived as being unable to make sense of the world without adult interpretation (Postman, 1983).

This thesis examines issues around the ownership and use of computer and video game machines among children and young people aged between 5 and 18. In this thesis I want to argue that the conception of childhood implicit in arguments such as those of Postman cited above (*ibid*) and which is also implicit in media reporting of concerns around computer and video games represents one particular construction of childhood. This construction can be countered by working within a paradigm which takes the child as a competent social actor (James and Prout 1997; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998. See my later discussion, this chapter and throughout). Listening to children's own accounts of playing video games, as this thesis shows, reveals that moral panics which focus around children's leisure activities, as identified in the

newspaper headings reproduced above and apparent in many academic and popular discussions on childhood and video games, are misplaced.

Moral panics and moral discourse

Stan Cohen's work on deviancy and his groundbreaking work on Mods and Rockers in 1970s England demonstrated that the media focus on the conflict between the two groups, and the public reaction which it generated, were out of proportion to the actual events. He showed the ways in which:

> ' ... the media latched onto the labels 'mods' and 'rockers', emphasised a particular image of such groups as violent and unruly, and bolstered the position of those advocating more control. The core of his argument is that the media do not simply reflect social reality, but are able to *define* it in a particular way. Thus in times of rapid social change when traditional values are shaken up and disturbed, the ensuing public disquiet is resolved by the media by identifying certain social groups as scapegoats or folk devils ...' (Muncie and Fitzgerald, 1981:422)

Moral panics, then, are said to be used in order firstly to divert attention from crises in the state, and secondly to legitimate stricter developments in law and order to contain unruly groups - notably working class or black youth (Muncie and Fitzgerald, 1981). More recently, McRobbie and Thornton (1995) have argued that in the present social climate, the context of the moral panic has changed. They contend that:

> 'Moral panics, once the unintended outcome of journalistic practice, seem to have become a goal ... moral panics have become the way in which daily events are brought to the attention of the public' (1995:560).

The moral panic has become diluted into a generalised, and frequently used, journalistic device. This allows for a wider scope of activities to be focused on as deviant and worthy of concern.

Children and young people are particularly likely to be the focus of moral, or other, panics on a variety of topics (for example, child sexual abuse, children's safety, teenage pregnancy, drug use and so on). Donzelot (1980), for example,

links such panics to notions of the family: more than merely becoming the focus of moral panics, children and young people become the 'meeting place of the political contract and the psychological complex' (Jenks, 1996:80). This was accomplished through what Donzelot calls the 'tutelary complex' - welfare through advice. The rise of the social, then, enabled firstly the political construction of the family as a vehicle for the preservation **and control** of the subjects and future capital of the state (men and children), and provided a need for institutions and specialised staff to deal with problems of the family.

Foucault's idea of *bio-politics* follows this argument and shows how social policy:

> ' ... plays a co-ordinating role in forming 'the social'. It promotes and organises knowledge, norms and social practices to regulate the quality of life of the population - its health, security and stability ... (and) ... **to shape the social to accord with the tasks and extingencies faced by the state'** (Hewitt, 1991:225, my emphasis).

The object of bio-politics is the disciplined body, normalised through what Foucault calls the *carceral archipelago*, which, like the tutelary complex and the Panopticon, are representations of normalisation practices (for example: the school time-table, clinical examinations, hygienist methods, etc.). Through such practices, the Government is able to intervene in the lives of the population, both publicly and privately (Hewitt, 1991:232; see also James, 1993:42 and James and Prout, 1990:56). In this way the social lives of children are shaped and policed according to the particular tasks which the state (and the child's primary government - the parent) demands (see Chapter 8). With regard to moral panics around video games, as I go on to argue below, the policing of this form of children's leisure is a new area, and one which focuses around areas such as health, addiction and sociality.

Much of the policing of young people's leisure, both historical and contemporary, can be seen to be grounded in concerns about the potential for

'unruliness' if young people are to be left to their own devices. Clarke and Critcher (1985) for example, take a historical perspective on leisure in order to illuminate their point that work and leisure are historical creations, and not simply given. They argue that in capitalist society, leisure has been used as a form of social control:

> '[leisure] did not develop in any simple linear fashion, as an aspect of industrialised progress. It was enforced from above as a form of social control ... Its rationale was in the end, despite religious and moral camouflage, that of the economic system. It concerned, most simply, the taming of the workforce' (1985:58-9).

This argument is discussed in relation to the ways in which some activities were encouraged (such as libraries, certain forms of sport) while others were discouraged and policed (for example; working class animal sports such as cock-fighting) The policing of leisure, they contend, is necessary because there is a danger inherent in leisure for the state/capitalist class. If leisure is not 'spent' wisely, then control (by the state/capitalist class) is endangered. There exists, they suggest, a 'protestant leisure ethic'. This can be most clearly seen in the need to police youth in their leisure (but see my later argument, this chapter). In conditions of mass unemployment, youths on the streets pose problems for authority; they must be controlled against the threat to private property:

> 'Young people, especially the male, the working class, the black, required immediate supervision by the police on the streets, by job instructors in training centres, by parents in homes. In the absence of work, the discipline it would normally be expected to inculcate had to assume other forms. The youth leisure problem has here become subsumed under this massive effort of social control' (Clarke and Critcher, 1985:158).

With regard to current concerns around computer and video games, and indeed many forms of contemporary children's culture, there are a number of quite specific panics which have arisen. The most notable centred on the video film 'Childs Play', which was said to have led directly to the murder of a two year old boy. The ten year old boys convicted of killing the child were

reported to have watched the video and later to have acted it out in the slaying of Jamie Bulger (see James and Jenks, 1996, Valentine, 1996). The assumption appears to be that children are undiscriminating dupes in regard to popular culture - that somehow what is seen on a screen is immediately 'injected' into the child producing copycat behaviour[2] which 'others' and demonizes (this is, of course, only a concern when the behaviour copied is anti-social. If it was pro-social, there would of course be no need to panic). Through such means, it becomes easier to impose control: these 'others' are not seen as children. Valentine states that the portrayal of the killers of Jamie Bulger was not as children but as evil monsters, and the media claimed that childhood itself had been killed by their actions (see also James and Jenks, 1996). Such moral panics around children:

> ' ... appear therefore to be mobilising a popular consensus that
> children ... are uncontrollable and are a threat to adult hegemony
> in everyday spaces ... it is a consensus which is being used to
> justify further attempts to police the crisis of childhood by
> restricting young people's access to, and freedoms in, so-called
> 'public space' (Valentine, 1996:593).

Currently, this is to be taken to its extreme in the first law and order bill of the new Labour Government. The most often cited measure contained in this bill, and which has been given a wide platform, is the curfew which will be imposed on children under 10[3]. The message is that children are dangerous, to themselves, each other and to adults, and that they should be contained within the family and not allowed on the streets. Similarly, in the USA, children are now being tried as adults in courts of law and confined in adult prisons as a response to adult fears about childhood violence[4].

More directly of importance for the present study are several fears within the popular consciousness which the media have at various times attempted to mobilise on different grounds. These concerns involve firstly the 'knowledge' that computer games have provoked epilepsy in children; secondly, that children have been made anti-social by the solitary activity of playing with

the games (Selnow, 1983); thirdly, that playing violent games has an effect on children's behaviour and that the content of some games is inappropriate for children (Provenzo, 1991); and that playing these games leads to addiction (Griffiths, 1991, 1993) which as Silverstone (1994) contends is the arena where many moral panics over media consumption are sited (1994:14). Finally, and contradictorily in view of the move to incarcerate children within their homes or within adult prisons, children are meant to be outside rather than indoors - a report in The Guardian (14/5/96:13) from an American correspondent carried the headline 'Virtually no life at all'. The article argued that the Internet might be useful for adults, but that children should be constrained in their access to it, and to computers generally. The reporter states 'I have twin four-year-old sons who love to play on the computer when I allow it, which is no more than two hours a week. Why? Because they are kids and should be out experiencing the real world'. Being a child and using the Internet means that the child isn't living a 'real life'. Similarly, an article in The Independent headed 'You can't play tag on a computer', argued that children are forgetting how to play because of their preference for TV and video games, and the article reports on a project run by social workers at a British primary school which was attempting to teach children how to play traditional games (27/10/1996:5).

All of these fears and concerns rest on the assumption that children (childhood) need(s) protection as children are thought to be unable to control their own behaviour; or that they cannot distinguish reality from fantasy in screen-based technology - Buckingham (1994) notes the way in which any popular pleasures, but especially screen based media, have historically been the focus of concern. Indeed, Jacobson (1997) shows that in 1920s America there were similar concerns over the early movie palaces. It was felt that children and young people should be inside the home rather than being 'victims' of mass culture. This concern resulted, she argues, in a deliberate movement, guided by academics and promoted by the media, and which was

aimed at middle class parents. This movement encouraged the development of 'child centred' homes (involving, for example, setting aside special play rooms in the home) where children were to be encouraged to spend their free time rather than frequenting the new movie palaces.

Roberts' (1980) historical focus alerts us to the fact that panics over children's leisure has always been connected to the relative 'newness' of that activity, and are intertwined with a concern that the new activity is displacing more 'traditional' games of childhood. As Golding (1974) stated 'rapid technological changes bring in their wake unease as to the effects of such changes and much criticism of their impact on traditional ways of life' (1974:2).

Griffin (1997) argues that perceptions of 'youth' as a 'problem' are often related to the young person's disordered relationship with consumption. She states:

> '... many discourses around youth represent the necessity for the young person to learn self-control ... the moment of (potentially dangerous) change and transition epitomized by 'youth' is important precisely because it operates in contrast to prevailing notions of innocent dependent childhood and static mature adult status. Constructions of the latter categories are reinforced by default through dominant representations of what it means to be young' (1997:7. See also Jenks, 1982).

Again we see that it is the poorly disciplined body which is of concern. What my thesis shows is that while computer and video games have a place in the social life of the child, it is not something which is done to the exclusion of other activities. Children still play at and with other things.

The moral panics and moral discourse around computer and video games can be seen as taking two distinct forms. As used by the media and in common sense they are based, as I have said, at one and the same time around protectionism and containment, and they are also used by the computer games industry and by advertisers to address themselves more directly to

children. As McRobbie and Thornton (1995) argue, moral panic theory is now taken on board by the culture industry and it is used in a quite deliberate way in business practice:

> 'Culture industry promotions and marketing people now understand how, for certain products like records, magazines, movies and computer games, nothing could be better for sales than a bit of controversy - the threat of censorship, the suggestion of sexual scandal or subversive activity. The promotional logic is threefold: first, the cultural good will receive a lot of free, if negative, publicity because its associations with moral panic have made it newsworthy. Second, rather than alienating everyone, it will be attractive to a contingent of consumers who see themselves as alternative, avant-garde, radical, rebellious or simply young' (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995:572).

A useful example of this is the re-vamping of the TV advertisements for the video game company 'Sega'. The thinking behind the new style advert introduced in 1994 was reported in a two page spread in the popular video game player's magazine <u>Sega Pro</u>. The new advertisement took the form of a supposed pirate TV channel which appeared to break into normal advertising. The action within the advert was fast paced and confused. One aim of the advert was deliberately to make the content confusing so that parents (and other 'un-hip' people) wouldn't get the joke '..the message remains that if the viewer thinks they can understand part of the advert they are part of the scene and want to be associated with Sega'. An executive of Sega was reported as saying "As with all Sega advertising, it is important we talk to a youth audience. We have to be careful to make sure that parents don't endorse it too heavily. It is a case of being one of us rather than one of them" (<u>Sega Pro</u>, 3/94:19).

In this thesis I intend to show that both the parents and the children who took part in the study were aware of these moral panics and current debates, but that their awareness does not necessarily mean that their behaviour is affected or changed by it - there is no simple one to one relationship. On the one hand, parents are worried about all of the aspects mentioned above, but on

the other, present their own child as not being part of that concern due to their own strict control over their child's behaviour. Children also acknowledge the concerns but distance themselves from them. They do this by presenting people who use computers and video games heavily as 'geeks' (see Chapter 5). Thus, what this thesis does is to present the children's own views of what playing computer and video games means to them, and the place of video games in children's leisure as a whole. Through this we can see that moral panics in this area are misplaced. Davis and Bourhill (1997) contend that:

> 'Media treatment of issues about children relies heavily on ... simplistic generalisations with children represented as objects of concern or as threats to adult order. The former relies on an idealized view of children as pure, innocent and vulnerable, needing protection or salvation from dangers they can neither identify nor comprehend. The latter, of children drawn innately (unless prevented) towards evil and anarchy, also has deep historical roots ... Children's meanings and motivations are persistently ignored [as a consequence] transgressions by children of their set role are the subject of furious condemnation' (1997:31).

Bearing the notions about moral panics about children and young people in mind, the thesis shows how those who took part in the study demonstrate themselves to be fully competent social actors rather than media 'dupes'.

The social construction of childhood

Here I want to rehearse some of the arguments within the new sociology of childhood. This paradigm takes as its focus that there is no universal childhood, but rather that the concept of 'childhood' is socially constructed and is therefore subject to varying constructions over time and space (James and Prout, 1997). The account of the history of childhood is widely accepted to have begun with the work of Ariès (1962). It is Ariès' contention that the idea of childhood did not exist in medieval society: 'in medieval society ... as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother, his nanny or his cradle rocker, he belonged to adult society' (Ariès, 1962:36).

Ariès discusses the development of the idea of childhood through reference to diaries, paintings and other such historical documents and traces, for example, changes in attitudes to children based on indifference, to coddling (the child as a plaything) to the 17th century development of psychological interest and 'moral solicitude' (1962:39).

Similarly, DeMause (1982) describes the evolution of childhood moving from the practices of infanticide, swaddling (by which young children were strapped to boards, or swaddled so tightly they could not move) and abandonment through to what he calls the 'helping mode' in the mid 20th century. For this writer, the conditions under which children are raised at different times is historically important: ' ... the central force for change in history is neither technology nor economics, but the 'psychogenic' changes in personality occurring because of successive generations of parent-child interactions' (De Mause, 1982:49).

The work of Ariès and DeMause alerts us to the historical specificity of child rearing practices, and hence conceptualisations of the child through time. In a critique of Ariès, Archard contends that it is not that there was no conception of childhood in the past, but that the *conceptualisation* of it was different. He argues that there are three basic respects in which conceptions of childhood can differ over time and between cultures: the boundaries of childhood (when it ends), the dimensions of childhood (in order to detect differences between children and adults) and divisions in childhood (infancy, adolescence, etc.) (Archard, 1993:23-6). He states:

> ' ... any conception of childhood will vary according to the ways
> in which its boundaries are set, its dimensions ordered and its
> divisions managed. This will determine how a culture thinks
> about the extent, nature and significance of childhood' (1993:27,
> see also Valentine, 1996).

We can see, through a consideration of this kind of argument, that the time of childhood can be seen as socially constructed, therefore having the potential

to be de- and re-constructed (see Berger, 1968). Earlier accounts of the sociology of childhood have taken the position that childhood is a social construction in order to oppose approaches to studying childhood which pathologise and naturalise 'the child' (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). For example, Hockey and James (1993) have shown that a conceptualisation of childhood as a time of innocence and dependency has the effect of marginalising children. In effect, argued Jenks (1996), childhood is constructed in opposition to adulthood. If adulthood is a time of independence and rationality, then childhood is conceptualised as a time of dependence and irrationality. Hence children need to be protected and guided.

It is by now commonplace to note that the new sociology of childhood has (in part, as stated above) its origins in a rejection of both developmental psychology and socialisation theory. Developmental psychology focuses on the age-bound stages by which a 'normal' child develops, and conversely judges children who do not attain, or who exceed, these stages as dysfunctional. Taking a socially structured approach to childhood enables such 'normalisation' practices to be seen as inadequate in explaining children's social lives (James and Prout, 1997). With regard to socialisation theory, a powerful critique can be found in Waksler (1991). She argues that the use of this theory within sociology means that children are only visible within the discipline when they are being socialised (Waksler, 1991:13). The result of this narrow view has the consequence that children cannot be seen as actors in their own right, but as 'empty vessels' waiting to be filled with social norms. Waksler contends:

> '[socialisation theory] leaves out both what children are doing when others are socialising them, and when others are not. It neglects the worlds that children design by themselves for themselves. It fails to examine children's ideas and activities as their ways of being in the world' (Waksler, 1991:21. See also James and Prout, 1997).

Those working in the area of the social study of childhood have, over the last decade, illustrated that developmental theory and socialisation theory cannot adequately account for all children's experiences of being a child. Across and within cultures and over time individual children experience the time of childhood differently according to variables such as age, gender, disability, ethnicity and so on. These experiences have been studied through various perspectives and disciplines. Recent work in the new sociology of childhood takes as its focus that children are competent social actors. Ongoing work in this area is developing rapidly and investigates, for example, children's negotiations around health (Christensen, 1998); children in households (O'Brien, 1995) and children at school (Mayall, 1994).

James, Jenks and Prout's (1998) work provides the social study of childhood with a paradigm which is able to draw together different disciplines and which can locate a conceptual space for theories of childhood. The new social study of childhood, then, moves away from a conception of childhood as an age-bound developmental process, and from a view of children as passive recipients of socialisation towards seeing childhood as a time of agency (James and Prout, 1997:42). In this perspective, children's social worlds are worthy of academic examination in order to uncover the diversities of childhood. The 'new paradigm' is also moving away from the extreme constructivist position. James, Jenks and Prout (1998) remind us that the child is 'the product ... of an interaction between 'nature' and 'culture'' and not solely the effect of discourse (1998:146). This is not to deny that children are social actors, they contend, but instead to make clear that 'social action is (generally speaking) embodied action, performed not only by texts but by real, living corporeal persons' (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998:147). This thesis is located within this paradigm.

Constructing childhood as 'different' from adulthood (Jenks,1996) allows the boundaries of what childhood is to be policed, and the policing and control of childhood is discussed throughout the rest of this chapter. Here I want to highlight that childhood is not simply an age category, but that as well as being shaped by age, it is also shaped by gender and by access to social space. To begin this discussion, I examine some of the existing work on youth and youth subcultures which highlights the ways in which taking gender into account provides a very different explanation and reveals differing sites of control. This discussion, as I will show, also provides lessons for the emerging sociology of childhood.

Youth Cultures

It has been said that 'culture is the way the social relations of a group are structured and shaped: but it is also the way those shapes are experienced, understood and interpreted' (Clarke *et al*, 1976:11). The contribution of writers on youth and youth cultures to sociology has been to show that, within a parent culture, young people are able to interpret and experience culture in their own terms and of their own making. Paul Willis expresses this well when he states:

> 'Most young people's lives are not involved with the arts and yet are actually full of expressions, signs and symbols through which individuals and groups seek creatively to establish their presence, identity and meaning. Young people are all the time expressing or attempting to express something about their actual or potential *cultural significance*. This is the realm of living common culture' (Willis, 1990:1 (emphasis in original)).

Willis is here highlighting a distinction between culture as art and culture as lived experience. Drawing on Gramscian notions of hegemony, theorists have demonstrated young people's resistance through their leisure cultures and subcultures (see especially the work of the CCCS discussed below).

It can be said that the sociology of youth developed mainly in response to post-war concerns with the development of 'the teenager' when for the first time young people had money to spend. While a functionalist perspective saw youth and adolescence as a means of transition from dependency in the parental home towards autonomous adulthood (Talcott Parson's view, cited in Jones and Wallace, 1992), other writers took a more critical perspective. Hall *et al* (1976:18-21) contend that there were five changes in post war society which led to the emergence of an identifiable youth culture: (i) greater affluence; (ii) the growth of mass communications; (iii) a 'hiatus in social experience' (by this they mean that 'normality' had been disrupted because of the social effects of the war, for example, absent fathers, evacuation, etc.); (iv) the 1944 Education Act, especially the introduction of secondary education for all and (v) the arrival of a range of distinctive styles of dress and music.

A prevailing view, especially with regard to the possible influences of the burgeoning mass media, was that teenagers were being manipulated by a growing mass market, passively consuming a range of products. For Hall and his associates, however, young people did not passively consume, but created 'style', transforming culturally given uses (of objects, music) into alternative meanings, through their consumerism:

> 'Income alone does not make a style ... The sub-cultures could not
> have existed without the growth of a consumer market
> specifically geared to youth. The new youth industries provided
> the raw materials, the goods: but they did not ... produce ... style'
> (Hall *et al*, 1976:54)

These writers analysed post-war youth in terms of sub-cultures, which, Hall contends, while related to the parent culture, are 'significantly differentiated' from it: '[subcultures] must be focussed around certain activities, values, certain uses of material artefacts, territorial spaces ...' (Hall, 1976:13-14) For Hall, and others of the Birmingham School, the importance of the sub-cultures lies in young people's appropriation of style to resist their class position.

Hebdige (1976:61), for example, talks about 'a youth culture of persons who question ... the value and meaning of adolescence and the transition to the adult world of work' and more strongly:

> 'Subcultures are therefore expressive forms but what they express is, in the last instance, a fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions and second class lives. This tension is figuratively expressed in the form of subcultural style....' (Hebdige, 1976:132)

For these, and other writers, then, the overriding factor in the formation of subcultures is resistance to the dominant ideology. These theories have been examined and articulated through ethnographic studies of, for example, 'Mods' (Hebdige), 'Teds' (Jefferson), and 'Skins' (Clarke) (see Hall and Jefferson, 1976). These studies deny a view of young people as being passively manipulated by the emergent mass media, and instead showed the ways in which youth actively created its own terms of reference. The CCCS studies allow us to see that 'youth' is not a unitary category, but is fractured by class and 'style' and in all of these studies, the emphasis is on young people as competent social actors, even when they're 'doing nothing'. Corrigan talks about the sub-culture of the streets:

> 'For most kids, where it's at is the street; not the romantic action packed streets of the ghetto but the wet pavements of Wigan, Shepherds Bush and Sunderland. The major activity in this venue, the main action of British subculture, is, in fact, doing nothing' (1976:103).

Corrigan is here talking, as most of the writers on sub-cultures do, of young men, although his focus was less on spectacular subcultures than on ordinary youth. Others have criticised this male focus: Jones and Wallace (1992), for example, identify that this kind of analysis can only be partial, ignoring as it does other structural dimensions such as gender, disability, and so on. Feminist writers have attempted to redress this imbalance through their work. The following section discusses the implications which feminist subcultural theory has for the social study of childhood.

Gendered boundaries

McRobbie and Garber (1976) noted the invisibility of young women in accounts of subcultures and have attempted to analyse the reasons for it. They contend that:

> 'When the dimension of sexuality is included in the study of youth subcultures, girls can be seen to be negotiating a different space, offering a different type of resistance to what can at least in part be viewed as their sexual subordination' (McRobbie and Garber, 1976:221).

The 'invisibility' of girls and young women in sociological studies has also been attributed, in part, to the sexual division of labour in the home - gender role expectations mean that for young women, leisure time is often spent helping with domestic work (Spence, in Jeffs and Smith, 1990:70, see also Coffield et al, 1986). I would like to quote at length here regarding Nava's (1992) views on feminism and youth. Feminism, she contends, has neglected an important sphere of analysis in that feminist work has been concerned:

> ' ... either with the culture and circumstances of girls only, or - as has generally been the case in sociological and psychological studies of childhood, youth and schooling - it has compared boys and girls. The different educational performances, the different positions of boys and girls as subjects in an adult world, have been contrasted. But the power relations which connect and define boys and girls as distinct categories, and which vary according to the context or discourse in which they are situated, have tended to be neglected. Yet the relationships *between* boys and girls and *between* masculinity and femininity are of considerable importance.' (Nava, 1992:71, emphasis in original)

Subcultural studies which have tended to see class as the main structure will not take account of such issues. That young (male, working class) people appropriate cultural artefacts and transform them in an effort to resist or resolve their class position cannot adequately account for all the other young people in society, girls and boys, working and middle class, black and white, who are not members of subcultures.

The powerful feminist critique of youth sub-cultural studies contains lessons for the 'new' social study of childhood. Just as McRobbie and Garber (1976) pointed out that youth studies were actually studies of young men, so it is that 'childhood' studies conceal the ways in which gender operates to shape the experience of childhood for girls and boys. While listening to children's voices, and taking children as competent social actors is an important first step in claiming a conceptual space for childhood, it tends to assume (even where the analysts disclaim it) that 'children' are a homogenous group. In effect, just as the early youth studies 'missed' young women, the early childhood studies are 'missing' gender out of the analysis. The new social study of childhood, then, needs to take gender into account. This thesis, therefore, positions gender centrally in the following analysis of the leisure activities of the children and young people who took part in this study.

Temporal boundaries

In the context of the present study, there has been concern expressed in government, the media and in the public realm about (among other concerns) both the (violent) content of and the amount of time spent by children playing video games as I noted earlier in this chapter. The computer games industry has responded by classifying games according to age in an effort to pre-empt (perhaps stricter) government action. No game has yet been given an 18+ rating, as games with 'mature violent sexual content' will be referred to the British Board of Film Classification (PC Format, April 1994:16). For the computer games industry, then, age is used as a boundary. In this way, the content of the games is not subject to criticism, rather the issue of age-appropriateness becomes the focus. It does so because, as James and Prout (1997) state, within childhood, time itself is used as a powerful boundary of control. Children's activities are marked off temporally - 'play time' 'home time' and so on. Further, the way that time is spent within these demarcations also becomes subject to control - 'play time' must be used

'properly' (see Chapter 6). As I go on to show throughout the thesis, the lived experience for children in Britain is increasingly one of temporal control, something which can be seen particularly in relation to the video games they play, and indeed in other leisure activities.

Archard (1993) suggests that the age of majority is an important boundary, after which a child is considered adult. However, in the current political and economic climate, due to a process of infantilization, young people are dependant on their parents (or on the state) for a longer period of time than at any time previously (Jeffs and Smith 1990), so that even after the age at which children attain their legal majority, they may not be considered, or feel to be, adult. If the end of childhood means the attainment of citizenship, then, as Jones and Wallace contend, in contemporary society where free market competition and consumer choice are promoted, 'citizenship is conferred by the relationship to both public and private consumer markets, and participation in consumer markets is an important aspect of citizenship as a whole' (1992:123) we can question how far children and young people, excluded from the means to work and in some cases from the benefit system, are able to participate in consumer citizenship. This has implications for the dimensions of childhood - clearly, dependant childhood is in opposition to independent adulthood (Jenks, 1996), and this provides a means of entry for adults to impose control over children's time and, as I go on to argue, space.

Spatial boundaries

'The central issue to be explored in relation to childhood space is .. that of control' (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998:38,). I want here to explore some of the ways in which public/private space (such as the street, the home) has been previously gendered.

The public space of girls and young women has been subject to much stricter parental supervision than that of young men, due to perceptions of the risk of assault and attack for young women on the street (McRobbie, 1991:12). More

recently, however, it may be that there are similar parental fears about the safety of boys and young men on the streets, especially in the wake of the Jamie Bulger murder as discussed above. Indeed Valentine (1997a) found in her research that there is considerable complexity in parents' views about letting their children out on the streets. Valentine states:

> 'Traditionally girls have been perceived as more at risk in public spaces than boys. Significantly, however, this research suggests that parents hold a more complex and contradictory view of gender and siblings than previous studies have suggested. In particular, girls appear to be perceived as more capable of negotiating public space safely than boys, because they are perceived to have greater self-awareness, sexual maturity and a sense of responsibility than their brothers. In a reversal of 'traditional' constructions of masculinity, boys are perceived as innocent, irrational, irresponsible, and as increasingly vulnerable to violence from peers and adolescents' (1997a:57).

This thesis examines gender differences in the uses of public and private leisure and the implications which arise for the control of children. Nava however notes that:

> 'Girls are less of a problem on the streets because they are predominantly and more scrupulously regulated in the home. It is therefore not only through the family, but also through the interaction of girls with boys outside it, that the femininity and thus the policing of girls is assured' (Nava, 1992:79-80).

By this she means that boys are at risk of attack mainly from other boys, as Valentine (1997b) notes, in that it is not socially appropriate for girls to exhibit aggressive behaviour, nor is it appropriate for boys to attack girls. Nava (1992) argues that girls and boys police each other with relation to gendered roles. It is this relation *between* boys and girls which are important for Nava in negotiating space on the street/in the youth club. Importantly, Nava raises the issue of gendered control within the home - an issue which I take up in Chapter 6.

Büchner, discussing childhood in West Germany, notes the control which adults exert over the games children play and the public space they occupy:

> ' ... 'Taking Possession' of a social space thus ensues under the protective accompaniment *and control* of adults. Road and traffic conditions force urban children away from playing in the street with the result that independent and unsupervised opportunities for social contacts are less available. Children's street world, formed relatively independently and composed of children from a variety of backgrounds and age groups, is increasingly replaced by integration into various peer-group social sets, often chosen and supervised by parents for particular purposes and activities.' (Büchner, 1990:79, emphasis in original)

It is not only road and traffic conditions in this country which force children away from the streets, but parental fears of crime and violence, especially in the wake of the murder of Jamie Bulger in 1993, where children were both the victim and the perpetrators of violent crime.

James (1993) notes the restriction on children's space and activities in private space - 'to teachers and school class-mates, family and close friends, to children's T.V., children's games, children's books, children's films ... the culture of childhood is quite literally poised on the 'edge'.' (1993:107). We gain a glimpse here of the ways in which children's leisure is controlled in domestic space. As I go on to point out later in this thesis, thus far little has been written on children's activities in domestic space (see Chapters 3 and 6) which is a point that has been noted elsewhere (see for example Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). To a large extent this is due to the difficulties which childhood researchers encounter in gaining access to the home as a research site (see my discussion in Chapter 3). What this thesis does, then, is to offer, through the empirical material collected (to some extent) away from the home, glimpses into the ways in which the boundaries around childhood (gender, time and space) are controlled and contested in domestic space.

This thesis therefore begins from a position quite opposite to that adopted by Postman. Postman (1983) has argued that childhood is disappearing, and that the dividing line between childhood and adulthood is being eroded because of the accessibility of T.V. and other leisure technologies. He takes the pessimistic view that childhood is on a 'journey to oblivion' (Postman, 1983:149) mainly because there is nothing left to conceal from children, no 'mysteries' for adults to reveal when adults think proper. The adult world is available to them through television at any time:

> 'The new media environment that is emerging provides everyone, simultaneously, with the same information ... electronic media finds it impossible to withhold any secrets. Without secrets, of course, there can be no such thing as childhood.' (Postman, 1983:80).

What in fact Postman means is that without adult control, there can be no such thing as childhood. This argument is erroneous. Far from disappearing, the category of 'childhood' is instead increasing, both in its boundaries and dimensions, and in part this is due to the increasing control of children's bodies, explored in this thesis by a focus on the child's body at leisure.

According to Rojeck (1985), Foucault provides some insights for us in this regard. The work of Michel Foucault is concerned with power and the way that it is constituted in the subject. While Foucault has written nothing on leisure specifically, Rojeck claims that a Foucauldian analysis can be brought to bear in the area, making use of two sites of analysis: power as a concept, and the government of the body (Rojeck, 1985:150).

Within the sphere of leisure, some social groups are in a structurally subordinate position to others (for example, the working class, women, ethnic minorities etc.) It has been stated that such groups cannot posses the power to make free choices in leisure because of their identities (Clarke and Critcher, 1985. For Foucault, however, power is not exercised in a wholly negative fashion (power over), but can used in a positive way (power to), in as much as

power is seen as residing not only in institutions in society, but also in the individual. It can be said, therefore, that '[i]n emphasising the enabling and prescriptive attributes of power, Foucault demonstrates that leisure should be conceptualised as simultaneously freedom and control' (Rojeck, 1985:152). With regard to the government of the body, Foucault sees the production of 'docile bodies' as necessary for the state to control populations. In the beginning (i.e. after industrialisation):

> 'The investment of the body by power had to be heavy, ponderous, meticulous, and constant. Hence those formidable disciplinary regimes in the schools, hospitals, barracks, factories, cities, lodgings, families. And then, starting in the 1960's, it began to be recognised that such a cumbersome form of power was no longer as indispensable as had been thought and that industrial societies could content themselves with a much looser form of power over the body ... one needs to study what kind of body the current society needs....' (Gordon, 1980:58).

I take up this point about the need to study what kind of body society needs later in the thesis where I raise the issue of the tensions between the kind of child society desires and the kinds of childhood that exist.

Through adopting this kind of analysis, the Marxist argument that 'irrational' users of leisure are policed in order to protect capital (Clarke and Critcher, 1985) is shown to be crude. Foucault's argument is that policing is not necessary, once discourses of normalisation are constructed: 'He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power ...he becomes the principle of his own subjection' (Foucault, 1977:202-3). Rojeck (1985) thus posits some questions which may be asked in order to examine leisure practices using a Foucauldian perspective:

- What images of healthy and unhealthy leisure exist in society?
- How does the discourse on leisure relate to practice?
- How does leisure conceal and reveal the operation of power in society?

Although not adopting a Foucauldian perspective in the thesis, I intend to address these three points throughout. I will discuss the images of healthy and unhealthy leisure as it pertains to children's leisure (see Chapters 2 and 4); and show how the discourse around what children's leisure should be relates to what children actually do (Chapters 4, 5 and 6). Throughout this thesis I will show how this analysis of children's leisure reveals the operation of power and control - not simply the ways in which children are controlled (for example, by parents), but also the ways that children control other children and to some extent, their parents (Chapters 5 and 6). In Chapter 6 I will show that one of the things which parents dislike about computer and video games is that they are unable to control what their children do with them. Chapter 7 takes the analysis a step further, where I show the ways in which children resist control in the ultimate sense - that is, by escaping the spatial, temporal and gender delineated boundaries imposed on them through their leisure activities into an 'interior space' which is private and beyond control (James, Jenks and Prout, 1997).

Conclusion

> 'Foucault enables us to understand power very broadly, and yet very finely, as anchored in the multiplicity of what he calls 'micropractices', the social practices that constitute everyday life in modern societies. This positive conception of power has the general but unmistakable implication of a call for a 'politics of everyday life' (Fraser, 1989:18).

This thesis is, then, essentially an examination of the politics of everyday life, the micropractice of daily living for children and young people. In it I focus on the ownership and use of computer and video games, and through this focus illuminate other activities, constraints, power, control and pleasures in the life of the child - what McRobbie (1994) has termed the 'dignity of the specific'. Like Sibley (1995) who contends 'the child, the family and domestic space need to be considered together in order to understand the role of

boundaries in childhood' (1995:28), the central themes running through the work are the notions and boundaries of gender, age, space and time as experienced and negotiated by the children and young people who took part in the study.

This thesis then examines issues around the everyday social lives of children and young people which become visible when focusing on the ownership and use of computer and video games. Beginning from an interest aroused by what I could see in my own home with my children and their friends, in its initial conception the research aimed to examine the following points in relation to the siting of young people's leisure:

- Are boys still to be found on the streets, in gangs, or are they increasingly to be found in the home, playing video games?

- Where boys are in the home, what are the implications for girls? Are girls able to share in the video game culture, or are they excluded due to gendered power relations/role expectations? What are the social relations between boys and girls, and how are they negotiated and expressed?

- Do video games inhibit social interaction or can the reverse be true: that the ownership and use of video games actually facilitates interaction between young people and adults, and may be used as a basis for friendship?

- How far do young people have control over their use of video games in domestic space or do parents exert the greater influence? How far can it be said that children and young people have control over domestic space anyway, not just in terms of playing games?

What follows is an examination of these and other issues which arose during the process of researching and writing. The thesis is informed by a perspective which takes the child as a competent social actor, and places the voice of the child centrally in the analysis.

Having taken as my starting point the ways in which moral and other panics around children's use of computer and video games serve to further draw

boundaries around childhood, and in order to set the context for the rest of the discussion which aims to explode these concerns, I turn in the following chapter to an examination of the academic work which both reflects and feeds moral and other panics.

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[1] See later in the thesis (this chapter and Chapter 6) for further discussion of these articles.

[2] This kind of view of the media as having immediate effects on behaviour is known as the 'hypodermic' model of media effects. See Glover (1984) and my later discussion in Chapter 2 for further details.

[3] It should be noted that this discussion refers to the set of proposals canvassed prior to the 1997 General Election. The incoming Labour Government had used this proposal widely in the pre-election discussions and party political broadcasts. Since the election, this measure has not (so far) been implemented comprehensively.

[4] The Guardian, 14/5/96 p 13

Chapter 2: Inside Academia - Leisure sociology and childhood, video games and gender

Introduction

In the opening chapter to this thesis I discussed some of the moral and other panics which have arisen around children and young people's use of computer and video games. I went on to show the ways in which childhood is socially constructed, and argued that in order to deconstruct such moral panics we need to firstly deconstruct the notion that there is any unitary experience of childhood, and consequently that we need to take gender into account. In order to do this, in this thesis I place the child centrally, and examine children's own accounts of the experience of playing video games so that we can see what this activity means to them.

Following up the themes raised in Chapter 1, then, this chapter focuses on two main areas: firstly I discuss some of the literature on leisure and play in order to deconstruct the notion that leisure is purely the province of adults. Such a view, I contend, further marginalises the status of the child, and leads to a perception that children's 'play' is less worthy than the leisure of adults. Allowing children's play the equivalent status of adult leisure in academic writing means that we can move away from focusing on various effects towards looking at the social meanings of particular activities for children.

Secondly, I then go on to examine the research previously carried out on children's computer and video game play. I argue that the literature around children and video games, which is both gender blind and which on the whole tends to ignore children's voices, both feeds and reflects the moral panics I discussed earlier. I conclude that what is missing from previous research is taking the child's own view, which allows us to see more clearly

the place of computer and video games as a leisure activity in the everyday life of the child.

Children's play and adult leisure

Here I want to deconstruct the notion that children 'only' play and to question the view, which leads on from that notion, that leisure is an adult privilege. Leisure as a concept is difficult to define. For the Greek philosophers, leisure meant freedom. However, their society was based on a system of slavery - to have leisure was essential for status and citizenship. 'Leisure, as understood and used by early Greek philosophers, can only be understood in light of the ideals of Greek culture' (Goodale and Godbey, 1988, Arnold, 1980). The ideal of freedom as a pre-condition for leisure still persists in many present day writers' definitions of leisure, whether they define it as relative (Bregha, 1980) or absolute. Others have questioned this, and argued that in modern capitalist society there can be no real freedom (see for example Clarke and Critcher, 1985).

Those for whom freedom is central to leisure generally tend to hold an elitist view of leisure - that any leisure activity which does not lead to self-actualisation is 'merely' distraction. For example, Goodale and Godbey (1988:245) argue that the world cannot be trusted with leisure, because 'when diversion becomes a central focus of our life, we become bored and decadent. Such people cannot be trusted'. In these writers' view, the quest for self perfection is the only 'good' leisure. The philosopher Pieper takes this further - he argues that 'the soul of leisure, it can be said, lies in 'celebration' ..... But if celebration is the core of leisure, then leisure can only be made possible and justifiable on the same basis as the celebration of a festival. *That basis is divine worship*' (Pieper (1972), emphasis in original). By this he means that reflecting on the meaning of life, which for him is Christianity, is the only leisure. Such reflections lead to leisure as the basis of culture. Smith defines leisure in

terms of pleasure seeking, and argues that such activities take place on a continuum from sensory to intellectual. He contends that sensory pleasure seeking is at the bottom end of the continuum and is therefore sub-human, and that only intellectual leisure activity is truly human (1980:57-9). In these kinds of views, then, leisure is a means to an end, and that end is self-improvement.

We can ask, then, if 'freedom' is necessary for leisure and if, as the writers quoted above argue, diversion and sensory pleasure seeking are not 'worthy' enough to be considered leisure or even human activity, is it possible to argue that children have leisure? If we accept Smith's (1980) argument, then children playing computer games (which stimulate the senses) are indulging in sub-human activity. This kind of argument has a history within philosophy. Hughes (1988) has described the ways in which philosophers have used children to show that moral development and reasoning (and we can include here leisure activity) are reserved for adulthood, and more especially, male adulthood (Hughes, 1988:81-2).

A concept generally applied to 'what children do' is play, not leisure. The term 'play' has normally been used to describe activities which there is no obligation to undertake and which serve as ends in themselves (Child and Child, 1973:133), although it may be that children and young people do have a purpose or an end in view when they play. Arnold (1980) has traced the etymology of the term 'play'. *Ludus*, the Latin word for play, she informs us, 'covered aspects of drama, gambling, games, festivals, athletics, school and learning, satire and comedy as well as activities associated with parades and public celebrations for amusement' and she concludes that 'play is the experience attributed to recreation and sought from leisure' (Arnold, 1980:16) – as such, play is 'human' behaviour, and not solely the confine of the child. Others have argued that play is the basis for culture (Huizinga, 1955[1], Sutton Smith, 1972[2]).

Sue Fisher (1993) draws on the work of Caillois (1962) in her sociological study of young people and fruit machine gambling. In this perspective, play has four distinct forms: *Agnon* (competitive games), *alea* (games of chance), mimicry (games of simulation) and *ilinx* (games inducing vertigo). Gambling, she states, is the *alea* form of play, 'and, as such, is inescapably interwoven into autonomous culture both of child and adult play' (Fisher, 1993:448). It may be possible to describe playing computer and video games in terms of these four forms of play, sometimes separately, and sometimes all four types may coincide.

Clarke and Critcher also dispute that play is solely a childhood activity, and argue that within the family, play forms are retained, although disguised under the heading of 'games' (1985:172). They also argue that 'play needs no rationale, no purpose other than its own satisfaction ... the incorporation of much of the new technology into family life, from computers to video recorders, depends upon its convertibility into items of, and for, play' (1985:173) Kelly (1983:188) defines play as 'episodes of non-serious interaction with self contained meanings and consequences'. The advantage of using the term 'play' is that it does away with the need to focus on means and ends - play/leisure is an end in itself as argued by Clarke and Critcher (1985) cited above. It should be noted, however, that the term 'child's play' usually has derogatory connotations, or implies an easy task.

Play, then, is mapped onto age categories, with children's play being seen as somehow less worthy than adult play. As is discussed elsewhere in this chapter, the play of children is always subject to adult interpretation and adult attempts at control, and maintaining a distinction between adult leisure and children's play reinforces and maintains a boundary which can then be policed. I am arguing, then, that children's play can usefully be equated with adult leisure, both in so far as it is not an exclusively child-like activity, and in that leisure can also be play. In this way it is possible to deconstruct notions

of leisure as bounded by age and consequently to see that what is needed is to examine what leisure means for those engaged in it.

Computer and video games

The literature around computer and video games is split between those who contend that video games are harmful in some way and those who argue that they have either no effect, or can be of benefit. In either case, the data which supports the arguments generally comes from within a psychological paradigm and tends to ignore the social context within which the child plays these games. In this section of the chapter I want to further point the way to the rationale behind the focus of the study. The concerns of those researching video games are, as I will show through this discussion, a reflection of (and provide information which feeds) the moral panics and moral discourse around children who play computer and video games (see Chapter 1). As I argued earlier, few (if any) working in this area begin from a conception of the child as a competent social actor (see Chapter 1 and Chapters 5 and 7). There are also very few studies which have explicitly set out to look at gender dimensions in video game play, which is what this study does. In the studies which I review here, we do however see an early indication that the playing of video games in the home is a gendered activity, and this is a theme which is taken up throughout the thesis.

The video game industry - a brief overview

The first working model of a tennis game was developed as early as 1958, although it was not until the discovery of silicon chips in the 1970's that the game boom occurred. Atari introduced 'Pong' a table tennis-type game in 1972 (Price, 1985:115), and the video game industry was born. Video games were installed in pubs, shops and arcades and machines were brought out which could be plugged into the T.V. for home use. Twenty million home consoles were sold by Atari in the U.S.A. between 1972 and 1984, when the market flopped (Panelas, 1983:52). Research into the effects of video games

on the young people who played them was generally published between 1983-5 and was driven by concerns about the amount of time and money young people were spending on the games:

> 'At once condemned as the latest seducer of the young and praised as the vanguard of the coming age of popular computing, countless lines of print are devoted weekly to commentary on this phenomenon as society continues to puzzle over its meaning, impact, and scale' (Panelas, 1983:52).

This early research focused mainly on arcade game use. In contrast, as I will show, research which took place after the re-birth of the market in 1989 began to focus on home use, and this can be related to the technical developments in the hardware and software as I outline below.

The first 'Nintendo' home console was introduced in the U.S.A. in 1986, and the 'Sega Genesis' (known here as the 'Sega Megadrive') in 1989. Video games and consoles continue to develop, with the introduction of CD-ROM and larger and larger chips (the original 'Nintendo' had an 8-bit processor, now consoles are moving toward 64-bit machines[3]). Home video games are very different in content to the early machines - the use of the 64-bit chip enables much more memory, therefore the games are far more complex. This gives arcade quality to the graphics and sound (see Kirkup (1992) for a discussion of the history of computing more generally). Currently, video games may often, for example, be interactive, or include film footage. There is now little need for young people to play in arcades when the same quality game can be played in the home. Research taking place since 1989 has tended to look inside the home for effects, rather than in arcades as early work did.

Corresponding to the video game market, which saw a boom in the early eighties followed by a crash and new developments in the early 1990s, are two 'waves' of research in the area of video games. The first took place in the early 1980s and examined the video games common at that time ('Space Invaders', 'Kong' etc.) and was almost completely of American origin, and

focused almost exclusively on game play in arcades. This was in response to the banning of video game arcades in some US states amid fears of the corrupting influence on the young men who congregated there. The second wave of research began in 1989 and is ongoing, and stems from the new developments in the computer industry with the introduction of relatively inexpensive, powerful home video game consoles and computers. The research focus, then, has now shifted into the home. It is still the case that much work is American and remains predominantly psychological in origin.

Video Games: The first wave of research

One of the first social scientists to comment on the new phenomenon was the anthropologist Surrey (1982) who observed game play in arcades in New York and Philadelphia. He discusses the ways in which individuals were socialised into playing games through watching others - 'A crowd gathers at the opportunity to watch an Ace dominate a machine, and individuals try to decipher the strategy. Successful players freely admit that they become skilled by watching others' (1982:77). As I go on to demonstrate in Chapter 5, playing video games is important in terms of status in the peer group.

In contrast, Selnow's (1984) main contention is that children are socialised by the video game itself, rather than through watching others play as Surrey has suggested. Of Selnow's subjects, 74% reported that they played video games alone: 'This suggests that video game playing is typically a solitary activity and that while children are playing they are not likely to be interacting with people' (Selnow, 1984:155). He also found that those children who spent the most time and money playing video games, at home and in arcades, were more likely to agree that playing video games is more fun, more exciting and more desirable than being with human companions. This notion, that children playing video games are socially withdrawn, has remained popular[4] in the media and in the focus of some contemporary research[5], and it is one

which is explored in this research. While Selnow correctly states that the 'uses and gratifications' approach in media research is an appropriate path to follow, (i.e., an approach which looks not at what the media do to the people, but rather what the people do with the media[6]) and looks at reasons why young people in his study played video games, he then goes on to conjecture that 'they perceive the videogames as not only a source of companionship, *but possibly as a substitute for it*' (1984:155-6, my emphasis). This thesis provides a counter argument to that of Selnow (see Chapter 5).

Kestenbaum and Weinstein (1985) examined psychopathology in video game users. They hypothesised that 'heavy video game use has a role in managing developmental conflicts, especially regarding discharge of aggression and open expression of competition and does not result in increased neuroticism, social withdrawal, or escape into fantasy' (1985:329). Using a self-report questionnaire with 208 male adolescent subjects, their results supported their hypothesis and present a positive view of video game use:

> 'Heavy videogame playing neither results in nor relates to global psychopathology or social introversion. Highvideo players are for the most part healthy adolescents. For these players video games have a calming rather than an excitatory effect in terms of aggressive and other energies' (1985:322-3).

Kestenbaum and Weinstein (1985) interestingly suggest that parents' anxiety around their children's computer and video game use is related to parents' lack of knowledge in this area and which finds expression in terms of parental control over their children's access to video games. This is an another issue which I examine later in the thesis (see Chapter 6).

Egli and Myers' (1984) research was prompted by public concerns over video game effects. Surveying 151 10-20 year olds, they concluded that:

> 'With few exceptions, playing video games was a minor part of the subjects lives ... High overall means on the importance of friendships, enjoyment of watching others play, and the fact that

all their friends enjoy playing support the view that visiting arcades is in fact a social activity' (1984:311).

Other writers have also supported the view that playing video games is a harmless occupation. Their possible use as a tool in counselling and behaviour management has been highlighted (Bowman and Rotter, 1983; Spense, 1988) and the possibilities for positive use in education have been investigated (The Observer, 9/1/94; Jacobs, 1989). Mitchell (1985) has argued that video games in the home serve to increase family interaction, a view which is further examined in Chapter 6.

Video Games: The Second Wave

Schutte *et al* (1988) set out to ascertain whether violent games made children more violent, and found that '[t]here was evidence that playing a videogame tends to lead to subsequent behaviour similar to that of the character the individual controlled while playing the game' (1988:457). However, the writers only observed the children's behaviour for five minutes following videogame play, so these results may be transitory. What effect they might continue to have over time is therefore left open to question.

Funk (1993), in contrast, asserts that the evidence for violence in video games being extended to behaviour is non existent, although she does state that '*there may be* a group of video game players in the child or adolescent age group whose game playing habits reflect future behaviour' (1993:89, my emphasis). Conjecture of this kind seems to be endemic in the literature and may reflect, I suggest, adult fears concerning the potential loss of control over childhood.

In contrast with these concerns over the transmission of violent behaviour, Baird and Silvern (1990) take a more positive view of video game play. They contend that childrens' use of electronic games such as video games allows children to control their own educational experience. They state:

'We must recognise that electronic games have the potential to facilitate children's play in a manner unlike previous toys. Through electronic games children may control difficulty, game rules and tools for problem solving. Being in control may allow children to construct cognitive tools unavailable to previous generations' (Baird and Silvern, 1990:48).

As we shall see, however, because it is mostly boys who play with computer and video games (see chapters 4 and 5), the implications for girls' ability to similarly control the cognitive experience may be disputed. Like much of the work in this area, Baird and Silvern's (1990) analysis is gender-blind.

Although computer and video game play has become a large home leisure occupation in this country (The Guardian, 13/4/93), work which examines the domestic context of video game play has been lacking in the U.K. One researcher who has published extensively over the last three to four years is Mark Griffiths. Originally interested in fruit machine addiction in arcades (Griffiths 1991b), his work has recently extended into an examination of the potential for addiction in home video games. Writing from a psychological perspective, he argues that 'both video games and fruit machines ... are potentially addictive' (1991a:53). However, stating that there is a *potential* for anything is not to say that the behaviour will be found. As I mentioned earlier, very nearly all the research around video game play is psychological, and tends to pathologise individual behaviour. It has been said that:

'... the education of most psychologists is still confined to a study of individual and group factors ... this does not appear to prevent psychologists from making professional judgements about the 'whole' person' (Coffield *et al*, 1986:215)

That is to say, the social, political and economic factors which together with psychological traits make up the whole person, are ignored. What is required then, is a sociology of children's leisure which, in taking children as competent social actors, also includes the wider social context within which the child enjoys leisure.

There are only a very few articles on the subject of video games/amusement machines written by sociologists. One such is by Sue Fisher (1993), who presents 'a sociological typology' of young fruit machine players. These are: Arcade Kings and their apprentices, Machine Beaters, Rent-a-Spacers, Action Seekers and Escape Artists. For example, Rent-a-Spacers 'gamble on fruit machines *primarily to gain access to the arcade venue*, the cultural space where they meet and socialise with their friends' (Fisher, 1993:465, emphasis in original). In Chapter 5 I show the importance of video game play in friendship for the children and young people who play them.

Panelas (1983) also presents a sociological perspective on video games and adolescents. He contends that:

> 'From a sociological perspective, the advent and popularity of video games merely reflects the existing symbiosis between the social life of teenage peer groups and the marketing practices of the popular culture and leisure industries ...(video games) ... form part of the symbolic raw material out of which a subculture with distinct rituals, values, forms of solidarity, and standards of measurement is fashioned' (Panelas, 1983:52)

It remains unclear, however, whether the ownership and use of video games can be said to constitute a subculture - as I show later in the thesis (see Chapter 5), it may be rather that the ownership and use of computer and video games provides a means of belonging in the peer group; it forms an entré rather than a distinct subculture.

Two recent books from American writers concerning children and video games have been published. Provenzo (1991) discusses 'Nintendo' video games and devotes a considerable amount of space to a content analysis of some of the games, and discusses the themes of violence and sexism within the games. It is his contention that video games are not 'neutral objects', but carry specific meanings, and are, he states, 'instruments of information that serve important hegemonic functions in their perpetuation of bias and gender

stereotyping' (Provenzo, 1991:138). While not disputing his reading of the games, I hesitate to accept fully his reasoning that the content of such games has the effect of encouraging similar behaviour. He argues that video games are:

> ' ... instrumentalities through which the child's understanding of his (sic) culture are mediated. In this context, video games such as Nintendo are neither neutral or harmless, but represent very specific social and symbolic constructs. In effect, the games become powerful teaching machines and instruments of cultural transmission' (1991:75).

I would argue that Provenzo here is taking an overly deterministic stance. Such arguments reflect the now discredited 'hypodermic' model of media effects discussed earlier (Glover, 1984). Fine (1992) critiques Provenzo (1991) and states correctly that 'children's behaviour is said, though not proven, to mirror the themes of those forms of popular culture to which they are exposed: an unsubtle reflection theory denying the creative use of media representations' (Fine, 1992:853). A view such as this also denies a view of the child as a competent social actor (James and Prout, 1997. See also Chapters 5 and 6, this thesis).

Kinder (1991) works from a synthesis of psychoanalytic and cognitive theory, informed by a feminist and post modernist perspective. She provides a more sophisticated analysis than Provenzo (1991) and stresses the 'inter-textuality' of games, T.V. shows, films and other cultural products. With regard to video games, she contends that:

> 'Because of the ideological assumptions implicit in the software and marketing of cartridges, video games not only accelerate cognitive development, but at the same time encourage an early accommodation to consumerist values and masculine dominance' (Kinder, 1991:119).

She has also analysed the content of some of the games, and notes that women are marginal, both as characters in the games and as players (1991:105), although she informs us that 'Nintendo' state that the appeal of

video games to girls is growing (1991:103). Both Provenzo and Kinder have been critiqued for their small sample sizes and paucity of data[7], and indeed Kinder mainly draws on observations of her son to illustrate her points. However, at least work like Kinder's extends the debate away from effects of video games on the individual to an incorporation of video games in a wider context, and their relationship to other media. I am, however, generally in agreement with Fine's (1992) critique of the work of Kinder and Provenzo when he argues that:

> 'Popular culture scholarship responds to a sirens call. There is something so *present* and so seemingly *potent* about popular culture that we puff its significance, creating concerns where none exist. Such danger is inherent in much scholarship, but it is a distinct occupational hazard of those who examine the sociology of culture. The best advice is: Let the kids play Nintendo; just have academics keep their distance' (1992:854, emphasis in original).

Academics should perhaps 'keep their distance' if, as he contends, their intention is only to publish saleable work (Fine, 1992:854). However, when the concern is popularly expressed in alarmist terms in the media (for example '*Video Games hook 1 in 5 teenagers*'[8], and '*Ban Kids from this sickness*'[9], a headline which I reproduced in the opening to this thesis) and in common sense, then academic work becomes necessary in order to fully explore these issues.

More recently, Sanger *et al* (1997) have published the results of an empirical study which is constructed as a 'guide' for parents and teachers. They state in their introduction:

> '... we hope that the following chapters lead the reader into the complexity of the lives of children in a way which illuminates their thinking, their feelings and their day-to-day experiences. What can then be asked concerns the consequences of this illumination for educators and parents' (1997:11).

While many of the arguments presented by Sanger *et al* echo findings and discussions throughout this thesis, their work differs in their emphasis on the child both as 'other' and as 'becoming'. To a large extent they are concerned with a need to advise those with responsibility for children on 'the consequences for the eventual use of information technologies in school and, later, in work' (1997:11). While they state that their findings disprove many of the moral panics around children's use of computers and video games, and in particular they find no evidence which supports the much vaunted fear of children acting out the violence they see on screen, they then go on to state that 'it would be complacent for anyone to assume that this scenario will hold good indefinitely. The power of the media to stimulate, entertain, persuade and affect us is growing, almost daily' (Sanger *et al*, 1997:176). They call for teachers and parents to be more aware of and experience popular culture (video games, television programmes and videos) so that they can mediate children's experiences and guide them 'positively'.

Gender and video games

The gendered nature of video games and video game play has often been noted. Research carried out in arcades (which has been the focus of most American research) has consistently found more boys than girls playing or observing others play. Kaplan (1983) investigated to what degree negative images of amusement arcades may contribute to the sex differences in attendance at arcades, but found no significant differences in male/female images of arcades. Rather, his subjects attributed gender differences in play to gender socialisation. When asked why more males than females played games, 35% of female responses attributed the differences to a male 'machismo' syndrome, and 36% of male responses agreed (Kaplan, 1983:97). Dominick (1984) suggests that playing video games in the arcades was more of a social experience for girls, who attended arcades with friends, dates etc., while for boys it was a more solitary activity (1984:146-7). Significantly, it has been noted that in arcades, the numbers of girls present, while already low,

can be even lower if observation is carried out after 9 p.m. (Braun and Giroux, 1989:98). This suggests that girls access to public space is more restricted at certain times than that of boys.

Kubey and Larson (1990) like Selnow, (1984) utilise the uses and gratifications approach to studies of the media (see above for explanation). Their work investigated 483 young people aged between 9 and 15 from eight schools in two areas (working class/middle class) in Chicago. Subjects filled in self-report forms for one week in addition to being contacted by the writers by means of an electronic pager once every two hours. This, they contend, enabled an accurate picture of their research subjects daily activities to be gained. Their results are full and varied. They state:

> 'Use of video games was significantly higher among boys than among girls at both age periods. Nearly 80% of video game play was by boys. This activity was over three times as frequent for the younger males as for the younger females ... and ten times greater for the older males than the older females ... 63% of video game playing occurred among the middle-class versus the working-class boys' (Kubey and Larson, 1990:117).

In a later study, Funk (1993) found higher rates of play for girls in her sample of 357 schoolchildren - almost two thirds of girls played at home at some time during the week for an average of two hours, while almost 90% of boys played for an average of 4.2 hours (Funk, 1993:88). Gailey (1993) found that girls in her study were more likely to play fantasy-adventure and spatial relations games than any other type (Gailey, 1993:88). Sega has announced that it is attempting to open up the market to girls through the introduction of a new 32-bit machine 'which could have things like interactive soap operas' which Sega feels appeal to girls[10]. Whether they would in fact appeal to girls is questionable.

Haddon's (1992) study briefly touches on gender differences in computer use within the home. He contends that, for male youth, a sub-culture is being

created through the ownership and use of computer and video games. He states that:

> '...producers clearly had some bearing upon the ways in which boys experienced home computing and games playing, as exemplified by the fact that so much of classroom talk was based on reading computer magazines. But ultimately this male youth also made creative use of the raw material - they made their own culture through the way they used 'talk' about micros and about games, through developing and changing products ...' (Haddon, 1992:89).

Haddon also states that this was not the case for young women. He argues that in his study girls gained their knowledge about games from their brothers, and 'just played' the games which their brothers had and which were available, but were not, in the main, games of their own choice (Haddon, 1992:91). There are echoes here of earlier studies on male youth sub-cultures - we have an impression of boys as being central to the sub-culture while girls only become visible in relation to their brothers in the same way as McRobbie (1976) argued that girls were only visible in relation to the boys who were the main focus of subcultural studies (see for example Parker 1974). In effect, Haddon (1992) claims, this sub-culture around computing and game playing was creating a new space for male youth culture, but it is one which is developing in what has traditionally been seen as girls' space - the home, and more especially, the bedroom. This is an area which will be fully discussed and extended in Chapter 6.

Linn and Lepper (1987), noting the controversy over whether or not the games were harmful or beneficial, surveyed 200 children and their teachers. They found no evidence correlating home videogame use with aggression or impulsivity, although for boys, arcade play and impulsivity were highly correlated. Nor did they find any evidence to show that playing videogames leads to social withdrawal (Linn and Lepper, 1987:81). Interestingly, they also found that 'contact with highly motivating videogames, perceived by children

as related to computers, may foster increased interaction with actual computers' (Linn and Lepper, 1987:85). This was found to be the case for both boys and girls, although the writers noted that for girls, 'the more the computer is perceived as an activity at which boys are likely to outperform girls, the less likely girls are to become involved with computers' (Linn and Lepper, 1987:86). Investigating any correlations between computer game play and participation in computer classes at school, they found that there is such a correlation for boys, but not for girls. The correlation for girls and participation in such classes was academic ability (1987:90). That is to say, boys who had played computer and video games were more likely to go on to participate in school computer classes. There was no similar causal relationship found for girls, it was rather that girls who were generally academically able were more likely to join such classes. This is a disturbing finding, in view of the perceived need to get girls involved in technological subjects (Cockburn and Omred, 1993) although the authors are insistent that no causal relationships be drawn from their work. The conclusion to the thesis (Chapter 8) will re-visit these arguments focusing on gender and technology, where I intend to argue that the attempt to get girls interested in computer science through encouraging them to play video games is, in the light of the evidence which I present in this thesis, fundamentally flawed.

Conclusion

Fine (1992), as I reported earlier in this chapter, offered a critique of academic work around computer and video games which warned academics to 'keep their distance and let the kids play Nintendo'. His critique alerts us to the nature of moral panics which are informed and fed by some academic work. As we saw in the introduction to Chapter 1, the popular press takes on board arguments about addiction, negative effects and social isolation and, by using them to show the ways in which children are vulnerable to media effects and hence in need of protection, implicitly also defines what childhood should be

(not exposed to violence, not socially isolated, not addicted etc.). However, it is not computer and video games *per se* that are of concern, but rather, as I pointed out in Chapter 1, the fear of the media's effect on children. This fear has a history, and indeed has been seen as traditional (Roberts, 1980):

> 'It is generally believed that children no longer go out to play. Adults seem to be divided into those who have not thought about the games of childhood since they themselves stopped playing them, and those who contrast their own memories with what they see around them, concluding that childhood is withering away. Children, it is argued, hardly every play on street corners now as they used to: incapable of entertaining themselves, they are interested in nothing but pop stars and television, listless and passive - until they become anti-social hooligans in their teens' (Roberts, 1980:xi).

New technologies of any kind prompt these kinds of concerns because what is feared is not the change in technology, but change in what 'childhood' is meant to be. This, then, is the threat - if 'childhood' can no longer be seen as a time of innocence and dependency, and because childhood is constructed as 'futurity' (Jenks, 1996) - what would these changes mean for adult society? How could the binary opposition adult/child then operate?

The literature around computer and video games which I have reported here follows closely the technical developments in the computer games industry, both in the timing of the research and in the spatial focus (i.e. arcades or home). As I have shown, while much of the research attempts to prove or disprove causal relationships, or tries to measure effects, this enterprise is inconclusive in its findings. I want to argue that this is because of the very nature of the paradigm within which such research has been carried out. As I have stated, almost all of the work in this area takes a psychological approach, and none of it asks children or young people for their opinions. My argument earlier in the chapter, which deconstructed the assumption that leisure is an adult activity, highlighted that what is needed is to ask those engaged in leisure what it means to them. In the same way, then, what is needed when

looking at computer and video games is to examine their place in the everyday life of the child. Just as the youth sub-cultural studies examined the use of 'style' *via* young people's leisure in order to show how young people resisted the dominant ideology (Hall *et al*, 1976), this thesis examines children's leisure through a focus on the ownership and use of video games in order to see what place this activity has in children's lives. This will allow us to see the operation of power and the ways in which it is concealed and revealed in and through leisure (Rojeck, 1985). That is to say, we need to move away from the sterile discussion about effects, and look instead for meanings - to hear children and young people's own 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973). This is what this thesis does.

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[1] cited in Goodale and Godbey, 1988:168.
[2] cited in Turner, 1978:282.
[3] A 'bit' is a chunk of memory.
[4] see for example, Fitzsimons, 1993.
[5] Interview with Prof. Cooper, UMIST, in The Guardian, Education Supplement, 13/4/93: 8.
[6] Glover, 1984.
[7] Fine, 1992 is quite vicious in his critique - he talks about both writers 'surface questioning and perfunctory analysis', concluding, 'why let data interfere with a theory?' (p 853).
[8] The Guardian, 15/12/93, quoting Mark Griffiths.
[9] Quoted in PC Format, April 1994:16.
[10]Nick Alexander, chief executive of Sega Europe, quoted in The Guardian, 18/1/94.

Chapter 3: Inside Children's Worlds: Methods

Context for the study - reflexivity and standpoints

> 'I am suggesting ... that we understand and become aware of our own research activities as telling ourselves a story about ourselves ... Perhaps we need think of research as constituted by processes of social reflexivity, and then, of self-reflexivity as social process. But, we must remind ourselves that we tell our stories through others. Further, our self-reflexive stories need not be trivial' (Steier, 1991:3).

At a time when, as I have outlined earlier, the social worlds of children become at one and the same time more subject to a 'gaze' and yet more private than at any other time, and in the light of what I refer to throughout the thesis as moral panic and moral discourse around children and young people, an examination of their leisure activities becomes necessary in order to deconstruct such panics. Yet it is also more difficult. Access to children as research subjects means negotiating an entry into a number of closed systems (such as the family, the school). This chapter, as well as (conventionally) describing the way the research was carried out, will also discuss and make central the ways in which the researcher's identity affects this research process, both in the choice of subject matter and in the way that the research is conducted. Social research does not take place within a vacuum, rather it is subject to both the constraints of resources (time, money etc.); to negotiations with individuals and organisations, and as McRobbie (1991) points out and importantly in terms of the present argument, 'the very questions we ask are always informed by the historical moment we inhabit' (1991:64).

Okely (1992) has described the long tradition of reflexivity in anthropology, but the move to reflexivity in sociology has been more contemporary, and can be said to have originated in two movements - the use of feminist methodologies which address power relations in the fieldwork situation; and

in a reaction against positivism. Stanley and Wise (1993), for example, argue that:

> 'Our consciousness is <u>always</u> the medium through which research occurs; there is no method or technique of doing research other than through the medium of the researcher' (1993:157, emphasis in original)

Further, they contend that because, for feminists, the personal is political, it is imperative for the personal to be included within the research experiences as they occur, and in later presentation of the research to a wider public: 'personhood cannot be left behind, cannot be left out of the research process. And so we insist that it must be capitalized on, must be made full use of' (Stanley and Wise, 1993:161. See also Ramazangolu, 1992).

This particular study has its origins in what Nava (1992) has called 'local intellectual knowledge'. Drawing on the work of Foucualt, Nava argues that there has been a shift from the researcher as a 'spokesman of the universal' and 'master of truth and justice' (sic) to researchers working at a practical, rather than a theoretical, level 'where their own conditions of life and work situate them' (Nava, 1992). This kind of approach is in the same vein as feminist standpoint theory which is 'the portrayal of social life from the viewpoint of the activity which produces women's social experience' (Abbot and Wallace, 1990:210-11) and which sees women as active subjects. Alanen (1994) has usefully extended the principles of feminist standpoint theory and indicated the value of using standpoint theory as a method in childhood studies. She states:

> 'It .. seems to provide a possible route for advancing to the next phase of theorizing, in childhood studies. The discursive "truth regime" in which childhood is implicated, and the institutionalised practices that have followed, organize for the social category of children particular locations from which they are compelled to participate in everyday social life ... Beginning from where children stand and act, as subjects, in their everyday lives, an account of society from such a point - that is, from a

children's standpoint - becomes conceivable in the same sense as a sociology for women' (1994:9).

Using standpoint theory in child research can, argues Alanen, 'explore, analyse and explicate the worlds that children know as insiders [and] link children's everyday lives with the normal organisations of social relations' (1994:9). She reminds us that the choice of a particular standpoint is 'a political act, for each standpoint implies generational (or childhood) politics in one form or another (Alanen, 1994:9). The standpoint I take is that children are active subjects, competent social actors, and this is reflected in both the area I have chosen to study and in the choice of methods with which to investigate the subject. In setting out the context to the study in this way I am, following Steier (*op cit,*)telling a story about myself, which is eventually to be told through the other participants in this research process.

So who am I? What is my particular standpoint? As a mature student with children who were aged between 10 and 23 at the time the study began, and with young grandchildren, I am living and working in close proximity with both the object of the study and the subjects of my research. Two of the schools used in this study are attended by my children, grandchildren, and their friends - children who visit my house and play games on the same computer which I use to work on and to write about their experiences of playing games - the study which explicates a part of their everyday life. In a very real sense, then, I am engaged with the subjects and objects of my research - this is truly local intellectual work.

What of the particular historical moment the study inhabits? In early 1993 when I was developing the ideas for the thesis, the video game industry was enjoying a boom in sales. My son, who was at that time very shy and isolated from his peers due to continuing health problems, desperately wanted a 'Sega Megadrive' and bought one from his savings. Quite quickly it became clear that owning this machine gave him increased status in the eyes of other boys and his circle of friends increased. Groups of three or four boys were

regularly to be found in my son's bedroom watching each other play, talking and laughing. At the same time, there was concern in the popular press that children were becoming socially isolated because they were playing video games. Personal experience led me to question this kind of assumption. Further, my daughter didn't get to play with the video games to the same extent as my son - he restricted her access to it unless he was very bored and wanted the company. I wanted to know to what extent this fear of children's social isolation being caused through playing video games was justified, and also to see if there were gender differences in video game play, and, if so, what these gender differences were due to.

Living in a small village, in which it is theoretically ideal for children to play outdoors, I had also noticed that very few children were to be seen outside. My house overlooks the playing field which belongs to the local youth club, and so I was in a good position to notice that it was not used. The older teenagers would gather in the village square in the evening, but children between the ages of 6 and 11 - 12 were not generally to be found playing outdoors. Where were the children of this village, and what were they doing? Were they indoors playing video games? Further, would children in the city play video games to the same extent as rural children? There are more commercially provided leisure opportunities for children in the city than there are in the rural area (see Chapter 4), which may mean that city children have less need to use computer and video games for leisure.

The impetus for the research, then, can be said to reflect my gender, age, parental status, social status and geographic location. It takes place in a context of the successful contemporary marketing of a particular leisure product aimed at children, one which prompted fears and concerns in the popular media and among the very people who were purchasing this product for their children - their parents. In focussing on the ownership and use of computer and video games, and examining the leisure activities of children

and young people and the ways in which those activities may be delineated by gender, I am studying theoretically and empirically that which I can see, in practice, in my own home with my own, and other people's, children.

Methodology - researching children's lives

Choosing a methodology for this study was in part affected by the research topic, standpoint chosen and the resources available, and partly by a consideration of the ways in which other researchers had approached the social study of childhood. While several studies of older children and teenagers have been carried out, there have been few studies of very young children. Work which has been done in this area has commonly taken an ethnographic approach (see for example James, 1993, Waksler, 1991). Research which has looked specifically at video games and children have, as I discussed earlier, been mainly psychological in focus, and so have used methods appropriate to that discipline (experimental and other 'scientific' methods). Few of these studies have incorporated the views and opinions of the young people themselves (Hazel, 1996), which is what this study does.

The tools used in this study were a self-completion questionnaire containing a mix of closed and open-ended questions, and a blank page on which the children could write or draw anything they liked. This follows the approach used by Bendelow and Oakley (1992) who, in their study of children's attitudes to, and perceptions of, cancer, used questionnaires for their 15-16 year old sample, and for their 9-10 year olds used a simple interview schedule which involved a 'write and draw' technique. This took the form of a booklet, which asked the children to 'write or draw anything you think keeps you healthy' etc. (1993:6. This technique was also used successfully by O'Brien *et al*, 1996).

My questionnaire was to be administered to children aged between 8 and 18. In addition, unstructured group and individual interviews with children aged between 4 and 16, and interviews with parents were carried out. This research, then, used a multi-method approach which blends quantitative and qualitative approaches, using a quantitative method in order to identify respondents for later in-depth interview. Hakim noted that qualitative and quantitative research methods can be linked by the use of an initial survey. She states that qualitative work carried out after an initial survey can provide 'a rich sampling frame for selecting particular types of respondent for depth interviews ... this type of linkage greatly extends the survey results ..' (Hakim, 1992:32).

Questionnaires have not generally been used with young children. Oakley (1994) contends that this reflects a view that children are not seen as competent as research subjects, since they are not considered to be able to express themselves (at least in adult terms. See also Fine and Sandstrom, 1988). The questionnaire used in the primary school was developed and refined several times and tested on children as young as 7. Because it required self-completion, the children studied had to be able to read well enough to comprehend the questions. However, I would argue that children of any age are capable of giving accurate responses to an interviewer administered questionnaire - indeed as an undergraduate I successfully carried out such research with children as young as 3. What I am arguing is that implicit in the methodology of the present study is a view of children and young people as competent social actors, rather than as objects of investigation who are considered unable to make decisions about filling in survey forms.

A view of children as being unable to be full participants in the research process reflects a particular social construction of childhood as immature and in need of adult interpretation. I am therefore taking the children and young

people's accounts of their leisure activities at face value, for as James argues, this is in line with an approach which credits children as competent social actors and thinkers (James, 1993:102; see also James, Jenks and Prout, 1998).

It has been noted that the use of group interviews allows a wider perspective on issues, in that the presence of others can lead to individuals expressing different perspectives than those given in one-to-one situations. This may provide richer information for the researcher (May, 1993:95). In the in-depth ethnographic interview[1], the informant teaches the researcher:

> 'The major purpose of an in-depth ethnographic interview is to learn to see the world from the eyes of the person being interviewed. In striving to come closer to understanding people's meanings, the ethnographic interviewer learns from them as informants and seeks to discover how they organise their behaviour. In this approach the researcher asks those who are being studied to become the teachers and to instruct her or him in the ways of life they find meaningful' (Ely *et al*, 1991:58).

In interviewing children and young people, however, Fine and Sandstrom (1988) highlight possible problems around gathering meanings. They argue that younger children may not be able to articulate their world reflexively 'at least in terms of "adult" modes of discourse'. These writers advocate making children into "strangers" and suspending our common-sense understandings in order to get a sense of what it means to be a child (Fine and Sandstrom 1988:47). James (1993) warns against over-emphasising children's 'otherness', however. What is needed, she argues, is not to make the subjects of study 'strangers', but through reflexivity in the research process, to 'see from different vantage points that which I thought I knew' (James, 1993:14). In this way, children and young people can be given a voice through the research process which neither accentuates their marginality (from adulthood) nor denies their realities.

The development of the research process

Here I want to highlight some of the ways in which this research was shaped and affected by and through the process of carrying out research with children. Beginning with a description of the original methods identified before the research process began, I show how these original aims became transformed into the actual research. Some researchers who have carried out work with children argue that children and young people should not be approached without first gaining permission from adult gatekeepers, due to 'stranger/danger' notions: 'Researchers have the obligation to understand how the concerns of parents affect what can be done with their children, given the images of social problems in society' (Fine and Sandstrom, 1988:33).

For the purpose of this research, access had to be negotiated with the Local Education Authority (LEA), individual schools (which involved going through the process of police clearance), teachers, parents, and lastly (and controversially in this instance) the children themselves. In its original conception, this research was originally intended to take a multi-method approach, with the emphasis being on techniques at the qualitative end of the continuum. Firstly, there was to be a questionnaire delivered to a random sample of 100 children in each of two secondary schools, and 50 children in each of two primary schools. These questionnaires would provide a general overview of the extent of ownership and use of computers and video games. More importantly, the questionnaire would be a means of gaining access to a sample of 10 children at each secondary school and five children at each primary school for in-depth ethnographic interviews and, through the children, access would be gained to parents. In this was the hope that I would be able to carry out some participant observation in homes, and this was to have been the main focus of the study. The research was intended to include a comparative aspect, as 2 of the schools would be sited in the city, and 2 sited in the rural coastal area.

Gaining access to schools

The headteacher at the rural secondary school, Windytown, knew me quite well, both as a parent of a pupil at that school and because I had done earlier research there which had resulted in the setting up of an 'anti-bullying' policy for the school. During an early discussion where I outlined my plans to him, he offered to let me survey the whole school, saying that he would suspend the school day for 15 minutes so that every child in the school could fill out a questionnaire.

The head of Greenlands upper school passed on the introductory letter I sent him to the head of lower school. The upper school was at that time undergoing an OFSTEAD inspection and so the head declined to take part. In negotiating access to the lower school, on hearing about the offer to survey all the school from the head of Windytown, the head of Greenlands lower school gave me the same offer. At Greenlands, then, there was no opportunity to survey children older than 13.

Thus the questionnaire quickly became more important than I had intended. This also meant that the way the questionnaire was to be designed and delivered had to be changed - it had originally been intended that the questionnaire would be interviewer administered, and was designed appropriately. With a time limit imposed by the schools of 15 minutes, and because there would be no interviewer present to clarify and explain questions, it became necessary to re-draft the schedule.

I had also negotiated access to a primary school in the city through a contact made during earlier research. However, as the time for fieldwork for the thesis approached, I was unable to contact this staff member. After trying to gain access for several weeks, the head of that school advised me that as the

member of staff who had agreed to the study was indefinitely away from school through illness, she felt it best that the school declined to take part.

Gaining access to Seaville Primary was made much easier by my close relations with that school and the staff[2]. I was allowed open access at any time in this school, although there was a degree of reciprocity required. This varied from helping in the classroom to completely reorganising and re-cataloguing the school library.

From the neat, comparative, random sample I had envisaged, then, during the process of gaining access the shape and extent of the study shifted towards the quantitative end of the continuum. There were to be around 2,000 questionnaires[3] delivered to two secondary schools and fifty to the rural primary school. To some extent the comparative aspect had been lost, although this was more than compensated for by having been offered the rare opportunity to survey such a large sample.

<u>Gaining access to children</u>

A letter was sent to the parent or parents of each child in each of the three schools (see appendix 2) via the school, requesting permission for their child to take part, and also asking parents to volunteer for interviews, which it was hoped would lead on to access being gained for observation purposes. If parents were willing for their children to take part, they need do nothing, but if there were any objections, they were to return a tear-off slip from the letter to the school requesting that their child be excluded from the research. No parents indicated that they would like their child to be excluded from the research. Only 13 parents indicated that they would like to be involved in the research (see below).

It was important to the aims of the study to obtain full informed consent from the children and young people themselves. Working within a feminist

framework which stresses that the researcher addresses notions of power and reciprocity in fieldwork relations (Mies, 1993), I asked that each school stress to the children that they need not take part in the research if they didn't wish to. This was met with considerable resistance from the headteachers involved. The head of Seaville Primary explained that to give the children the opportunity to decline to take part in the research meant more work for the staff, and also that 'if you give them the chance to say no they won't do it' (see also Solberg, 1996). Delamont has also noted that in her research in her own old school, none of the pupils she studied were asked for their permission to be researched. She contends that this was due to what she calls 'the old girl network' (Delamont, 1984:25) - because she was an ex-pupil of the school, she was given a privileged position. In the event, as I will discuss later, the children who didn't want to take part used their own strategies of resistance.

For the secondary schools, I offered to come to school assemblies to explain to the children what the research was for and what taking part involved. This offer was well received by the staff (for whom daily assembly is a chore) and also by the pupils, who appreciated a new face on the stage. It was also of benefit to me - as the questionnaire was now to be so large that I would be unable to deliver it personally I was at least partially reassured that to some extent the principle of informed consent was being met.

<u>The schools</u>

The primary school is situated in the village where I live, and where my youngest child was a pupil at the time of the fieldwork. This small village, which I have called Seaville, is located on the extreme east coast of the East Riding of Yorkshire. There were at the time of the research around 120 pupils in school, aged between 3 and 11, drawn from the village and the surrounding hamlets and villages. This school is a feeder school for the rural secondary school which I used in the study. The children in the school are of

mainly working class background. There is high unemployment in this rural area, and many of the population that are employed work as farm labourers, cleaners and so on.

The rural secondary school, Windytown High, is around 7 miles away from Seaville. Windytown is a moderately sized rural town. There is no local industry, apart from a fading seaside trade. This school had approximately 1,200 pupils on the roll at the time of the fieldwork aged between 11 and 18, and again the children attending this school were mainly of working class background. The school traditionally had a poor educational reputation, but was improving under the leadership of a dynamic young headteacher who was concerned to actively promote community involvement.

The urban school, Greenlands, is situated in the leafy suburbs of a large city in Yorkshire. This school has traditionally held a good reputation in the city, and is commonly over-subscribed. The size of the school is comparable to Windytown High, but the class background is overwhelmingly middle class. The school is on a split site, with the lower school (where the fieldwork was carried out) catering for 11 - 14 year olds, and the upper school for 15 -18 year olds.

The sample[4]

26 girls and 26 boys from the primary school, aged between 8 and 11 (mean age = 9), completed a questionnaire (see appendix 3). In addition, interviews were carried out with a total of 41 children from the primary schools. Interviews with the very youngest children (4 - 8 year olds) were carried out in groups with between 3 and 5 children of both sexes in each group.

754 children aged between 11 and 18 (mean age = 13.6) from Windytown High completed a questionnaire (see appendix 4). Of these, 347 were girls and 404 were boys. 3 respondents did not indicate their sex. Interviews were

carried out with 20 children aged 11 - 15. The older children who had volunteered and been selected for interview failed to turn up, as the school had arranged the interviews on the last day of term for that age group (i.e. after their exams had finished) and those pupils were all in the pub.

At Greenlands, 805 children aged between 11 and 14 (mean age = 12.3) completed questionnaires. 379 were girls and 422 were boys, with 4 respondents not indicating their sex. Interviews were carried out with 13 young people, all aged 13 - 14.

It should be noted that all of the children and parents interviewed were white. This geographic area has a very low ethnic minority population. Because the questionnaires were anonymous I cannot estimate the proportion that were non-white.

Delivering the questionnaire

Once access to each school had been negotiated and staff had seen and approved a copy of the questionnaire, the questionnaires were delivered. At the primary school each child in the top two classes (ages 8 - 11) completed a questionnaire while I was present, so that I could clarify issues and explain any questions the children had.

In the secondary schools, I delivered the questionnaires to the office of each headteacher. They were then responsible for handing each tutor group teacher a bundle of questionnaires and separate slips (which the children could complete if they wanted to take part in interviews). Some teachers allowed the children to complete the questionnaires in the PSE (personal and social education) session, others used the registration period. The heads of school called me to collect the completed questionnaires and interview slips when they had received them back from the individual teachers. 91 children volunteered for interviews from Greenlands School and from these, 4 groups

of five children were selected. At Windytown High, 192 pupils volunteered and 6 groups of 3, 2 groups of 2 and 1 group of 4 were selected. Interviews were arranged through the head teachers, who informed the children when and where to turn up to see me. At both schools I was allocated a 30 minute slot for interviews over the lunch period. No interview took longer than this, and for various reasons which I will expand on later, some were considerably shorter.

The questionnaire

The questionnaires for the primary and secondary pupils were slightly different in presentation and form. Children were asked a combination of open and closed questions which allow greater detail. Open questions mean that the respondent is not forced to choose between categories which the researcher has imposed, but can give replies which are meaningful to them (Gilbert 1993). I decided not to ask questions about the employment background of the children's parents in order to calculate class for ethical reasons - it occurred to me that some of the children might not actually know what their parents did, or if the parents were unemployed the child might have felt some stigma about giving their response. Instead I used as a partial class analysis the headteachers' interpretation of the overall class background of each school.

Most of the questions were straightforward. The main difference between this survey and others concerned with children's leisure lies in the way that I ask about what the respondents like to do out of school. Most studies of children and leisure (or use of media) will ask how often or for how long a particular activity is done. For example, Hendry's (1993) study asked how many times a week a particular activity (going to the cinema, etc.) was carried out. In his studies of video games, Griffiths (1993; 1996) asks how long children play for, which enables him to make predictions in line with his

theory of technological addiction. In this questionnaire, I instead asked the children what they *liked* doing - this gives a qualitatively different response. The question was phrased 'tell me the three things you like doing best when you're not at school'. I did not rank the answers in any particular order of preference, although the children themselves may have done this when filling in their answers. Answers gathered from this kind of question allow us to see the child's own perceptions of what is enjoyable to them. For example, while many children have tasks or chores to do each day - practising a musical instrument, housework, homework - which would show up on a questionnaire designed to elicit frequencies of activities, asking the children what they like doing would not (and indeed does not. See appendix 1) reveal these tasks in the analysis.

Children as questionnaire respondents

As I have indicated, the choice of a questionnaire as a research tool with children indicates my concept of the child as a competent social actor. Virtually none of the children had difficulty following the instructions, and the questionnaires were well received. They *"made a change from doing work"*. The use of the blank back page for drawing or writing generated a vast amount of material, with many of the children taking great care over their drawings or their written contribution.

The aspect of this part of the fieldwork I have found particularly interesting is the way that some children (notably those over 13) used the questionnaire to resist taking part in the study or to subvert the tool itself. For example, where I had asked the respondents to 'circle one answer', one 14 year old boy from Windytown High circled 'one answer' everywhere it appeared. A small number of children failed to fill in any answers at all, while others copied exactly what their friend had put. This does not, in my opinion, give any real cause for concern in terms of the overall validity of the questionnaire (because the proportion of these kind of responses was so small), but raises interesting

aspects about filling in questionnaires. Firstly, the questionnaires were clearly sometimes filled in as a joint project some of the time. Sometimes a series of questionnaires (i.e., with sequential ID numbers) were identical in their responses, and I give an example of this below.

In response to the question 'tell me three things that you like to do when you're not at school', some of the children wrote things which I categorised as 'age-inappropriate' in analysis. As the table below shows, these activities were said to be being done (although they may not have been as I discuss below) more by the older rural children. Comments included such things as 'getting drunk' 'going joy-riding' 'shagging my boyfriend' (which was coded as 'opposite sex').

Table 3.1 Age inappropriate activities by age, sex and location
(N for the whole sample: boys n = 825, girls n = 725. Figures are percentages and do not add to 100 as each respondent could give more than one reply)

	urban girls 11-13 (n = 379)	urban boys 11-13 (n = 422)	rural girls 11-13 (n = 167)	rural boys 11-13 (n = 206)	rural girls 14-18 (n = 180)	rural boys 14-18 (n = 198)
alcohol	0	1.4	0	0	5.0	5.6
drugs	0	0	0	0	2.2	5.6
cigarettes	0	0.5	0.6	0	1.7	0.5
joyriding	0	0.2	0	0	0	1.5
opposite sex	2.4	0.7	0.6	0.5	6.1	2.0
TOTAL	2.4	2.9	1.2	0.5	15.0	15.2

I have called this category 'age inappropriate' because many of the activities mentioned within it are proscribed - either by law or convention - for children under specific ages. It should be noted that these activities may not be really done, but rather may instead be what these children would like to do. Most of these activities are mentioned more by older children than younger, with the exception of 'opposite sex'. This activity is mentioned more by girls than by boys. A group of girls from the urban school wrote the following comments (which are reproduced exactly as they wrote them) on the back pages of their questionnaires. All the girls are thirteen years old.

id. no. 20395   *playing with Dollys (e.g. barbie or sindy)*
id. no. 20396   *I like playing with my barbies (with my*
          sisters)
          I like playing on the computer
          I like going out
          I like drinking alcohol (and taking drugs)
          at the weekend [taking drugs was crossed
          out]
          I like playing with my friends
id. no. 20405   *They keep you amused (computers)*
          I like to play with Barbie and Sindy
          [drawing of doll, labelled 'sindy']
id. no. 20406   *I like playing on musical instruments eg.*
          guitar, keyboard, piano and organ. I like
          reading war and peace, it is a very hard book to
          get into.
          I play the computer to relax my Brain. I also
          like dressing my dolls. I like the occasional
          fag. I also like sleeping around.
id. no. 20411   *you shouldn't play on the computer too*
          often and children who are v. young
          shouldn't I like sleeping around in the
          park when I go out on a night with my
          friend all like it too it makes us feel older
          and sophisticated we get a kick out of it

Clearly some of the girls had begun to write what they like doing accurately, but because they were filling in the questionnaires together, they started 'egging each other on' to put more 'shocking' things down. By chance, these girls were in the first group that I interviewed at this school. Late in the interview I was talking about what the children had written on the questionnaires when David butted in:

SM   *one of the things that came out on the*
          questionnaire, you know when you were asked to
          put your favourite activities, girls like to be with
          their friends...
David   *[pointing at Mike] 'e put shop at Netto. That*
          was 'im!
          [Giggles from all the girls]
Leena   *well I put playing with barbie dolls*
          [giggles]
SM   *Ahh! I remember those ones!*
Jenny   *Paula put play with my dolls!*

Leanne	*I'm not gonna say what I put*
SM	*I remember the group of you that all put barbie dolls and other things*
Leanne	*I think I put the other things, actually*
SM	*was that true then?*
Leanne	*yeah*
Leena	*Leanne, you dirty girl*
	[all the girls are giggling and laughing and talking about who put what]
Leanne	*how can you remember what we put?*
SM	*because I spent hours and hours going through them ..*
Leanne	*do you have any daughters or sons?*

It seems that in the main the young people put some activities down for a joke - it seems unlikely that these girls do actually play with dolls - and then some of them take the joke further. It obviously provided enjoyment to them while filling in the questionnaire, and the enjoyment was repeated during the interview. When I asked Leanne whether what she had put down was true, she admitted it, but in a very defensive way. I could not tell whether it really was true, or whether she had to admit it to save face in front of the others, or to impress the interviewer. She rapidly changed the subject, and began asking me about my family, and I decided not to pursue the subject so that I could save her any further embarrassment. Hay (1997) used as a research resource notes containing 'dirty writing' which the girls in her study sent to each other during lessons. She states:

> 'Their discourse about sex takes place both under and beneath the teacher gaze. The shared frisson of subverting the power of others (masculinity/adult/teacher authority) is captured as they contrive their illicit sexualized girls' talk, conscious of, but defying the powerful excluded others' (Hay, 1997:82).

In the excerpts from questionnaires and interviews presented here, the children are similarly excluding and subverting the power of their teachers (who were present when the questionnaires were filled in) and the researcher. It was in the drawings that much of this kind of activity was represented. For example, the drawing reproduced below is by a 13 year old girl:
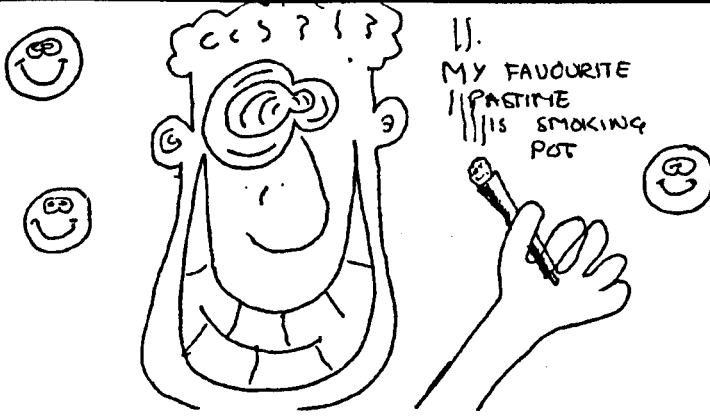
For this age group, however, this kind of drawing was the exception, but becomes more common in the drawings of the older children, where there were several drawings of joints, marijuana plants and so on. I wondered whether the young people who indicated that they liked these sorts of activities were actually doing them, or trying to shock the researcher, so in many of the interviews I asked what the general opinion was. All of the young people interviewed agreed that in some cases it was true, but that some of the people who had written these things were 'just trying to be hard' or that they were 'having a laugh' - at the researchers expense, no doubt!

Some of those taking part in the study did not want to tell me what their favourite activities were - in fact one 15 year old girl wrote on her questionnaire 'why do you want to know what we do outside school anyway (you bitch)!'. A similar kind of response was encountered by Gordon et al (1997) who recount the way that one of their respondents had completed her questionnaire. Like the present study, this survey was administered in the school setting: after many of the questions the respondent had written 'what the fuck has this to do with you!'. Gordon et al argue that this girl was showing 'hidden resistance' - quiet and generally alone, this was one way in which she was able to use power (Gordon, 1997:2). Hay (1997) reports that one of her first contacts actually ran away from her and hid behind a teacher in order to resist taking part in her study!

While not always as explicitly stated as in the previous excerpt, a few of the young people in this part of the study resisted giving this kind of information, although only 63 did not write anything at all. What was more common was to write 'strange' activities - 133 (15%) of the secondary school pupils who completed the back page of the questionnaire used it to write 'strange' things. While the excerpts included here are some of the exceptions, they are included to illustrate on the one hand some broad theoretical issues in methodology generally, and also to highlight important issues in research with children. That is to say, that children as research subjects are not necessarily a 'powerless' group. They are, as I show here, capable of resistance.

The following transcript of one such back page gives a flavour of the kinds of things which were written and/or drawn:

> id. no. 30346(male, 14)
> Drawing: Various doodles of people.
> Text: My Mums Fingernails MIGHT
>   BE CRIMPY But my DAD BURNS WATER
>   Just DuN IN AN ERIK
>   SANTAS NEAR
>   Im off ME FUCKIN HEAD
>   MY DADS GOT A Prick GUN
>   AND HE'S COMMING TO GET
>   YOU

The questionnaire that this boy filled in, and the two following extracts from questionnaires, were clearly filled in together, as the ID numbers follow in sequence. In response to the question 'tell me three things you like to do best when you're not at school' these boys wrote:

> id. no. 30344   I like standing alone collecting eyelashes from
>   the side of the road
>   I like drinking milk through a straw under a
>   leaking roof on Sundays
>   I like clipping my nails with my dad's tea leafs
>   when travelling to the moon collecting cheese
> id. no. 30345   cake eating competitions
>   studying limescale on the kettle

While these boys have followed the instructions on the questionnaire accurately, they have resisted actually telling me what it is that they really like doing by inventing outrageous activities. There were several back pages on which some children (boys almost exclusively) had drawn genitalia, or written offensive comments. The first one of these I came across while coding the questionnaires was a full page drawing of an erect penis. A speech bubble was drawn emerging from the tip, with 'gizza kiss' written inside it. While when I first came across this I was quite shocked, feeling almost that it was a personal attack. After all, all the children had seen me in their assemblies - a rather heavy, middle aged woman from a University. But the more instances of this there were, the more it seemed to me that such drawings were a way of resisting adult control over their time and actions. Reproduced here is another such, drawn by a 13 year old boy from the rural school.
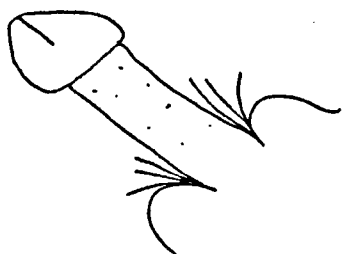
It was not only the boys who drew this kind of picture. The drawing below was by a 16 year old girl from the rural school.

MUSA
FLY !
NAT
VEST
BRA
JAMES
JAMIE
YO DUDE
CRAP

Page 3   SAM11/20/94
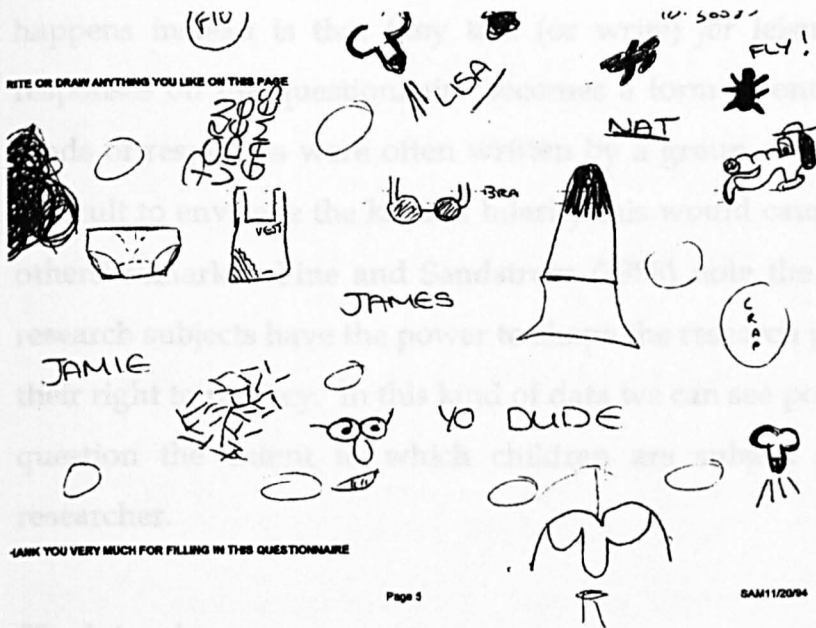
As we can see, there are numerous doodles and names drawn here, as well as the several drawings of genitalia. It is noticeable that in this girl's drawing, the male genitalia is not as accurately drawn as in the one by the boy reproduced above. Her drawings are more like cartoons while the boys' drawing is quite realistic. It may be, then, that this girl has never actually seen a penis, and that she has drawn them for effect, rather than to represent any real knowledge of sexual organs, or indeed, any sexual activity.

A fifteen year old girl from the rural secondary school seemed aware that this kind of thing might happen. She wrote:

> I don't see why people have to make such a fuss about computer
> games, ie. You. I find it hard to believe that this questionnaire
> will be of any use to anybody. I think there are more
> worthwhile things that need researching, involved with the
> things that young people may become addicted to, and I feel
> that this whole project should be rethought before continuing.
> Whether your views are that young people do not become
> addicted to computer games, **I do not think you will get a
> realistic response from this questionnaire, except from
> the 1st and 2nd year.** (my emphasis)

Although her views were somewhat pessimistic (and incidentally depressed me for a while, as I took her comments to heart), it can be said that for some of the young people, talking about their leisure is resisted, although what

happens instead is that they talk (or write) *for* leisure. Writing unusual responses on the questionnaire becomes a form of entertainment. As these kinds of responses were often written by a group of young people, it is not difficult to envisage the kind of hilarity this would cause when they see each others' remarks. Fine and Sandstrom (1988) note the ways that adolescent research subjects have the power to shape the research process and to exercise their right to privacy. In this kind of data we can see power in action, and can question the extent to which children are subject to the power of the researcher.

The Interviews

In the primary school, the very youngest children (4 - 7 years) were selected for interview on the basis of a simple random sample using the school register as my sampling frame. The older children indicated on the questionnaire whether they wanted to be interviewed, and whether they wanted to be interviewed in a group or by themselves. I collected the children from their class, and took them to the 'quiet' room where I was to record the interviews on audio tape. The interviews were all carried out with myself and the children sitting on the floor in a circle with the tape recorder in the middle.

The quiet room is situated in the centre of the school, with access to the hall and library through two doors. This room contains a TV and video, comfortable seating, an OHP, and is where music lessons are taken and the musical instruments stored. Far from being a 'quiet' room, at times it resembles anything but. Children come in and out collecting various items on behalf of the staff, and the children taking part in the interviews often became all too easily distracted, to the extent of sometimes playing with the percussion instruments which were in a box on the floor. The following extract from a transcript of a group interview with 5 and 6 year olds shows this, and shows the way that I struggled to keep the interviews to the point:

SM:	... *What else do you all like to do?*
Carol:	*I like to play my instruments.*
SM:	*What instruments have you got?*
Carol:	*I play the tambourine.[The box with the tambourines in was next to her, and she kept touching them. She takes a tambourine out and shakes it]*
Helen:	*I've got a tambourine as well.*
SM:	*Do you all use the computers at school? [....]*
SM:	*What computer games do you play?*
Carol:	*Tambourines, there's loads, loads of my favourites, like tambourines.*

Often I became exasperated that the children weren't answering my questions, but were throwing in remarks, shouting to each other and wandering off the subject. On reflection, however, I can see that their incidental remarks were pertinent, had I chosen to listen. For example, during one interview when I was asking the children what they liked to do out of school, one child was shouting to me 'you know my dog ... you know my dog'. At the time I failed to respond to this as I was trying to get information about the focus of the study. On reflection it can be seen that actually this child was telling me what she liked out of school - her dog. What I was unconsciously doing was responding as a parent or a teacher - in an adult role - and ignoring 'unsuitable' behaviour (that is, interrupting and shouting). Had I been listening more carefully, as a researcher, many potentially interesting avenues could have been opened up (see James, 1993, Solberg, 1996). Interviews with the older primary children were less fraught, but also in hindsight less interesting.

However, what also became clear to me is that the children's perceptions of who I was affected the interviews - all of the children knew me very well, as not only was my child a fellow pupil, but I had been a parent helper in the school for several years before the research. They knew me, then, as a mother and also related to me in a teacher role. During the interviews, however, I was known as 'Laura's mum' - in each interview one or more of the children

would confirm this relationship with me and with each other. This existing relationship with the children made the interviews easier in some respects, and yet at the same time more difficult. Those who knew me in a 'teacher' role from my time working in the school were more focused on the interview, and gave more thought to responses, whereas those who knew me as someone's mum tended to treat the interview in a more light-hearted manner. In other words, I had more authority in the children's eyes if they knew me as a teacher. What this means more generally is that your relationship with the children does have some effect on the way that the interviews progress (see for example Mandell, 1991).

In the secondary schools, children were self selected for interview through the slips they had filled in which indicated whether or not they wanted to be interviewed. Reading through these slips, many of the children had written not just their names, but the names of their friends, and specifically asked to be interviewed with them. I therefore used the children's friendship groups as the basis for selecting interviewees.

At Windytown High, the headteacher allocated the school's interview room for the purpose of the interviews. This room is situated down the corridor where the head and deputy head have their offices, and where the bursars office is. It is a part of the school where children only go on 'official business' - for detentions, late passes or to pass on messages on the behalf of staff. As a result of this, and due to the fact that I am not personally known to the children of this school (apart from those who were either friends of my son, or who lived in the same village as me), the first 10 minutes of each interview were quite tense, and I had to spend time putting the children at ease with me. Indeed, after the first interview had ended, the group of girls who had taken part encountered another group waiting to come in. 'What was it like?' asked the waiting group. 'It wasn't that bad ... it was quite good fun' the girls replied.

At Greenlands School the arrangements for the interviews were less conducive. The room allocated for the interviews was a large first-floor class room which faced onto the playground. There was consequently considerable noise drifting up into the room. It also contained a door which led to what I believe was a rest room or store room of some kind, and staff were passing through the class room and through the connecting door constantly during the interviews. Several times during each interview the head would come in, and ask how long I would be. The following is an extract from my field diary and reflects my impressions of these interviews.

The room I've had, although I asked for a quiet room, is one which leads to another room, so there are people (staff mainly) in and out all the time. This disrupts the interview, I forget where I am, the kids go quiet. She said she had booked in 8 kids, this is after I had asked for no more than 4 at a time, and again none of them turned up. She went in the corridor and grabbed two kids, one of whom turned out to be my cousin's son. This grabbing kids to 'volunteer', (she laughed "they've volunteered, but they don't know what for", and then she bustled out of the room), is problematic. I always stress to the kids that they don't have to take part, and request their permission before I start. This is even more emphasised when the kids aren't true volunteers, and yet how can they decline? When she has told them to do it? Anyway, the interview was almost 10 minutes late in starting, and she came in 15 minutes later to ask me to hurry up because one of the kids was needed for something. When I saw her outside, I asked was I to come in tomorrow as arranged. She said "well, have you got enough now?" hopefully, while nodding at me to let me know that the appropriate response was yes. Then she said "well, they're not turning up are they?" I said, "would you like me to call it a day?" and she was obviously relieved. She was about to turn away when she turned back and said "can we have the results fairly soon?". I reminded her that I had offered a month or more ago to come in and do some assemblies to feed back the questionnaire results to the kids, and she said that the assemblies were all booked, they're so busy with sports days and things, so could I just print some off for her. The whole idea was to involve the kids, and now I feel that she's not going to share the results with them, but is keeping them for other reasons. Research in schools means that the researcher is to a

large extent powerless to either direct or control the research
process. There are so many other people involved. You really
are subject to their whim. Everything takes far too long to
arrange, and you have to fit in with everything they want.
Things go wrong all the time - for example at this school, one
year head either forgot or decided not to hand out the interview
slips, so I was limited in the ages of the kids I could interview.
I lost the 14-15 year olds. Because when people didn't turn up
she was grabbing them out of the detention room, there is a
male bias. These 'volunteers' really aren't interested in co-
operating, they didn't fill the slips in and so have no interest in
helping.

The interviews at this school, while carried out in difficult conditions, were,
however, by no means a failure. The way that this head conducted the
arrangements, and herself, seems to me to be an attempt to control the
research process, and to ensure (by her and other staff's frequent visits to the
room) that the children didn't tell me anything that would reflect badly on the
school. I include this discussion here to illustrate the way that doing research
with children is very rarely a matter just between the child and the researcher,
but is subject to constraints at all levels, which have the effect of altering the
nature of the research to some extent (Hay, 1997; Mandell, 1991).

Interviews with parents

As mentioned earlier, only 13 parents in total out of a potential 1,600 (whose
children completed questionnaires) volunteered to take part in the research.
Of these 13, interviews were successfully arranged with 9. None of the
primary school parents volunteered for interview. To a large extent this
might be due to the siting of the research - i.e. in my own village community.
As Ely *et al* (1991) note, being too close to home in ones choice of research
setting can be problematic in that people may not see you in a researcher role,
but as a friend or neighbour (1991:28-9).

Only one parent had daughters only, the others had either only one son, or
one son and daughters. Interestingly, although these parents lived in a

variety of areas and types of housing (semi-detached, detached, farmhouses) and had varying occupations, each interview was reminiscent of the others. It seemed at times as though I was interviewing the same parents. Mainly middle class, it was almost as if there was a 'script' for the interview. Each parent attempted to portray their child(ren) as not being affected by playing video games, and that the parent had the use of these items 'under control' in a 'sensible' manner. To some extent this reflects research subjects' interpretations of what it is the researcher might be looking for (Gilbert, 1993). It was commonly assumed by the parents I spoke to that I was investigating the negative 'effects' of video games, and perhaps parents had prepared themselves for interview accordingly. In this way the interviews with parents in this study can be seen as a public presentation of 'good' parenting.

This kind of assumption on the part of parents might also explain why so few volunteered to take part in the research - if that family had a child who played video games very frequently, then holding your family life-style up to examination by an unknown researcher may have been a daunting prospect. The lack of response from parents encountered indicates clearly the difficulties of gaining access to private space when the research concerns children.

However, managing and arranging the interviews with parents awoke trepidation on the part of the researcher as well as on the part of parents. I had worried about being seen as an 'expert' who might be expected to have answers to the concerns of parents. Brechin (1993) sums up some of my feelings about this stage of the research when she writes:

> 'I always felt uncomfortable asking people to do me the favour of acting as research subjects. I felt doubtful about the validity or morality of my claim on their time. Could I really justify it? It was true that they didn't mind, and they could refuse. I think they also quite enjoyed it, on the whole. But they assumed it must be important and worthwhile and accorded me the status I

took upon myself ... of someone who could request their co-operation for my own ends ...' (Brechin, 1993:72).

In practice, most of the interviews with parents were enjoyable and informative both for me and for the parents involved, with both parties gaining something from the encounter. Almost all of the parents gave me support and encouragement during interviews, as well as their time and attention. Some, but not all, of the interviews became almost a social occasion, sharing tea and laughter with the participants. As Oakley (1981) has stated:

> 'In most cases, the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personality in the relationship' (1981:41. See also Ribbens, 1989).

While the relations between me and the parents I interviewed could not always be seen as non-hierarchical (sometimes the parent being interviewed was in a position of power over the interviewer, at least for the duration of the interview!), it was certainly the case that during those interviews which were more of a social occasion, where I felt I could invest my personality, the interviewing episode, and the resulting data, were much more satisfying.

Where there were sons and daughters in the house, the interviews with parents centred almost exclusively around the son - the boy's name would be mentioned twice as much as the daughters. While this is usually because the boys would be more involved with the computer/video game than the girls, it also reflects a masculinist bias when discussing technology. Interestingly, and unusually in research with families, it was also common for fathers to volunteer for interview, which indicates a male concern with technology (see Wajcman 1991). Of the nine parents I interviewed, 4 of those who had volunteered were fathers. Of the mothers, one was a single parent (so had no man to speak for the family), three were employed at a higher status than their partner (and were also in two cases involved in higher education

themselves), and in the remaining family, the father took little part in the day-to-day family life and showed no interest in the children's activities.

This is in contrast with the work of Edwards *et al* (1997). Looking at step-parenting, they found that overwhelmingly women mediated their access to step-families. They argue that even when their first point of contact into a step family was male, negotiations for access was done by female partners. They state:

> 'There is plenty of research evidence ... showing that it is principally women who hold responsibility across the family-public world boundaries for linking and co-ordinating children's and partner's needs with services and agencies' provisions and requirements ... they also mediate kin and friendship relations on behalf of their partner and children within the boundary of the private sphere ... and took on this role in our research in mediating our access to others within their step-clusters. While this situation can be regarded as a function of their powerless position and constraining association with family life and the affectual/emotional aspects of the social world, at the same time it also potentially vests power in their hands' (Edwards *et al*, 1997:10-11).

What does it mean, then, when as in my research, men are the point of entry to families? If women are the mediators in the research process when dealing with 'affectual/emotional' aspects and thus have the potential for power, men as mediators in the research process when looking at items of technology deny any potential for women to use the research process for power. It would seem from my research that only when the female partner has a higher employment status (or her partner is not present or is not interested) can she use the research process in the way that Edwards *et al (ibid)* describe.

Analysis

When the questionnaires were completed, each response was post-coded for analysis. For the closed questions (age, sex, do you have a video game, etc.) this was a straightforward exercise. For open questions, where the range of

possible answers to any question is much wider and where much richer data is gathered, this involves a process of reading through several completed questionnaires in order to get a feel for the data, and then coding according to categories or themes (Gilbert, 1993). For the question which asked children about their favourite out of school activities, however, I decided to theme into categories as little as possible, so that the richness of the data was not lost. In this way there were a total of 44 different out of school activities mentioned. Even with the care taken in this way to maximise the breadth and depth of data, some detail is lost purely because no interviewer is present to prompt the respondent to elaborate on responses. For example, a popular activity for the girls in the study was 'being with friends'. This finding is important in itself, as I go on to argue in Chapter 4, but the detail of what is involved with being with friends is lost. However, the questionnaire is a useful tool for identifying areas of further interest (Hakim, 1992), and this particular questionnaire was useful in this respect.

After coding, data entry was done at the University computer centre, where the staff entered the coded responses into an ASCII file, which when completed was transferred to the computer package 'SPSS for Windows' where the material was analysed.

The interview material was analysed in a manner following 'grounded theory'. This is said to be where:

> '... data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal
> relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory,
> then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what
> is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge (Strauss and Corbin,
> 1990:23).

The interview material was organised and then coded into conceptual categories which were created out of the data itself and which, Ely *et al* contend:

> 'At its most useful the process of establishing categories is a very close, intense conversation between a researcher and the data that has implications for ongoing method, descriptive reporting, and theory building' (Ely *et al*, 1991:87).

Analysis of material from ethnographic interviews involves not merely a description of what was said, but involves the researcher in a search for the *import* of what was said (Geertz 1973). In this way, theoretical or conceptual categories were created from the data and used to build a 'thick description' of the meanings of computer and video game play for children.

In conclusion

The topic and the methodology for this study developed out of my particular 'local intellectual work' as I describe in the introduction. It is also located at a particular historical point in time. The methods used reflect my concern to acknowledge children as competent social actors, and I have shown some of the ways in which they resist the research process. I have also discussed the ways that interaction with gatekeepers who must be approached in gaining access to children shapes the research, and, in this case, caused it to be radically redesigned. What has also become clear through this discussion is that the issue of space became central to the research process. The rooms which were made available, the kinds of space I could not get access to, all of these also had an effect on the way that the research progressed. To discuss these issues, I have at times purposely highlighted particular problems. This is not to say that the research itself was problematic. Rather, my intention has been to illustrate the often haphazard nature of the research process and the ways in which pragmatism, rather than any sense of methodological purity, rules the research process.

While traditional methods (a questionnaire survey) have been used as part of this study, I am not intending to claim that the findings generated can be generalised to all geographical locations and social settings. The way that the

questionnaire was used to gather qualitative as well as quantitative material, I contend, locates the work towards the qualitative end of the continuum. As Schofield cogently states:

> 'The goal is not to produce a standardised set of results that any other researcher in the same situation or studying the same issues would have produced. Rather it is to produce a coherent and illuminating description of and perspective on a situation that is based on and consistent with detailed study of that situation' (1993:202).

Further, while many studies of children's social worlds have used participant observation as the main research tool (see for example James, 1993; Fine and Sandstrom, 1988; Corsaro, 1990; Mandell, 1991) what I hope that this study shows is that the questionnaire also has a place in child research. The value of any technique depends on the perspective adopted by the researcher and the kind of material which is required. Questionnaires give different data than does observation. As will be seen in the following chapters, while at times the data I present might have benefited from insights gained by more qualitative techniques, some of the material included here could not have been gathered in any other way.

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[1] The style of interviews used in this study can be said to be in-depth rather than ethnographic, although the intention was to ensure the interviews followed the aims of Ely *et al* (1991) as quoted below as nearly as possible. See appendices 5 and 6 for parent and child interview guide.

[2] My own children were past and present pupils here, and I had worked in that school as a parent-helper for several years.

[3] The schools estimated this number of questionnaires and letters to parents which would need to be printed. In the event, 1559 secondary school and 52 primary school children completed questionnaires. I have no information as to whether the estimation was incorrect or whether the missing 400 were non-respondents.

[4] For a concise table listing the stages of the research design and the numbers participating at each stage, see Appendix 7.

Chapter 4: Inside or outside? Spatial and gender differences in preferred leisure activities.

Introduction

The exploration of children and young people's use of computer and video games needs to be set in the wider context of young people's leisure more generally. This is essential when countering the moral panics around leisure generally and video games specifically - as I argued in Chapter 1, the discourse around the use of computer and video games assumes that use of these games has a negative effect on other leisure activities. This chapter, then, examines the favourite leisure activities for the children and young people in this study. This is done both to see how many children mentioned liking to play video games as a favourite out of school activity, and also to situate this within the wider range of activities which are enjoyed by the children and young people in this study.

I also examine whether there are gender, age or spatial (indoor/outdoor; urban/rural) differences in preferred leisure activities among the children in this study, in order to build up as full a picture as possible of the leisure of children and young people in the study areas. Later in the chapter I begin to examine more closely the extent of ownership and use of computer and video games. This chapter, then, examines the place of video game play in relation to other leisure activities in the social life of the child, and the material I present here brings into question the common-sense belief that children who play video games are not doing anything else with their time. We also begin to see the importance of friendship in children's leisure, a theme which will be echoed throughout the thesis.

The literature around children, youth and leisure is generally concentrated around three main areas: youth culture/sub-cultural studies; developmental perspectives and studies which focus on leisure provision, although Griffin (1993) notes that within sociology there are further sub-divisions based around deviance and delinquency. There are few studies of the leisure activities of very young children, with the work of the Newsons (1968, 1976) being a notable exception. Indeed, the lack of literature on children and leisure can be related to the nature of the definitions of leisure which many writers use (see Griffin, 1993 and my earlier discussion in Chapter 2). For example, it has been said that:

> 'Leisure is a capitalist term: it is 'time which is not waged'. It is thus not applicable to married women or children. Children's work is continuous. They are never in control of their times and actions, they can be as constantly called upon to amuse their parents as any Victorian living-in servant to perform a given task - or as summarily dismissed (to 'go and play' or 'go to bed'. Much of their lives is spend (sic) killing time and messing about' (Leonard 1990:68).

What is 'playing' and 'messing about' if not children's form of leisure? This chapter, then, investigates the leisure activities - the playing out, going out and messing about, and more specific activities popular among children and young people aged between 5 and 18.

The first two sections of this chapter explore the responses given to the question 'tell me the three things you like to do best when you're not at school', and complements the statistical data gathered from the questionnaire with excerpts from interviews. The statistical material is presented grouped into categories of age and school location, and is separated according to outdoor and indoor activities. The main points are briefly discussed below each chart. Discussion of the findings and extracts from interviews, which illuminate my discussion, are incorporated throughout the chapter.

While all the children mentioned a wide range of favourite out of school activities, the secondary school children who completed questionnaires mentioned many more activities than did primary school children. There were over 40 activities mentioned by secondary school pupils altogether, ranging from roller-blading to watching the television, although many of the activities were mentioned by only a handful of children, such as 'sleeping' or 'playing with pets'. While the detail gathered in this way from the questionnaire gives a full picture of the kinds of things that children say that they like to do out of school, for the purpose of this discussion, this breadth of detail makes comparison unwieldy. To aid clarity, then, I have restricted analysis and discussion to only the most frequently mentioned activities[1].

Most frequently mentioned favourite outdoor activities

Seaville Primary school children

Chart 4.1: Most frequently mentioned favourite outdoor activities. Primary school children.
(boys N = 26; girls N = 26)

For primary school boys and girls, 'playing out' is the most frequently mentioned activity[2]. Exactly what constitutes playing out is not, however,

something which can be gathered from questionnaires; it is the interview material which allows us to see this more clearly[3]. With the exception of swimming and horse riding, boys mention liking all outdoor activities more than did girls. The youngest children's favourite activities were in the main limited to the home, or close to the home. In group interviews with the 4 - 7 year-olds, none of this age group mentioned activities away from this kind of space, although one or two mentioned family outings to the beach. This is in contrast with the Newsons' study of almost thirty years ago - children as young as four were used, particularly by working class mothers, to run errands to the local shop (1968:71-4). 5 year old Joe liked to go swimming, but said '*I don't go usually. I ask Mum but she doesn't take me*'. The leisure activities of the youngest children in this study are, then, bounded by the house and the garden. Activities which take place outside of these boundaries require parental accompaniment.

Most of the youngest children said that they liked playing outside in their garden, or in someone else's garden, and many of them have a large variety of garden play equipment available to them: swings, tree-houses, climbing frames etc. When I asked what it was that they liked to do, the children often attempted to keep up with, or outdo, each other in terms of belongings. This excerpt shows this and also illustrates that social relations are important; that friendship is a clear feature of these children's leisure.

SM	*What do you like best?*
Tim	*I like Sonic best.*
Anthony	*I like parties best.*
Rachel	*I like riding my bike, I do.*
Paula	*I like riding my scooter.*
Anthony	*I've got a scooter and a bike.*
Tim	*I like riding a bike.*
Anthony	*I've got a tractor and a trailer.*
Rachel	*And riding a scooter and feeding my rabbit ... and I feed it all day!*
Anthony	*I like parties, and watching television when I get home, and people coming to my house, and going to parties 'cos I'm going to one tonight.*

Rachel	*And Becky doesn't feed it.*
SM	*Just you do?*
Rachel	*Yeah, my own rabbit, I got it for my birthday.*
SM	*Yes? That's lovely. What do you call it?*
Rachel	*Errr ... I call it ... err ...Anthony what is it called? You've been to our house.*
Anthony	*I can't remember it's name. I can remember what your kitten's name is.*
Rachel	*Yeah, Chloe .. and sometimes she bites and sometimes she scratches. And sometimes she messes about and she tries to get out ... that's when she's hungry.*

Rachel and Anthony spur each other on in this piece of dialogue, and through it confirm that they are friends; that they go to each others houses and know about each others pets and belongings. The recounting of favourite activities becomes competitive among the children here - each time one of the children mentions an activity, or a belonging, another child adds that to his or her list, until finally Rachel adds in her pets, and in doing this is able to show that Anthony is her friend. What is also clear from this excerpt is that the children are conforming with each other in terms of their belongings. James (1993) has discussed the notion of conformity in children's relationships. She states:

> 'As distinct from the idea of sameness, then, the concept of conformity does not simply involve locating a place for the Self among Others. It opens up the opportunity to permit or forbid Others to find themselves a place within the social group .....' (James, 1993:142).

In this excerpt, all the children could take part and find themselves a place in the group in terms of their toys and belongings.

By the ages of 10 and 11, some of the children are playing away from the house. Damon, for example, goes down to the beach on his own after tea, or goes to the youth club. Amy and June, both aged 11, ride horses every night, either at lessons or exercising friends' ponies. Paul rides his bike down to the nearest village to see if any of his friends are out playing. Stutz's study (1991:7) found that at the ages of eight to nine years old, 83.6% of children

were playing in the garden, compared with 54% of that age group who played in the street. Playing out is mentioned much less in the present study than in that of Stutz - playing out as a favourite activity is mentioned only around 40% of the time. James, Edward and Lauren are 8 years old:

> SM   *So, when it's summer, do you usually play*
>   *outside more or do you play inside?*
> James   *Yes, I play outside most.*
> Edward   *Outside and inside - mostly outside. I make a*
>   *lego model and take it outside to play.*
> SM   *What about you Lauren?*
> Lauren   *I play with my cousins outside.*

Overall the outdoor leisure activities of the primary school boys and girls are broadly similar, with the exception of swimming and horse riding, which are mentioned exclusively by girls. These latter activities are more supervised (and also imply the spending of money) than the more informal 'sport' that the boys mention. Amy and June, both aged 11, ride horses every night, either at riding lessons or exercising friends' ponies.

> June   *I ride horses a lot, and I go down to the stables and help*
>   *with them. And I have to practice my piano, I have*
>   *piano lessons, and ermm I go to ride people's ponies*
>   *during the week and things like that*

June 'has to' practice her piano for the lessons which she takes. The difference between 'having to' do something and doing it because you like it is reflected in the data gathered via the questionnaire as I discussed in Chapter 3. Asking the children what they like doing gives a qualitatively different picture than asking what they do. For example, none of the primary school children who completed a questionnaire mentioned organised activities such as Cubs, Brownies or the youth club as being favourite things to do outside school. Other studies, which have asked what children did in a given time (weekly participation rates, for example), have found that these kinds of organised activities are mentioned frequently (see Hendry *et al* 1993). Stutz (1991) found that 77 of her sample of 199 children aged 7 - 14 (i.e. around 40%) were members of some organised club - Scouts, Brownies, Sea Cadets, etc. In the

present study, this kind of activity was more commonly mentioned in interviews.

> Damon   [pause] Sometimes...... after my tea, I go down
>   the beach. Then it's either youth club, or scouts,
>   or something like that.
> SM.   Do you go to anything like that, Gary?
> Gary   Yeah, I go to youth club and scouts. They're on
>   Mondays and Fridays.

Liking to ride bikes is mentioned more by boys than by girls in this study. In her study, however, Stutz found that riding bikes was enjoyed equally by girls and boys. She informs us that riding a bike for children of this age is:

> '... neither a means of transport nor a sport, but rather an
> instrument for enjoying a sense of independence and freedom, as
> well as a means of facing up to the challenges it presents and
> displaying the most recently acquired tricks and techniques'
> (Stutz 1991:8).

If riding bikes is indeed an instrument for independence and freedom, it would seem that the boys in the present study enjoy such dimensions more than the girls. It is likely that boys are given more freedom of movement than girls are at this age, and this is likely to be related to parental anxiety around girls' safety (but see my later discussion), and also that boys are expected to be outside. As I argue later in this chapter and in Chapter 6, this is one reason why boys' video game play is often of concern to parents.

Chart 4.2: Most frequently mentioned favourite outdoor activities.
Urban 11 - 13 year olds.
(boys N = 422, girls N = 379)
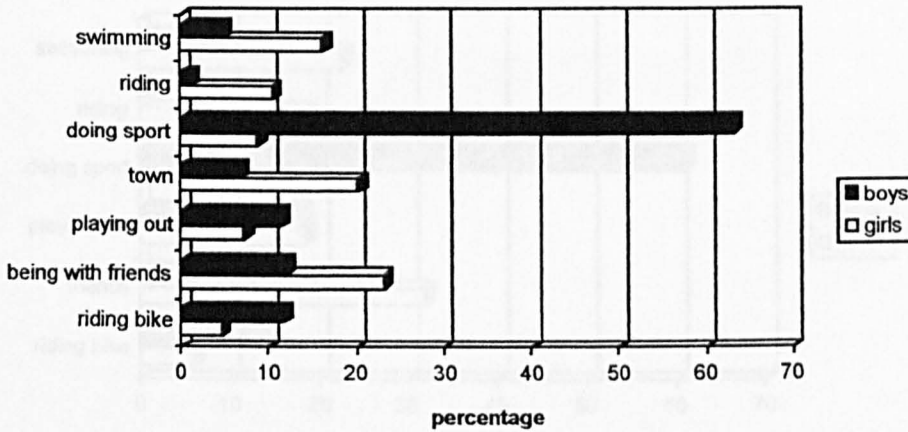
The above chart shows that there is only one activity which these urban boys mention to any extent. This is 'doing sport' which, as reading through the comments on the questionnaires shows, is composed almost entirely of playing football. 11 - 13 year old girls at this school mention being with friends as their favourite activity, along with swimming, horse riding and going into town[4]. Playing out is mentioned much less at this age than at primary school age.

Chart 4.3: Most frequently mentioned favourite outdoor activities. Rural 11 - 13 year olds.
(boys N = 206, girls N = 167)
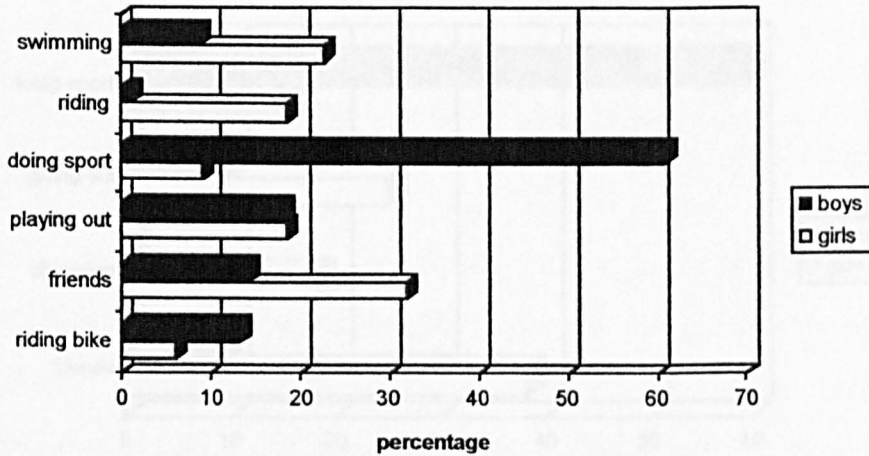
Again, this chart shows that the main activity which these rural boys enjoy is 'doing sport', that is, playing football. They mention liking to play out and ride bikes more than do the urban 11 - 13 year olds. Girls' favourite activities are being with friends, swimming, horse riding and playing out. The rural children overall mention liking outdoor activities more than do the urban children.

Chart 4.4: Most frequently mentioned favourite outdoor activities. Rural 14 - 18 year olds.
(boys N = 198, girls N = 180)
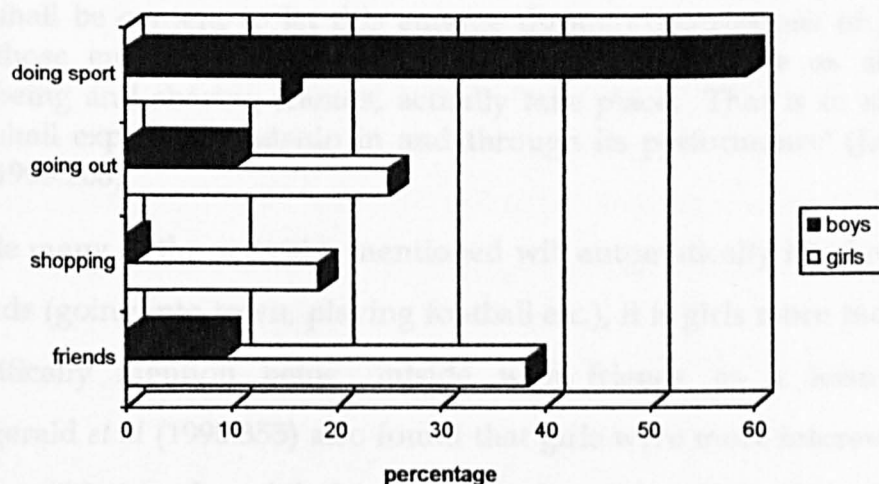
Chart 4.4 above shows that, once more, boys only mention liking playing football to any extent. In fact, these older boys mention very few activities at all as being favourite. The favourite activities of girls have changed, however. They still like being with friends more than any other activity (and mention this more than any of the other girls) , but now also say that they like shopping and going out.

For the secondary school children, favourite outdoor activities are similar overall, although as discussed above, rural children mention outdoor activities to a greater extent than the urban children. While boys in both locations and at both ages in the main only mention 'sport' as a favourite activity, the favourite outdoor activities of girls are more varied, although these change with age towards going out and shopping.

Outdoor activities and the gendered performance of leisure

Through an examination of the reported favourite outdoor leisure activities described in this chapter, we can see the ways and the places in which friendship is performed by the children and young people in this study. Examining friendship in this way follows James (1993) who stated:

> 'I shall not attempt to predefine what children's friendships are. I shall be content to let this emerge through descriptions of how those encounters, which children themselves define as about being and sharing friends, actually take place. That is to say, I shall explore friendship in and through its performance' (James 1993:208).

While many of the activities mentioned will automatically involve being with friends (going into town, playing football etc.), it is girls more than boys who specifically mention being outside with friends as a leisure activity[5]. Fitzgerald et al (1995:355) also found that girls were more interested in doing things with friends, while boys preferred sports and hobbies. Boys mainly report liking an activity - football - which is nevertheless also played with friends (although the people boys play football with may not be friends but 'mates', which might imply a looser relationship). Boys' prioritising of football as a favourite activity reflects that, for boys, friendship is more about 'doing' than 'being' and to some extent this reflects gender differences in friendship styles as reported throughout the literature (see for example Besag, 1989; Caldwell and Peplau (1982) and my later discussions).

Coffield et al (1986) for example, in their study of young people in the North-East of England investigated the gendered nature of friendships. While they found that the girls in their study talked easily about their friends and what friendship meant to them, they had trouble obtaining this kind of data from the young men. They state:

> 'We saw men together, we collected some details about the number of friends they had and what they did, but in contrast with the women they made few observations about their friends

and who was important to them. It was not a topic they discussed or appeared to give much though to' (Coffield *et al*, 1986:159).

The authors state, however, that although the young men were reluctant to talk about close friendships, if they were asked directly then most of the lads said that they had a best friend they could confide in. However, because of the reluctance of the lads to discuss close friendships, the writers could only study the friendship activities of young men by observing what they did with their friends (Coffield *et al*, 1986:161). While the remainder of the discussion in this section is concerned with specific activities, we are still able to see, through these activities and the children's accounts of them, the ways in which the gendered nature of friendship is performed through leisure.

Playing out and hanging around

As many outdoor activities automatically imply being outside on the street or in some other unsupervised location, it may be that rural children are allowed more freedom than urban children because of parental perceptions of danger in the urban area. Büchner argues with regard to childhood in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG):

> 'Road and traffic conditions force urban children away from playing in the street with the result that independent and unsupervised opportunities for social contacts are less available. Children's street world, formed relatively independently and composed of children from a variety of backgrounds and age groups, is increasingly replaced by integration into various peer-group sets, often chosen and supervised by parents for particular purposes and activities' (Büchner 1990:79).

Similarly, Ward (1994) argues that opportunities for childhood have been 'lost' in 1990s Britain, in that children are increasingly restricted in their movements and activities to 'safe' spaces. Ward discusses a study by Hillman *et al* (1993), which focused on whether children's mobility and independence of movement had decreased over time, due to parental fears. Among the

findings reported by Ward, the researchers stated that while bicycle ownership had increased massively among children between 1971 and 1990 'two-thirds of the cycle owners in 1971 said that they were allowed to use them on the roads: by 1990, this proportion had fallen to only a quarter' (Hillman *et al*, 1993, cited in Ward 1994:151).

A twelve year old boy wrote '*... I like very much to go on my bike with my friend. Sometimes we go to Market Town but I have only bin there ones. But I am alowed to go across the suspension bridge*' (sic). His drawing showed a church, labelled 'Market Town Minster' with two stick figures waving, one with no facial features, the other with a smiley face, labelled 'me'. He clearly enjoyed the ride to Market Town, and has drawn himself smiling and waving there. While the bike ride to Market Town involves using a busy road, the bridge in question that this child is allowed to go across has a cycle track which is set away from the road, making it possible to complete the crossing without coming into contact with any other traffic. This is more than likely why he is allowed to ride across the bridge, and why he had only been able to go to Market Town once.

Although Hillman *et al (op cit)* contend that older children (those over 11) are not subject to such restriction as younger children, it is possible that in recent years parental concerns about danger on the street from both traffic and from adults has increased. A new danger is that posed by other children, particularly since the murder of one child by two others (see James and Jenks, 1996). It becomes worrying to have your children outdoors from two perspectives - the danger posed to them, and the danger which your children might cause. Wyness (1994) in his study of the ways in which parents 'keep tabs' on their adolescent children in what he claims parents see as an 'uncivil society', states that 'parents desire a more secure material hold on their children at a stage where they ought to be adapting to the outside world' (1994:206). This hold on their adolescents is, he argues, sometimes carried out

in order to 'deprive their children of the opportunity to commit delinquent acts' (1994:207).

More recently, and as I have mentioned above (see Chapter 1) Valentine (1997a) has identified a change in parental views about their children's safety on the streets, and argues that parents now see their daughters as being more skilled in negotiating public space than their sons. This argument resonates with the findings of the present study, where overall girls mention a wider range of outdoor activities than boys do.

Outdoor activities change with age and the relaxation of parental boundaries. We have seen that for the very youngest children, the most popular activity was 'playing out', while the older children express this activity as 'being with my friends' or 'hanging around with my friends'. For the 14 - 18 year old girls this changes into 'going out'. Griffiths (1988) has discussed the ways in which young women's leisure progresses through adolescence from 'playing out' to 'dossing out'. Drawing on her study of 50 working class girls aged between 12 and 16, she states:

> 'What the girls did depended on their age and stage of adolescence. There was a gradual transition from 'playing out' at the younger end, to 'dossing' or hanging around as the girls got older. Dossing was gradually replaced by 'going out', which depended on having more money and consequent access to places to go....' (1988:55).

In my study, one 12 year old girl wrote '*I like hanging round with my friends. Because we have a laugh*'. At this age, it would seem that the outdoor leisure of both girls and boys is similar in content. Carl and Simon from the urban school said that in the evenings they '*just go out*'. They don't go anywhere specific, they '*just hang around*'. James (1986) has noted however that while adolescence is said to be a time of 'nowt to do and nowhere to go', young people are actually always doing something - even if that is merely messing

about or having a laugh (see also Corrigan, 1979). Phil and Levi from the urban school described their typical evenings to me:

Phil   Just get in and have me tea and just go out with my
        mates and have a good laugh.
SM   Do you go to a youth club or anything or do you just
        hang around?
Phil   Just hang around.
Levi   Just hang around with my mates. Get in, have my tea
        and ring 'em up, see if they're coming out.
SM   So is it just, like, hanging about on street corners and
        stuff, or do you play football, or ...
Phil   We just go to the woods, loads of us, and we just ....
        [unclear]
SM   So are there plenty of places like that to knock about in
        round here?
Phil   Well, I live in (suburbs) so there's quite a few places
        round there, and there's quite a few kids, so ....
Levi   [where I live] there's a park, but it's boring. There's
        nowt to do in there.
SM   Is it full of little kids?
Levi   No, no, it's the older kids hang about there.

While both these boys live in the urban situation, they do not mention going to any organised facilities such as youth clubs; nor do they mention using any commercial leisure provision. Instead, both boys use public space. The play park intended for young children which Levi finds 'boring' is, in the evening, transformed into a space for teenagers to hang about in. A place for playing out is thus doubly transformed through time into a space for hanging out.

Going out and going shopping

Few boys mention these activities as being their favourite out of school activities. The 11 - 13 year old urban girls mentioned this more than the rural girls, as charts 4.3 and 4.4 show. In the urban location, there are two multi-screen cinemas, an ice-skating rink, a ten-pin bowling alley, and several sports centres which are in close proximity to the catchment area of the secondary

school, and the city centre is only a ten minute bus ride away. Conversely, 'arcades' and 'leisure centre' (see appendix 1) are mentioned mainly by children and young people from the rural location. This is entirely due to the fact that these are the sole commercial leisure provision in this seaside town. Fisher (1995, 1993) has found that for children living in seaside areas, arcades are an important, and heavily used leisure provision: 'arcades ranked second only to the free public spaces of seafront and streets in their popularity as a leisure venue' (Fisher, 1995:77). The young people in this seaside town appear not to use the arcades to anything like this extent, however, although it is interesting to note that girls in this study report that they like to use the arcades more than boys do (see appendix 1).

The reasons why the rural 11 - 13 year olds did not report liking going into town to the same extent as the urban girls might be due to several things - for example, the distance involved (from the rural location a trip into the town centre involves a bus journey of at least an hour and a half, or requires parents being willing to transport the children in their cars, while for the urban children it is a short bus journey); or parental fears of safety for their children. For example, April, a twelve year old rural girl said:

> April   *I'm not allowed to go to town.*
> SM   *Aren't you? Why?*
> April   *My Mum says ... [unclear]*
> SM   *Would you like to?*
> April   *Yes*

It may also be due to worries that the young people themselves hold. Nick, a 14 year old rural boy, does go into town to go ice-skating and to the cinema with his friends, but has certain fears about the town centre:

> Nick   *.... sometimes we go round the computer shops, but I*
>   *don't really like buying games by myself, I don't like*
>   *carrying them round by myself.*
> SM   *why?*
> Nick   *Well, my friend, once he got, like ... there was these kids*
>   *running towards us, in a rush it looked like, and he got*

> *knocked over, he dropped about £40 on the floor, like*
> *someone must of picked it up 'cos we couldn't find it, so*
> *like if I got knocked over and dropped my game I*
> *wouldn't want someone to pick it up, so I usually only*
> *buy games when I'm with Mum in town.*

A 'rush' is, in this case not meant to imply that the boys concerned were in a hurry, but means a form of attack. Girls report liking to go into town to look at clothes and for the opportunity to be with friends - one 12 year old girl wrote '*I like going into town with my friends especially shopping for clothes as we have a laugh trying on almost all the stuff*. She did not write that she buys the clothes - the enjoyment for her and her friends comes from trying on '*almost all the stuff*.

Shopping (as opposed to the 'trying on' for fun that the younger girls do) is something that is dependent on having money, and is reported more by the older girls - possibly because they have more access to money either in the form of pocket money from parents or income from jobs. Ganetz (1995) has discussed these issues, and contends that the fitting rooms, where groups of girls go to try on clothes, provide them with a space which fulfils several functions - the fitting room can be seen as a 'relating space' which is linked with the fitting room as an 'identity space'; a 'free space' away from adult (and male) power and control; and a 'creative space' where the trying on of clothes opens up opportunities for 'symbolic creativity' (Ganetz, 1995:86-88). She states:

> 'For girls to go shopping together for clothes is to confirm each other's taste and style ... it is about confirming each other ... both parties need to be in agreement about what is 'nice' and what is 'ugly' in general fashion, and that the one party can give the other advice on what suits her personally. In other words, it is necessary that they know each other well; if they do not then shopping functions as a mutual experiment: 'do you understand who I am?, 'can we become friends?'.... many clothes are taken in to try on and many will be tried not because they suit the young women's taste but because they are odd, new, a little 'strange'. Also typical is that the girls usually do not buy anything and if they do, it is not the most extreme clothes' (Ganetz, 1995:86).

It may also be that the girls are rehearsing for when they are older and have more money available and can buy goods by and for themselves. I return to Ganetz' notion of the fitting room as 'creative space' in Chapter 7.

Going into town shopping and looking at clothes with friends is not an exclusively female activity, however. Nava notes that 'shopping and self-adornment have become less gendered - less specifically female - activities' (1992:166). Gareth and Derek (both aged 13) go into town with their friends on the bus sometimes. I asked them what they like to do in town:

> Gareth   *Mess about. Look in sports shops and stuff.*
> *Just like mess about. Look in computer shops,*
> *see what we like and then the next time we*
> *come we can buy that game.*

Unlike the girls, they don't report trying things on, but neither do they buy the sports wear and computer games they look at. While for boys going into town with their friends may also provide an opportunity to rehearse buying at a later date, in both cases, going into town is something that can be done with friends and is generally enjoyable. Simon, aged 13, told me about what he did in town on the Saturday previous to the interview:

> Simon   *... I went with a friend and we got the 9 o'clock*
> *bus and I support Everton, and I got my*
> *favourite players name on a shirt and then we*
> *went to watch Streetfighter 2 and then we came*
> *home*

Nava states 'Consumerism is far more than just economic activity: it is also about dreams and consolation, communication and confrontation, image and identity. Like sexuality, it consists of a multiplicity of fragmented and contradictory discourses' (Nava, 1993:167). We can see these issues in the above extract. One aspect of 'liking football' is the opportunity it creates for consumerism. Simon is a keen player, and is also a keen supporter - he had his favourite player's name put on a shirt. Simon and his friend also went to the cinema to see a film which is based on a popular (violent) computer game.

In this way, quite distinct leisure activities like playing football, playing video games and going to the cinema become intertwined, replicated and expanded into commercial activities. As such, these activities are in a broader sense also linked to issues around friendship. They are activities which are done with, and can be talked about later with, friends. Buying and wearing clothes and commodities with logos (like the football shirts), and shopping with friends for outfits which are similar to those which your friends have is not, James argues, simply about conformity, but is about belonging. It is, she contends 'a question of style: the expression of individuality in particular culturally defined ways ...' (1986:160. See also Corsaro and Eder, 1990). Similarly, Mac an Ghail (1994) states that within student peer groups:

> '... clothes, haircuts, trainers, sports bags, bikes and video games were key signifiers that marked out gender and social status. Possession of these highly desired commodities served as an index of high status masculinity and femininity' (Mac an Ghail, 1994:106).

Football and sports

We can see best what friendship is for boys by taking account of the activities that they say they like doing. When the boys in this study mainly say that they like playing football, this can be read in a much wider sense. Playing football is not, then, the only thing going on. Mac an Ghail, for example, claims that in his research football proved to be one of the most important 'masculinizing cultural practices'(1994:108). While it may be true to say that the opportunity for vigorous play which boys are said to like (Pellegrini, 1992, Chamberlain, 1983) is catered for, playing football also provides opportunities for other forms of interaction - both at a physical and a social level, in that playing football and liking football also provides other opportunities for leisure apart from the obvious focus on the game itself as discussed above.

Some young people play football seriously for local or school teams, while others prefer the more informal street game, as Corrigan (1976) also found. Of course, some do both:

> Simon   *Well, I like sport really, I play football and things.*
>
> SM   *Do you play for a team, or is it just knocking about?*
>
> Simon   *Well, I play for the village team, and we do a lot of training, and we play every night with my friends.*

'Liking football' also provides an opportunity to talk about the game with others - even those who, for one reason or another, are unable to play are still able to watch games or to support teams through consumerism. Many of the more famous league teams have a plethora of merchandising to sell to fans. Items for sale include anything from wall paper to outdoor coats, all covered with the team's identity - the logo symbol.

For Ann, Kayleigh and Julie, aged 14, sports activities are something to do together:

> SM   *What you did last night?*
>
> Julie   *We went to aerobics last night.*
>
> SM   *Did you? At the leisure centre?*
>
> Julie   *Yes, we go on a Monday and a Wednesday ....*
>
> SM   *.... why did you start going to aerobics, because none of you particularly need to lose weight, do you?*
> *[much laughter]*
>
> Ann   *We just want to keep fit and...*
>
> Julie   *It's something to do, on a night. If you just sit in every night it gets boring.*
> *[Chorus of agreement from the others]*
>
> Ann   *It's better than going down town [into the centre of this coastal town], we don't go down town because it's too cold at the moment.*
>
> Julie   *Sometimes on a Friday night me and Ann go to aquadisco.*

As I have mentioned, the leisure centre in this coastal town is practically the only commercially provided leisure resource. Where the choice is between

wandering round the cold streets or standing around in the amusements these girls prefer an activity which, although sport-based, is not primarily carried out for that reason. It is rather that the space of the leisure centre becomes somewhere that the girls can be together in warmth and safety as friends. That is, it is a space where girls friendship is performed.

There are a wide range of sports enjoyed by the young people in this study (see appendix 1 for details). Büchner has noted that while cycling, ballgames and swimming have been long established activities for children in the FRG, sports choices have become differentiated. He says:

> ' ... the most popular remain, for the boys, football, for the girls, gymnastics; but relatively speaking, these are less popular than they used to be .. in the fifties, 90 per cent of the sports club child members were actively involved in three to seven different sports; in the eighties, 90 per cent of such children participate in eight to eleven different kinds of activities' (Büchner 1990:81).

At first sight it appears from the data I present here that boys are more 'sporty' than girls, but if all the sports activities which girls mention are totalled and compared with those of boys, then the difference while still significant is not so large. Girls have generally been found to do less sport generally than boys do, and especially less competitive sports (Hendry et al 1993:68; Chamberlain 1983:132; Roberts and Parsell, 1994, Fitzgerald et al 1995); but the findings presented here indicate that girls in this study enjoy a wider range of individualistic sports activities than boys - general sports, riding, swimming and athletics. In contrast, much of boys sports is informal football with friends, although some do play for teams.

So far in this chapter I have discussed differences in favourite outdoor activities among the children and young people in this study. I have argued that although there are gender and locational differences in the favourite activities of girls and boys in this study, all of the activities mentioned as being most popular are implicitly based around friendship, and that it is

through an examination of these leisure activities that we can see the ways in which friendship is performed.

In all of the most frequently mentioned activities apart from sport, girls mention a wider variety of activities outside the home than boys do - a finding which is not in keeping with any of the previous literature. How can these findings be explained? None of the existing studies of leisure mentioned here have focused on a comparison of out of the home activities with indoor activities, although they report both indoor and outdoor activities; nor have any of them taken into account (or taken place in a time of) widespread use of computer and video game machines in the home. The girls in the following extract signal clearly what might be going on. These girls had earlier in the interview informed me that their favourite activities included playing cricket and football in the street. Talking about possible reasons for girls not playing video games as much as boys, they had this to say:

SM	Do you think they'd play more if there were some interesting games?
Jolene	They might play more, but, they wouldn't forget about their friends as well would they?
SM	They wouldn't forget about friends?
Jolene	No.
SM	Why - do you think girls are more ... in the questionnaire, when I asked you what kind of things you like doing, and for most boys it was playing sport, and for most girls it was doing anything as long as it was with a friend - do you think that's true? [All agree] Girls are more into friends than boys are [all: yeah]
Louise	Down our street, a lot more girls play out than lads.
SM	Really? What do you think the lads are doing then?
Louise	They're playing on their computers, they go into each others houses and bring their games round to each others houses.

The following section examines the favourite leisure activities of children and young people inside the home, in order to see whether such an examination can shed any further light on these findings.

Inside the house: most frequently mentioned indoor activities

<u>Seaville Primary School Children</u>

Chart 4.5: Most frequently mentioned favourite indoor activities. Primary school children.
(boys N = 26; girls N = 26)
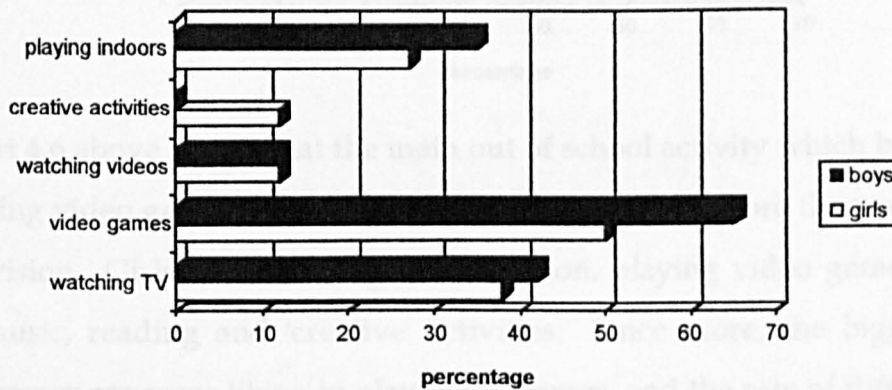
Boys mention three favourite indoor activities - playing video games, watching the television and 'playing'. This is a pattern which we will see repeated throughout this analysis. Girls mention a wider range of indoor activities as being their favourite than boys do. Only girls, for example, mention liking 'creative' activities[6]. The biggest gender difference, however, concerns liking to play video games, which girls mention around 15% less than boys, although both boys and girls mention this more than the next most popular activity - watching the television.

Chart 4.6: Most frequently mentioned favourite indoor activities. Urban 11 - 13 year olds.
(boys N = 422, girls N = 379)
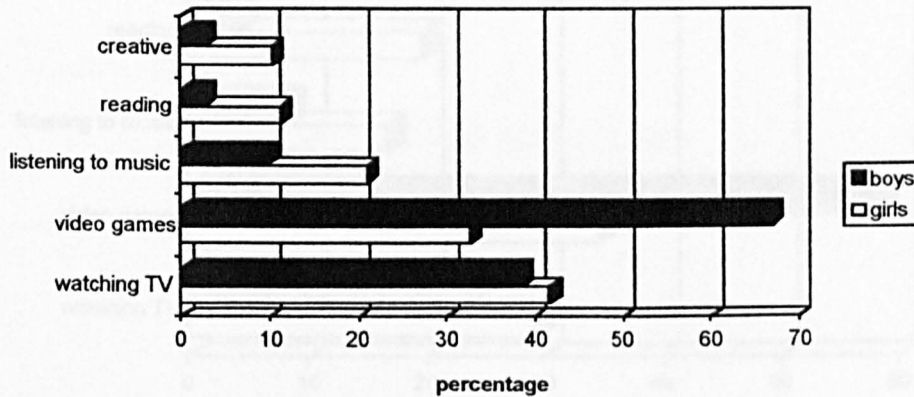
Chart 4.6 above shows that the main out of school activity which boys enjoy is playing video games. This is mentioned by boys 30% more than watching the television. Girls like watching the television, playing video games, listening to music, reading and 'creative' activities. Once more, the biggest gender difference concerns liking to play video games, and the rate of difference here has doubled from 15% at primary school age, to around 30%.

**Chart 4.7: Most frequently mentioned favourite indoor activities. Rural
11 - 13 year olds**
(boys N = 206, girls N = 167)
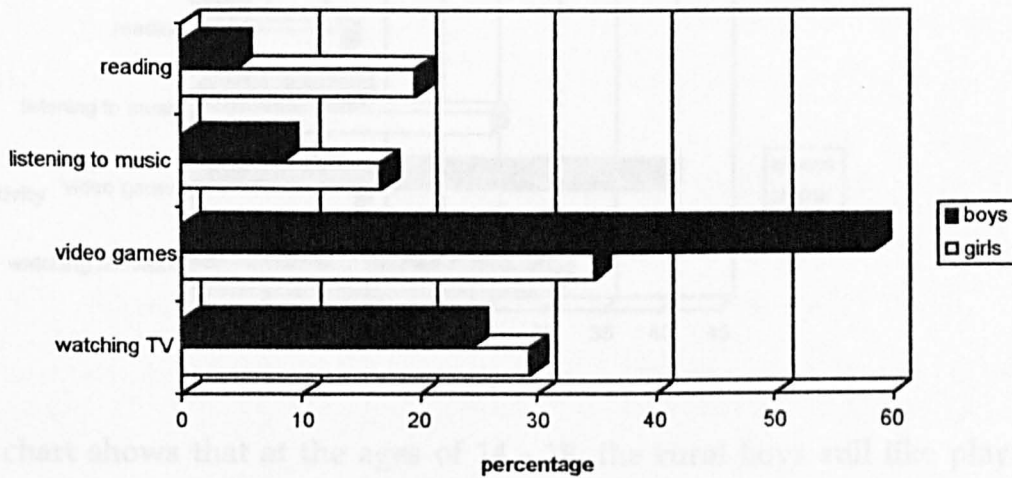
This chart shows that like the urban boys, these rural boys like playing video games and watching the television. Rural girls favourite indoor activities centre on the same activities as the urban girls, except these rural girls do not mention liking 'creative' activities to the same extent as urban girls and so it is not included here. Overall, rural children mention liking indoor activities less often than the urban children do. This is in line with the earlier discussion where I reported that rural children mention more outdoor activities than do urban children.

Chart 4.8: Most frequently mentioned favourite indoor activities. Rural 14 - 18 year olds
(boys N = 198, girls N = 180)
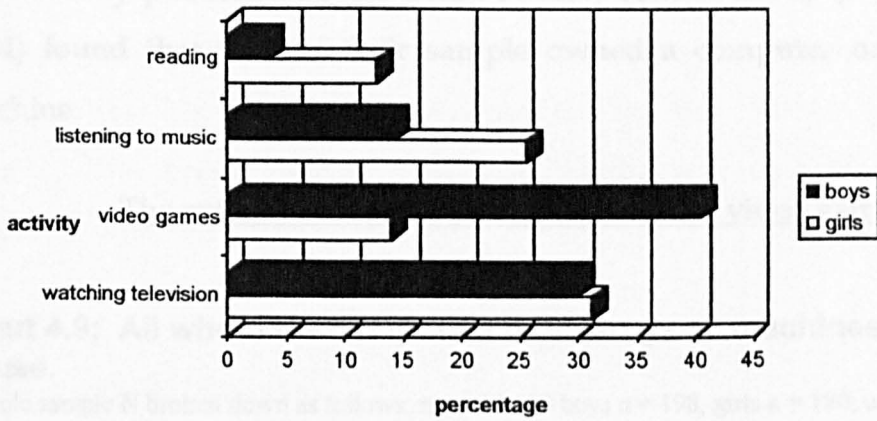
This chart shows that at the ages of 14 - 18, the rural boys still like playing video games and watching the television, although the rates of mentioning these activities are less than at the younger age for both girls and boys. Girls favourite activities remain the same as the younger girls, but the rate of mentioning listening to music has increased, as it has for boys.

It would seem therefore that when we look at favourite activities inside the home, there is continuity across the years of childhood and youth. Certain activities remain popular, whatever the age. Playing video games, watching TV and playing indoors are the most popular activities for the primary school aged children, playing video games, watching TV and listening to music are the most popular activities for the 11 - 13 year olds, and these remain the most popular activities for the 14 - 18 year olds, although the rates of mentioning TV and playing video games is less, and the rates for listening to music increases at this age (Larson, 1995).

Playing video games

In this section I focus on the ownership and use of computer and video games which I have found to be one of the most popular indoor activities. Parsons (1995) found that 70% of his sample owned computer or video games, and a recent study published by the Child Poverty Action Group (Middleton *et al*, 1994) found that 62% of their sample owned a computer or video game machine.

<u>The extent of ownership of computer and video games</u>

Chart 4.9: All who have computers or video game machines in their house.
(Whole sample N broken down as follows: rural 14 - 18 boys n = 198, girls n = 180; urban 11 - 13 boys n = 422, girls n = 379; rural 11 - 13 boys n = 206, girls n = 167; primary boys n = 26, girls n = 26).
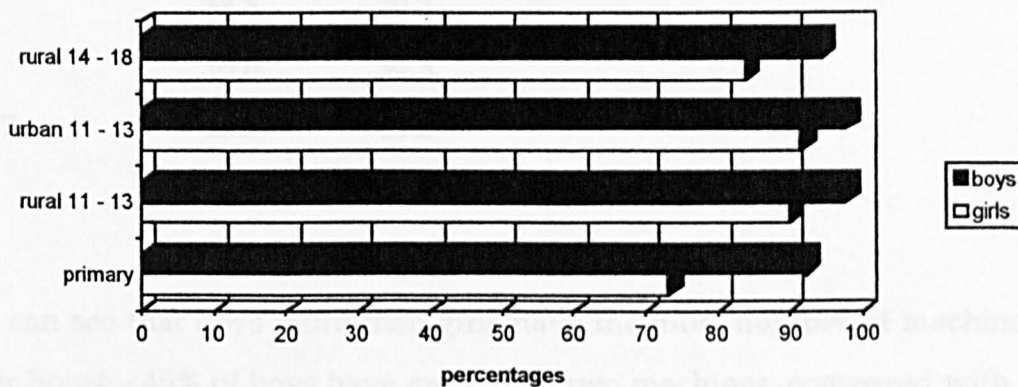
As the above chart shows, the majority of children in this study have video game machines or computers in their house. Primary girls and rural 14 - 18 year old girls are the least likely to say that they have them, but between 92% and 97% of boys in all locations have computers or video game machines in their house. This means that on average around 93% of children in this study own at least one computer or video game machine. These figures are much higher than previous studies have found. One possible reason for this difference may be that the prices of games consoles were much lower in the year that the fieldwork was carried out as compared to the prices of them at

the time of the other studies mentioned - a Sega Megadrive which originally cost £120 was selling at around £70 in the Christmas period preceding the fieldwork. In this way we can see that wider social and economic conditions feed into the leisure activities of children.

Some children say that they have several computers or video game machines in their house. While the majority have one or two, some reported having as many as six. The following table shows the number of video game machines that the children say they have for the secondary schools. The primary school children reported a similar number.

Table 4.1: Quantity of machines owned by secondary school pupils.
(figures are percentages)

No. of machines	girls (N = 725)	boys (N = 825)
1	33.8	20.3
2	36.0	34.3
3 - 7	30.2	45.2

We can see that boys more than girls have the most number of machines in their house - 45% of boys have more than two machines, compared with 30% of girls. The types of machines owned range from the early Spectrums to PCs, but the majority own games consoles - the Sega Megadrive or the Nintendo machines.

Frequency of playing computer and video games

Previous studies of children and young people's use of computer and video games have found that boys play more than girls (see, for example, Griffiths,

1993; Haddon, 1992). The results reported here confirm these previous findings.

Table 4.2: How often do you play computer and video games, by sex. Primary school pupils.
(N for the whole sample: girls n = 26, boys n = 26. Figures are percentages)

	girls	boys
every day/most days	37.5	52.0
sometimes/not often	62.5	48.0
TOTALS	100 (n = 24)	100 (n = 25)

This table shows that boys video game play is fairly evenly split between playing every day/most days, and playing sometimes/not often. Girls are more likely to play sometimes or not often[7]. We can see this gender difference in interviews with these 6 year olds:

SM	*Does everybody play videogames every night or do you watch television?*
Tim	*I play every night.*
Anthony	*Every night when I get home incept (sic) when I go to parties and when I'm doing something exciting I watch TV and then when I've had a drink I sometimes go and play on the computer.*
SM	*Rachel, do you play every night on your brother's?*
Rachel	*No, I like watching telly. I like watching cartoons, do you?*

Rachel doesn't have her own machine to play on, (for the implications of this see Chapter 6) and she says she prefers watching the television. The two boys play every night unless there is something more exciting going on.

Table 4.3: How often do you play computer and video games, by sex. Rural 11 - 13 year olds.
(N for the whole sample: girls n = 167, boys n = 206. Figures are percentages)

	girls	boys
every day/most days	28.7	59.1
sometimes/not often	71.3	40.9
TOTALS	100 (n=164)	100 (n=203)

Here the gender difference in playing frequently is much clearer than at primary school age. Relatively few girls play every day or most days. Many of the boys interviewed said that they played every night:

> SM   *So do you play in the evening after school, usually?*
> Nick   *Yeah, soon as I get in I do my homework and get something to eat, and then I play on it for about an hour, then watch some TV.*

The following excerpt shows the gender differences in preferred indoor activities, which I reported earlier. Chris's sister likes writing and drawing - the activity which I have termed 'creative' in the earlier analysis.

> SM   *... and do you both use the machines the same, or does one of you use it most?*
> Chris   *I usually use them both most, and my sister usually uses them when she wants to.*
> SM   *why doesn't she use it much? (his sister)*
> Chris   *she likes writing and drawing things.*

Table 4.4: How often do you play computer and video games, by sex. Urban 11 - 13 year olds.
(N for the whole sample: girls n = 379, boys n = 422. Figures are percentages)

	girls	boys
everyday/most days	33.1	69.2
sometimes/not often	66.9	30.8
TOTALS	100 (n=359)	100 (n=412)

Urban boys and girls play more frequently than the rural 11 - 13 year olds, although boys report playing every day or most days much more than girls do. Carl and Simon play every night:

SM   *When you're playing video games at home, how*
            long do you play for in a week - do you play
            every night, or....
Simon   *Yeah.*
Carl   *Yeah, I play every night.*
SM   *How long for?*
Carl   *About ... it depends.*
Simon   *It depends. [unclear]*
Carl   *What you've got to do that day.*
Simon   *Yeah, but about 2 or 3 hours a night, that's*
            every night, mostly.

For the boys, video game play is something which fits into the routine of everyday life, while for Allison, below, it is something which is done only on the occasions when she has friends round.

SM   *When you play, Allison, do you play for long?*
Allison   *No, about 10 or 20 minutes.*
SM   *How often do you play in a week?*
Allison   *I play it when my friends come down, and*
            that'll be about it. That's this weekend.

**Table 4.5: How often do you play computer and video games, by sex.
Rural 14 - 18 year olds.**
(N for the whole sample: girls n = 180, boys n = 198. Figures are percentages)

	girls	boys
everyday/most days	19.3	49.5
sometimes/not often	80.7	50.5
TOTALS	100 (n=166)	100 (n=188)

The older rural children play much less than any other group, and video game play for girls of this age is very low. The rural children aged 14 - 18

were, as described earlier, much more likely to mention outdoor activities as their favourites, and this finding is in line with that. These children also identify the temporal pattern to video game play:

Simon   I don't know, it depends on how much time
            you've got - I play on it more in the winter than
            in the summer.
Paul   I've stopped playing mine now, really, I play on
            it once a week, maybe
Simon   Yeah, I'm about that really. It goes up in the
            winter

The weather was also a factor which affected how often the children played:

SM   So do you play on them a lot, or not much?
Verity   Well, I like to play them but, like, not a lot, like
            if I'm bored or summat and I need something to
            do I just play on the computer.
Sam   If it's like a rainy day
SM   So, if you do go on them, how long do you go on
            for, what amount of time?
Sam   Ages! [giggles]
Verity   Hours and hours.

Playing video games frequently (that is, every day or most days) is then more commonly done by boys of all ages, and is dependent on what else there is to do, what season it is and what the weather is like. From the excerpts included here, it does not appear therefore to be something that is of over-riding importance in the leisure activities of these children and young people, and I discuss this further in the following chapter. Video game play is, however, a common leisure activity and I turn now to an investigation of the effects it might have on other leisure activities.

Does playing video games have an effect on other leisure activities?

This is an important question for parents and others who commentate on children's use of computers and video games (see Chapters 1, 2 and 6). Stutz (1995), for example, argues that:

'Children who spend their spare time on electronic entertainment are losing out twice over. In one way they are being indoctrinated with powerful messages, in the other they are missing a most important part of their education, which is 'play' ... [children] enjoy nature and have an innate need to experience it, on the beach, in the woods, in the fields' (Stutz, <u>The Guardian</u> 13/3/95 p6).

As I discuss in Chapter 6, parents are concerned to ensure that their children do not become 'glued' to the computer or video game console. There is a feeling that other activities are somehow 'better' and more suitable - children 'should' be playing outdoors, and not 'stuck' inside. Childhood is often constructed, as Gittins (1998) argues, as a 'natural' state and the idea that children are close to nature both spiritually and physically is presented, as is evident in the above excerpt, as not only right but necessary. This is especially relevant to parents of boys - I argued earlier that boys outdoor activities take place in less supervised spaces than those of girls. Boys are expected to be outdoors but because boys are playing video games more than girls are, they are consequently reporting being indoors more than girls are.

I have shown that the ownership of computer and video games is extensive, and many children play them regularly. The following analysis takes four of the most frequently mentioned activities which the secondary school children in this study say that they like (sport, being with friends, watching the television and reading), and looks at whether frequency of playing video games causes an increase, or decrease, in those leisure activities.

Table 4.6: All secondary school pupils who mentioned liking sports, by frequency of video game play and sex.
(N for the whole sample: girls n = 725, boys n = 825. Figures are percentages)

	girls	boys	TOTAL
plays every day/most days	9.1	90.9	100 (n = 339)
plays sometimes/not often	31.8	68.2	100 (n = 242)

Of the boys who mentioned liking to play sport, 90.9% also play video games every day/most days. Boys who don't play video games often mention sports less. The reverse is true for girls, who are more likely to mention liking sport if they don't play video games frequently.

Table 4.7: All secondary school pupils who mentioned liking to be with friends, by frequency of video game play and sex.
(N for the whole sample: girls n = 725, boys n = 825. Figures are percentages)

	girls	boys	TOTAL
plays every day/most days	47.0	53.0	100 (n = 115)
plays sometimes/not often	80.4	19.6	100 (n = 163)

For boys and girls who play every day/most days around half mention liking to be with friends. Girls who play sometimes or not often are much more likely to say that they like being with friends, while few of the boys who play sometimes or not often mention liking to be with friends. It would appear therefore that playing video games frequently is positively, rather than negatively, associated with boys and friendship relations. This finding is followed up in the following chapter.

Table 4.8: All secondary school pupils who mentioned liking to watch the television, by frequency of video game play and sex.
(N for the whole sample: girls n = 725, boys n = 825. Figures are percentages)

	girls	boys	TOTAL
plays every day/most days	27.0	73.0	100 (n = 226)
plays sometimes/not often	66.9	33.1	100 (n = 293)

Again, liking to watch television is mentioned more by boys who play frequently, and less by girls who play frequently.

Table 4.9: All secondary school pupils who mentioned liking to read, by frequency of video game play and sex
(N for the whole sample: girls n = 725, boys n = 825. Figures are percentages)

	girls	boys	TOTAL
plays every day/most days	56.7	43.3	100 (n = 30)
plays sometimes/not often	85.2	14.8	100 (n = 88)

Of those who say that they like to read, around half of the girls and boys play video games every day or most days. Girls mention liking to read much more if they don't play every day; while boys mention this activity much less if they don't play every day.

Few previous studies have examined whether playing video games affects other leisure activities. It has simply been assumed that this would happen (e.g. Selnow 1984). There are, to my knowledge, only two studies which do this - Griffiths (1996) found that video game players were more likely to engage in sports than non-players. He states that video game players also saw their friends out of school more frequently than non-players (1996:12). These findings are in line with those of the present study. Creasey and Myers (1986) examined the hypothesis that playing video games would affect other leisure activities. They found that in fact other leisure activities would be affected for a few weeks after the acquisition of a new machine, and would then return to previous levels, so there was no long term effect on children's leisure. In neither of these studies, however, is gender taken into account. Funk and Buchman (1996) did focus on gender differences. They examined the relationship between preferred game (genre) and self-concept in adolescents and found that:

> 'Spending more time playing video or computer games was associated with lower perceived self-concept in several areas, including self esteem, in our sample of adolescent girls. No

significant multivariate relationship was identified for boys' (1996:30).

Funk and Buchman's (1996) findings may have relevance for the findings presented here. While they were not looking, as the present study does, at leisure activities it may be that in some way leisure activities are related to self-esteem.

The four tables presented here show, therefore, some interesting and surprising results. Playing every day or most days actually means that boys are more likely to mention liking other activities. They are less likely to mention liking to do other activities if they play infrequently. Playing video games every day or most days only seems to be negatively associated with the leisure activities of girls. Girls who play sometimes or not very often report the four activities under discussion more than girls who play more frequently. Frequent video game play, then, is *positively* associated with boys other leisure activities. This finding is one which to some extent explodes some of the concerns around the use of computer and video games. But, at the same time it compounds them for those whose agenda is to get girls more interested in information technology (see for example Lin and Lepper (1987); Littleton *et al* (no date, personal communication). This finding would benefit from further examination.

Conclusions

This chapter has investigated what the children and young people in this study say that their favourite out of school activities are. It has been found that there are a wide range of activities which these children enjoy, and this chapter has focused on the most popular of them. Boys favourite activities centre around playing football, playing video games and watching the television, while girls mention liking a much wider range of activities overall. An examination of the leisure activities of children and young people enables

us to see the ways in which the gendered nature of friendship is performed, and the importance of friendship to children.

The examination of the ownership and use of computer and video games shows that boys own and play video games more than girls do, a finding which is in keeping with the existing literature. A new aspect of the investigation of the gendered nature of video game play has been examined, and I have found that playing video games every day or most days is negatively associated with girls other leisure activities, but is associated in the opposite direction for boys. As much of the concern around video game play centres implicitly on boys, this finding goes some way to exploding some of the panics around boys use of computer and video games. In this chapter I have begun to provide an analysis of children and young people's leisure preferences which takes as central the children's own perceptions of what they like rather than what they do, and I continue to place the child's account of her/his social life as central throughout the thesis. The themes of friendship and concerns around children's use of computer and video games are further explored in the following chapters, and I also offer some explanations as to why it is that girls play less often than boys.

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[1] That is to say, where the rate of mentioning is over 10%. See appendix for tables which show all activities mentioned by age, location and sex.

[2] The categories of favourite indoor and outdoor activities mentioned here and in Chart 4.5 were derived from analysis of Question 18 and from responses written or drawn on the blank page of the primary school questionnaire (see Appendix 3).

[3] To a large extent when you ask a child what they like to do, simply responding 'playing out' tells the interviewer everything and nothing. It is assumed that we all know what 'playing out' is - we have all done it as children, and seen other children or our own children do it themselves. In a sense we do know what it means for us, and perhaps for other children, but in the context of a research study this kind of material is perhaps better gathered through observation. There are no contemporary studies that I know of which focus on this kind of play, rather studies of children and play are conducted in institutional settings (the school, the play group) where access to children is easier. As discussed in Chapter 3, gaining access to the private space of the home is difficult, and in that case activities which go on there (or in the garden) remain private. This is an important lack in the literature, and a clear area where further work is needed.

[4] 'going into town' means going into the main shopping centre of this city. For the children at the rural school, they use this term for going into the city, or 'going down town' which refers to going into the coastal town centre.

[5] To some extent the inclusion of being with friends in the 'outdoor' category is ambiguous, because it was not clear from the questionnaires whether the girls meant being with their friends indoors or

outdoors. However, the overwhelming majority said things like 'hanging around with my mates' or 'going out with my friends' which implies being out of the house.

[6] 'Creative' activities refer to such things as drawing, painting, cookery, knitting and so on.

[7] Analysis was carried out which controlled for those primary school children who did not have computer or video game machines in their house in order to see if there was any effect for girls. This showed that of the 18 girls who did have these items in their house, 50% (n = 9) play every day/most days and 50%(n = 9) play sometimes or not often. The 6 girls who did not have computers or video games in their house all played sometimes or not often, as did the one boy who did not have a computer or video game. In terms of the present discussion this finding is not significant, in that there are too few in each cell to make any claims of significance or generalization, and does not affect the later discussion. A larger sample would be needed to ascertain whether controlling in this way would have an effect for the primary school children.

Chapter 5: *Inside the Home: the playing of computer and video games*

Introduction

This chapter focuses closely on the playing of computer and video games in the home. As we have seen from the statistical data presented in the preceding chapter, boys mention a wider range of favourite activities in the home than they do outside the home. The most popular indoor activity for boys is playing computer and video games, and they mention liking to play (and indeed do play more often as I show in Chapter 6) video games twice as much as girls (see Chapter 4). This chapter begins to show why it is that video games are an important leisure activity for boys, and offers some reasons as to why girls do not play to the same extent.

This chapter examines therefore what it is that those who play enjoy about these games. It will look at how children play them (alone or with others) and will examine children's opinions of video games. Taking the children's own accounts of what it is that they enjoy about playing computer and video games, I argue that the moral and other panics around this leisure activity are misplaced. In particular, I focus on the notion of friendship to explore the myth that playing video games leads to social isolation (Selnow 1984).

Game Genre

Computer and video games differ in genre. Griffiths (1993) has identified nine classes of computer games used in the computer and video games magazines and which children and adolescents are familiar with. He argues that 'if children and adolescents work with this degree of definitional

refinement it follows that researchers should do also' (1993a:406) [1]. As an example of the way that children and adolescents use the definitions from the gaming magazines, I reproduce here a verbatim transcript from one of the questionnaires. This 12 year old uses both the genre definitions (although sometimes these are used incorrectly) and a rating system typical of that used in gaming magazines:

> *Text: GAMES I HAVE FOR MY GAME GEAR;*
> *Adventure Game; Columns; I think this is so easy and it is for*
> *very young children 3/10*
> *Adventure Game; SONIC 2; I think this is so corny because I*
> *get stuck on level 3 every time 2/10*
> *ADVENTURE Game; Crashdummies; I thought at first this*
> *was good but after it while it gets bit boring*
> *DRIVING Game; F1; I think this is a very skillfull game for*
> *my age and I like it 8/10*
> *SPORT Game; WINTER olympics 94; This game is OK , But*
> *you lose everytime at everything 6/10*
> *SPORT Game; WoulD cup; this is another good game for my*
> *age group but there are some teams and it is not as good as F1*
> *7/10*
> *MY AMSTRADS very Boring because it takes so long to load*

In this study then, *sports games* refer to, for example, 'FIFA Soccer', 'Premier Manager', 'NBA Jam' (a basketball game), and so on. *Driving games* consist of vehicle racing games which can be motorbikes or cars. At the time of the study, 'Micro Machines' (a video game based on a successful toy series of collectable miniature vehicles) was a popular game of this genre. *Adventure games* include games such as 'Monkey Island', where the player is taken on a strange journey and has to solve certain puzzles along the way. *Strategy games* include 'Tetris', 'Columns', 'Chess' etc. More sophisticated versions of strategy games include the game 'Lemmings' where the player has to ensure that as few lemmings as possible follow each other into a hazard and are killed. I have collapsed *role playing games* and *simulations* together, although there are differences, as well as similarities, between these types of games. These genres are further confused - for example, 'SimCity' could be called a

strategy game, but it is also a role play/'god' simulation. *Beat-em-ups* and *shoot-em-ups* are, as the names might imply, games in which you either have to fight an opponent or shoot something. Games of this type include the (infamous) 'Mortal Kombat' (beat-em-up) and 'Terminator' 1 and 2 (shoot-em-up)[2]. A *platform game* usually consists of some form of fantasy-orientated plot based around a character on a scrolling screen format - 'Mario Brothers' and 'Sonic the Hedgehog' are examples of these games. I have categorised a game as 'other' where the title was unknown to me. There are so many different computer/video game machines with so many games specific to each of them that it is difficult to know all possible games[3].

Children completing the questionnaire were asked to list up to four of their favourite computer or video games and to say why they liked each game. To aid analysis, I coded the game titles which the respondents mentioned into genre. Like much of the existing work on children and video games (Kubey and Larson (1990); Funk (1993) and Gailey (1993) for example), this study has found clear gender differences in the types of games which are liked.

Table 5.1: Genre of game liked, by sex (primary school pupils).
(Whole sample: boys N = 26, girls N = 26. Figures are percentages)

	girls	boys
strategy games	29.2	8.3
beat-em-ups	8.3	33.3
platform games	62.5	58.3
TOTAL	100 (n=24)	100 (n=24)

The primary school children mentioned few types of game compared to the secondary school children. Girls preferred strategy games and platform games, while boys preferred beat-em-ups and platform games. No children mentioned liking shoot-em-ups. This is in contrast with the data on secondary schools, presented in the table below, which shows a much wider

range of genre. Possible reasons for this contrast might be practical: that as the children grow older they gain more experience of the different types of games; or that primary school children are restricted to playing only those games which either come with the machine, or which their parents buy for them. A nine year old girl, for example, said that she only played 'Sonic' because that came with the machine and her parents couldn't afford to buy her any more yet.

The table below shows genre of game liked by sex for the secondary school pupils. There were no differences found in terms of location between the urban (middle class) school and the rural (working class) school in genre of game liked. It appears that the favourite games of girls and boys are universal (that is, class or location are not factors), rather it is gender which makes the difference in liking certain types of games.

Table 5.1a: Genre of game liked, by sex (all secondary school pupils).
(figures are percentages)

	girls	boys
adventure games	2.31	2.51
beat-em-ups	7.12	15.35
driving games	5.48	10.52
platform games	54.90	20.43
RPG/simulations	1.93	5.87
shoot-em-ups	1.35	9.11
sports games	5.58	25.14
strategy games	9.52	2.69
other	11.83	8.38
total responses	100 (n = 1040)	100 (n = 1635)

The table above shows that for girls, the game genre that is mentioned most often as being their favourite is the platform. Boys like sports games,

platforms and beat-em-ups, and mention these genre more often than any other. These findings are in line with the existing literature (see Parsons (1995) for example). Gailey (1993) found in her study that only boys played sports games with any regularity. Griffiths (1993) reports that in his study, when the children were asked which games they played the most, the beat-em-up 'Street Fighter 2' was played more by boys while 'Mario' and 'Sonic' (platform games) were played more by girls. Interestingly, he informs us that 'Tetris' (a strategy game) was also played more by boys (1993:8). My findings contradict this, and this is probably due to the questions that were asked. In this context Griffiths was asking which games were played more, not which games were the children's favourites. It might be that in Griffiths' study, these games were played more because these were the games that the children actually owned, and as I mentioned above, sometimes children might only own the games which originally came with the machine. The findings which I report, in contrast, might refer to both games which are owned by the children, and games which they might not own but still like playing.

Platform Games

The following discussion[4] takes the games which were most frequently mentioned as favourites (i.e. platforms, sports games and beat-em-ups) by all of the secondary school children and examines the reasons the children gave for liking these particular games.

Table 5.2: Reasons for liking Platform games, by sex (all secondary school children).
(Whole sample: girls N = 725, boys N = 825. Figures are percentages)

	girls	boys
it's easy	5.4	1.3
it's exciting	2.8	5.9
it's fun	14.6	16.9
it's a good game	18.0	13.4
graphics/technical content[5]	30.5	27.0
it's hard to do	7.9	7.5
other reason	0.9	1.3
it's a fast game	12.9	13.7
I like the subject[6]	6.4	11.4
I like the violence	0.4	1.6
it's a two player game	0.2	0
total responses	100 (n = 534)	100 (n = 307)

More girls than boys mentioned a platform game as their favourite (534 of the games were mentioned by girls, 307 were mentioned by boys). The reasons both boys and girls give for liking platform games are very similar. Girls are slightly more likely to say that they like platforms because they're easy, because it's a good game, or because they like the graphics. Boys are slightly more likely to like the games because they are exciting or because they like the subject. The following passage is a transcript (complete with original spelling mistakes) from the blank page in the questionnaire. An 11 year old girl is talking about her favourite game:

> *One of my favourite games is 'Rolo' for the Megadrive. It's about a elephant who has escaped from his cage in the zoo. He goes around freeing all the other animals. Each time you finish a level a piece gets added to a map and helps Rolo reach the end off the level. I like this game because it has lots of animals in it and is fun to play. You don't just control Rolo, you can*

*control any other animals you free. This is quite a slow game,
so some people might not like it.*

She had also drawn a picture of an elephant freeing a cuddly animal. This game contains a narrative structured around the theme of altruism which can be said to fit in with gendered female stereotypes (Condor, 1986) - freeing the animals and helping Rolo in his task. It also might be said to appeal to girls because of the subject matter - cute cuddly animals.

While some parents tend to get irritated with their children playing video games because all they see is the child intent on a screen, tapping away rapidly at the controls, and might condemn platform games as not teaching the child anything except how to use the controls to jump around the screen, the games all contain some kind of storyline. Many are based on traditional morality tales where even those which contain graphic scenes of violence are concerned with a battle between good and evil. For example, 'Sonic the Hedgehog', one of the most popular games of this genre, has a highly moral tale. All the 'Sonic' games centre around a battle between good (Sonic and his friends) and evil (Dr. Robotnik). The following quotation is from the PC version of the game:

> *In his previous adventure, Sonic destroyed Dr. Robotnik's base,
> Death Egg; now the debris has started its fall to the earth. And
> right in the path of the falling base floats a giant cloud-like
> mass. The giant shadow of Death Egg hides the cloud ...
> Towering mountains, a gigantic forest... the cloud is none other
> than the legendary Floating Island, suspended in the sky.
> Death Egg becomes a fireball and hits the Floating Island;
> mountains are destroyed, the forests decimated ... This
> disastrous event greatly alters the island's path, forcing it
> towards the earth. The island crashes into the sea surface. The
> impact creates a gigantic wave, but the island doesn't sink. The
> Floating Island now sits on the sea surface as if nothing
> happened.*
>
> *Many days pass... in an island far from where Floating Island
> hit the sea surface, Tails, a fox with two tails, reads a strong
> Chaos Emerald reaction on the Jewel Reader, a machine he has
> developed. "Maybe this has something to do with that big wave*

I saw a few days ago..." Thinking there may be trouble, he decides to consult with Sonic. At the same moment, while relaxing on the shore, Sonic finds a small ring washed up on shore. Sonic looks carefully at the ring, and notices some ancient characters carved on it. The ring reminds Sonic of a legend he once heard about a "mystery island."

In an ancient time, the "mystery island" was part of the continent. A people with an extraordinary culture inhabited it. That civilization had built a peaceful and happy society using the energy of something they called "The Mighty Stone". But at a certain point, a faction of dark-minded elders tried to steal the energy of the stone, and by accident made that energy explode.

The civilization was wiped out in a second, erased from history. Time passed, and a god came from the sky to the newly created "mystery island". The sky god restored part of the civilization to the island, and threw the "Mighty Stone" into the open sky ... A ring washed up on the shore... the legend of the "mystery island"... Sonic, feeling his excitement build, makes his preparations for another adventure.

Dr. Robotnik, who managed to escape from Death Egg before it fell, has heard that Chaos Emeralds are buried in Floating Island. From the crevice created by the fall of the base, a massive presence of Chaos Emeralds is detected. If their energy could be utilized, Dr. Robotnik thinks, Death Egg may be able to orbit again. Dr. Robotnik has quickly built a base on Floating Island to harvest the Emeralds. He has kidnapped animals and transformed them into robots, and changed the island's environment into a nightmare with his Environment-Control Machine. "Yeah! Even if Sonic comes to the island, it's too late! This time the Emeralds are mine!".

The actors and the stage are now ready; here starts the new adventure of Sonic the Hedgehog.

The theatrical metaphors used in this introduction convey a dramatic frame to the game. The plot involves myth, legend, good and evil, co-operation between friends, heroic action, altruism and a battle against the improper use of technology and for conservation of the environment. The way that the story behind the game is presented is little different to any of the traditional children's tales - which some parents say they would prefer their child to read, rather than aimlessly pressing buttons. Provenzo's (1991) argument is

based around the view that children passively imbibe negative effects while playing these games. He states, 'video games such as Nintendo are neither neutral or harmless, but represent very specific social and symbolic constructs. In effect, the games become powerful teaching machines and instruments of cultural transmission' (1991:75). While I am not in agreement with his notion of children 'passively' imbibing anything from games, if the games *are* 'teaching machines' then what is being learnt from 'Sonic' and games like this are the kinds of things that are thought to be important for children to learn.

Some computer and video games require an extensive input of time to complete them - *adventure games* like 'Monkey Island' and 'Monkey Island 2', for example, can take literally days to solve. Thus one of the reasons why few girls report liking this particular game genre and instead say that they prefer 'platforms' is that you can 'dip' in and out of platform games without losing any sense of the game. Subject as they are to the whims of their brothers in their access to games, and the demands of parents (see Chapter 6), girls cannot afford to spend hours playing a game. In a discussion of Woolfe's A Room of One's Own Kamuf (1988) contends that women cannot have a room of their own - it will always be a place of intermittent work, because women's time is never their own, but is always subject to interruption. She cites Woolfe who said about books:

> 'The book has somehow to be adapted to the body, and at a venture one would say that women's books should be shorter, more concentrated than those of men, and framed so that they do not need long hours of steady uninterrupted work. For interruptions there will always be' (Kamuf, 1988:81).

This could equally well apply to the video games which girls prefer. For example, a 12 year old girl wrote on her questionnaire that she liked her favourite platform game because '*it is quite easy and quick to play*'. As we can see from Table 5.2 (above), around 5% of girls (compared to 1% of boys) who like platforms say that they like them because they are easy - there is no need

to commit hours of game play trying to solve the game. Wajcman (1991) takes a similar view. She argues that because girls and women are expected to take care of domestic work, they do not have the time to concentrate on leisure activities such as computer games (1991:154). This is a common theme within the literature on gender and leisure. Similarly, in a discussion of domestic labour, Seymour (1992) notes that '... attempts by women to claim time for themselves rather than spend it in service to the household are seen both as rejecting and neglectful of the family and as "selfish" and "unfeminine" ' (1992:191). Interestingly, a study of 16 - 18 year olds in Dublin found that girls, but not boys, felt guilty about having too much leisure (Chamberlain, 1983:132). In video game use, girls would appear to be learning early on that their life patterns will revolve around the care of others and to develop the expectation that their leisure interests must be put after those for whom they care (Wimbush and Talbot 1988).

Table 5.3: Reasons for liking sports games, by sex (all secondary school pupils)
(Whole sample: girls N = 725, boys N = 825. Figures are percentages)

	girls	boys
it's addictive	0	0.8
it's easy	7.7	1.3
it's exciting	3.8	1.5
it's fun	11.5	3.3
it's a good game	5.8	13.5
graphics/technical content	17.3	21.8
it's hard to do	5.8	3.3
other reason	3.85	0.8
it's a fast game	3.8	9.1
I like the subject	40.4	43.4
I like the violence	0	0.5
it's a two player game	0	0.8
total responses	100 (n = 52)	100 (n = 394)

Few sports games were mentioned by girls as being their favourite (52 compared to 394 games mentioned by boys) although, in the table above, we can see that the reasons given for liking this kind of game are again very similar. Girls are, however, more likely than boys to say that they like sports games because they're easy and because they're fun games. Boys, on the other hand, tend to like these games because they like the subject. As we saw in Chapter 4, sport (and especially football) is very important as a leisure activity for boys. As one 14 year old boy said '*I like football and on the Amiga A1200 there are loads of soccer games which keeps me interested*'. Another example is of a 13 year old boy who drew a scene from a computer game with the accompanying text '*I like to play ice-hockey. This is my favourite vidio [sic] game*'. As with 'platform games', the technical content is an important reason for

liking a game. A 12 year old boy wrote 'FIFA Soccer I like it because it has a good options screen and you can choose from several modes. and the graphics are very good and I don't dislike anything about it'.

Beat-em-ups

TABLE 5.4: Reasons for liking beat-em-ups, by sex (all secondary school pupils)
(Whole sample: girls N = 725, boys N = 825. Figures are percentages)

	girls	boys
it's easy	2.7	0
it's exciting	4.1	3.3
it's fun	2.7	2.0
it's a good game	16.4	5.3
graphics/technical content	23.3	20.0
it's hard to do	5.5	2.0
other	0	0.4
it's fast	8.2	6.5
I like the subject	11.0	16.3
I like the violence	26.0	44.1
total responses	100 (n = 73)	100 (n = 245)

This genre is mentioned more by boys than by girls. However, when girls do mention this type of game as one of their favourites, again their reasons for liking it are similar to the reasons which boys give. The main difference in responses here is that boys were almost twice as likely to say that they like the violence in the game than girls. Responses of this kind include 'I like all the blood and gore' and 'I like ripping people's heads off'. Analysis of the group of children who did mention violence as a reason for liking particular games showed no differences in terms of location, age, family composition etc. from the rest of the sample. In other words, children who like playing violent games are no different in their social characteristics than any other child.

Griffiths (1993) asked his research subjects why they liked playing their favourite game. He states:

> 'Players' reasons for playing their favourite game were predictably very similar to why they played games in general (fun, excitement, a challenge etc.). However, there were a few unexpected results. These primarily revolved around the structure and content of the games and included graphic effects, sound effects, number of levels in the game and the featuring of violence. Such responses suggest that structural characteristics of games ... are important and a topic worthy of future research ...The fact that 13% of players liked their favourite game because of it's violent content is perhaps the first empirical evidence that some children view aggressive metaphors as positively reinforcing' (Griffiths 1993:10).

I have found, however (see below), that one of the reasons that children like violent games is because many of them are two player games, and so give the opportunity to play with friends. Like Griffiths, I have found that one of the main reasons for liking any game which the young people taking part in the study mention is what I have called 'graphics/technical content'. This category is what Griffiths means when he mentions sound effects, levels in the game, and which he is calling the 'structural characteristics' of the game. He notes that this finding is unexpected. However, if you take into account the children's familiarity with the games magazines (and indeed television programmes devoted to video games like the BBC's 'Gamesmaster') this is less surprising. Games reviewers, in magazines or on the TV, give points for various aspects of each game. The graphics and other structural characteristics are a major criteria on which a reviewer will award points. The young people who play video games are aware of what is good games design and what isn't, as the excerpt below shows.

SM   *What do you think about games like Mortal Kombat and Streetfighter? Do you like them?*

Gareth   *Yeah, I like them games, but some games like ....Urban Nights, I don't like that.*

	Urban Nights, I think it's a bit ... dodgy.
SM	*Dodgy? What do you mean?*
Gareth	*The music on it don't really go with all what's on it and that.*
SM	*So it's not a very well made game you mean?*
Gareth	*Yeah, and it's .... it's not what it should be, it's too....like, you go round and everything, and you go through a door, and then you have to go through the entrance again, and then when you die you have to go all the way back to the beginning, which is...*
SM	*So it's not a very well designed game then?*
Gareth	*No.*

Some of those who wrote comments on the back page of the questionnaire noted that the improved technical content of the games is an important factor in what makes games attractive to players. A 12 year old girl, who in her written comments on the questionnaire was concerned about playing video games, wrote '*The graphics are really good now and I think that make's you play even more*'.

Why do children like violent video games?

The theme of violence in video games about which Griffiths (1993) expresses concern in the above quotation has been of concern to many narrators on the subject (see for example, Provenzo (1993), Parsons (1995)). I asked those taking part in interviews for their views on video game violence, usually as it refers to the beat-em-ups 'Mortal Kombat' and 'Mortal Kombat 2'. These games attracted much attention when they were first published due to the copious amounts of blood shown on screen: the game characters battle to the death. For example, The Guardian newspaper ran a series of articles (mainly written by their American correspondents) expressing alarm about 'Mortal Kombat'. One such, entitled '*Video games: when the killing has to stop*' attacked the video game companies and asked 'what kind of people are businessmen

who will sell sickness to kids?' (The Guardian, 23/9/93, page 16). Three months later, another American correspondent wrote an article entitled *Mortal Kombat won't be killed* and described the video game manufacturers' response to the public outcry over the game by bringing out two versions of the 'blood cheat' which would be available to different age groups (The Guardian, 13/1/94, page 12).

The games and software magazine PC Format ran a five page piece discussing the (mainly academic) concerns over children and video games. Entitled *Killing for Kicks*, the article put forward the views of Stutz, whose work I have commented on earlier. She is quoted as saying 'they are not passively watching the screen. They kick and punch and learn to kill to play these games. It is all sick and it's contagious sickness' (PC Format, June 1993 pp 20-25). Stutz's views on the playing of video games reflects a conception of children as 'empty vessels' who are passively filled by outside influences. This kind of view allows no conception of the child as a competent social actor (see Jenks, 1996; James and Prout, 1990), whose use of electronic media is carried out within a particular social context, and who is well able to 'read' the text of the game. Buckingham's comments about children's use of television apply equally well in this context:

> 'Public debates about the 'effects' of television are often based on behaviourist notions of stimulus and response. Children are constructed here as passive consumers, and as helpless victims of ideological of behavioural influences ...[but] children cannot be seen merely as 'dupes' of television ... [it is] actively used by children in their attempts to make sense of their own social lives' (1994:94).

As one 15 year old boy wrote:

> *People think that video games etc. promote violence, no they don't. Adults think that children are mindless cretins, devoid of culture and are hermits who only inhabit their rooms, with goon-like eyes fastened only to their computer screens. This is rubbish. Children are smarter than it appears, just because Kao Lung in Mortal Kombat punches his opponent in the face and his head comes clean off, doesn't mean that an*

"impressionable" child will do the same, despite the excess
amounts of blood.

Carl and Simon talked about violent games in the interview after I had asked

them what kind of game they would design if they could:

Simon	*Platform.*
SM	*Do you like platforms best?*
	[Both agree]
Simon	*I like platforms.*
SM	*What about beat em ups like Mortal Kombat?*
Carl	*Yeah, they're good.*
Simon	*Yeah, I like them, in fact Mortal Kombat's my favourite game.*
Carl	*Is it true that they're gonna bring age rates out for games, 'cos they said they was?*
SM	*They haven't brought it out through the Government, but the games companies are putting them on the boxes themselves -* *I don't know if they could enforce it, because it's not a law, I don't think. Mortal Kombat has a limit, is it a fifteen or an eighteen?*
Simon	*Fifteen, I think. Violent, though, innit? You can get blood on it, a blood cheat.*
Carl	*Oh yeah, there's one on Mortal Kombat,*
Simon	*I don't know if you know about it, but it's a blood cheat, it where, when you hit 'em, blood just goes....*
Carl	*Yeah, blood cheat*
Simon	*It's where they're on this like platform thing, if they fall off, you don't normally see them fall on these spikes, but they fall on these spikes ...*
Carl	*Oh, yeah, I remember that, and it goes right through his stomach.*
SM	*You know that kind of gore, a lot of kids when they filled in the questionnaire, said the reason they liked the games was because of all the blood and gore - is it real? Do you see it as being real?*
Simon	*No, not realistic at all.*
Carl	*No.*
SM	*So why is it fun, then, to watch all this blood?*
Carl	*Well, its just funny. 'Cos when you see them, there's just blood everywhere.*
SM	*Is it because it's not real - because it's larger than life?*
	[Both agree]
SM	*A bit like a cartoon?*

	[Both agree]
Simon	Like, if someone gets kicked, about a pint of
blood	comes out of 'em, and he gets kicked about
	fifteen times so - you don't have fifteen pints of
	blood in you, its just stupid.
Carl	It can't be realistic, so you just laugh about it
Simon	yeah, you just laugh.
Carl	It's just funny. You just get a thrill out of it.

In contrast to the view put forward by Carl, that the violence is not realistic, only Dave said about the violence and gore in Mortal Kombat '*Cool. It's more realistic innit?*'. Does Dave know the reality of this kind of fighting, or is he perhaps using this kind of knowledge to give himself status in the interview group?

As I have described above, one of the strategies which the games companies used when there was public outrage at the violence within the game was to insert a hidden code into the game. The 'blood cheat', as it rapidly became known, was supposed to be available only to players aged over 18. The kids themselves are aware of the reasons for the age limits on games, and they are also aware of the strategies that can be used to get round the blood cheat, as can be seen in the following excerpt. Here are Gareth and Derek talking about this, and other, cheats you can get for the game:

SM	Do you think it encourages kids to be violent?
Derek	Depends.
Gareth	I dunno, because on Mortal Kombat, you have a code for all the blood to come.
Derek	Yeah, and you have to be a certain age to get .... on Mortal Kombat 2 you have to be 15 to buy it, but the blood cheat, you need to be 18 to find it out, unless you find it out in a magazine or a friend tells you.
Gareth	See, you don't have to have blood spurting out, but I think its better with blood spurting out.
Derek	The moves are a lot better but as a normal, you usually have finishing moves, and you like punch 'em and they go into spikes, and normally you just punch 'em and they shatter...
Gareth	And they pull out your heart, don't they, and,

	and err ... you get .... you suck 'em in and spit out all the bones. There's moves like that, int they, at the end of it.
	[both boys amused by this description of the finishing moves]
SM	*Why is that good, then? Why do you like it?*
Gareth	*I don't know, it's just funny.*
Derek	*It's usually, it can be funny, whereas if the cheat isn't on, it's just real boring, the ending.*
SM	*So, some of the kids I talked to at another school said it was because it was so over the top, it made them laugh, is that what you mean?*
Derek	*Yeah.*
SM	*It's because its unrealistic?*
Gareth	*Yeah, on Mortal Kombat there's a baby's cradle, and it turns this kinda like spell on em, and it makes 'em go in a baby or anything and they're floating up and down ...*
Derek	*And there's friendships, where you make friends, or wave flags, or things like that ...*
SM	*Mmm? I've never seen the game, so I don't know what its like.*
Derek	*But there's that many different kinds of moves, you can't remember them all, there's like ...*
Gareth	*Dragon punches ...*
Derek	*Fatalities ...*
Gareth	*Yeah, fatalities, they're quite hard to...*
Derek	*Turning them into babies, friendships ... there's too many to remember.*

In both excerpts from the interviews which I have included above, the boys say that these games and the violence within them is funny - it makes them laugh. Violent games are popular, then, because they are 'a laugh'. The special moves within the game which Gareth and Derek discuss (turning your opponent into a baby, friendship moves) are, as far as I am aware, only available when you have the 'cheats'. These moves would also seem to be there for humorous reasons - turning your opponent (who could either be a character in the game if you were playing by yourself or your friend if you were playing with him/her) into a baby means that you humiliate your opponent in the best possible way. Many games contain 'cheats', and instructions on how to use them are commonly found in the computer gaming magazines. As Sanger *et al* (1997) point out, cheats are also used as a

strategy for improving gameplay, and to avoid having to go back to the beginning of a game if you 'die' half way through (1997:94). Edward, aged 7, uses cheats in one of his games to get to the end of the game:

Edward   The easiest one is ....
James   Key.
Edward   You can cheat levels too, just don't get all the
            things. Break your heart, break your wing and
            then you can go to the end. You don't get as
            much points though. You can finish it if you
            can't do it properly.

Some games are so complicated that without the cheats for it completing the game would take days. Kayleigh, aged 14, is talking about a game like this. She and her friend Ann enjoyed this game, but found it easier to play after her father had got her a book with the cheats in:

Kayleigh   One of the worlds is called 'tree world' and it's
            so hard, because, I mean, we had all the cheats
            ... and you have to turn on all these water pipes,
            and you have to go upstairs, downstairs,
            upstairs, downstairs, before you can get back,
            and it was even hard with the cheats because you
            didn't know if you'd turned it the right way,
            and if you got it the wrong way you had to go
            back, change it, get it right, Oh! Its depressing!

This description from Kayleigh reinforces my earlier point that girls have less time to play than do boys. While the boys use cheats to make the game more interesting to them, girls use cheats to make the game quicker - to speed up the time spent game playing into their time available. As well as the formal ways of finding cheats for games, such as gaming magazines, children find this information out from their friends. In this way, computer and video games become a topic of conversation for those who play them:

SM   So do they [video games] give you something to talk
        about with other people, then?
Carl   Yeah, cos like you'll say 'have you seen that game, it's
        just come out' or 'have you got any cheats for it' or 'do
        you want to come round to my house and play it', so
        you want to ask all these questions, you wanna find

This discussion has highlighted that there is more involved with the child playing violent video games than other commentators have focused on (e.g. Provenzo, 1993). We have also seen through this discussion that playing this type of games enables the player to interact and to compete with friends, using the game, or indeed the cheat, as a medium for this.

Playing video games with other people

One of the fears expressed around children's use of video games is the idea that it leads to social isolation (Selnow, 1984). However, my data shows (as indicated in the above excerpt) that the view of video games as a cause of social isolation and withdrawal in children is erroneous. They are in fact something which can be used to enhance or develop friendship, or at the very least provide a topic of conversation for the children who play them.

Children being alone is seen as cause for concern and intervention because 'If you were unpopular at school you are more likely to become an alcoholic, a depressive, a schizophrenic, a delinquent, a dischargee from the army, or a psychotic...' (Duck, 1986:145). However, it is the context of 'aloneness' which seems to be of concern. For example, Stutz (1991), who describes children sitting alone in front of a screen as being a damaging experience, eulogises on 'aloneness' in another setting:

> 'What is actually happening when the child goes fishing? He is either alone or with only one or two other people. He is silent and usually quite still. He is in a quiet environment ...he is gazing into the water; he concentrates intently; he is being challenged by the fish. He is pitting his skills against natural forces. He is in a state of equilibrium between tension and relaxation and his mind is being freed for dreaming. This is surely a wholesome state' (1991:10).

How nicely this quote equates with the child playing video games and how different the reaction to the child fishing and the child playing video games!

'S/he is silent and usually still ... s/he concentrates intently; s/he is being challenged by the game. S/he is pitting his/her skills against the game ... ' and so on. Stutz bases her idea that fishing is 'wholesome' partly on her finding that the boys who fish do not kill the fish, but put them back. Similarly, the boys and girls who engage in playing violent video games do not kill their friends (opponents), yet the one activity (fishing) is described as a wholesome state, while the other is the subject of concern.

The idea of the child as being part of nature, a 'wholesome' being, is, as Jenks (1996) demonstrates, related to a particular construction of childhood which he terms the 'Apollonian' child and which, he contends, is the modern (public) image of childhood. He states:

> 'Such infants are angelic, innocent, and untainted by the world ...
> [t]hey have a natural goodness and clarity of vision that we might
> 'idolize' or even 'worship' as the source of all that is best in human
> nature ... [i]t is within this model that we honour and celebrate
> the child ...' (1996:73).

Here we are able to see clearly that which concerns us when the child (for example) is seen to enjoy playing violent games: we are not able to idolize the child's purity or honour its innocence because what they are doing is not 'childlike'. The division between the binary opposition adult/child is not visible.

Playing video games and gendered friendship

One of the important points about 'Mortal Kombat' and other violent beat-em-ups, which some of the boys I interviewed mentioned, is that it is a two player game and so provides an opportunity to play with and compete against your friends:

Simon	*Some people buy it [violent game] because everyone else has as well.*
SM	*So it's like, keeping up with their mates?*

Paul	Plus, you can have a game where there's two people playing each other, so it gives you chance to fight your friends, see who's best.
SM	So it actually gives you a chance to play with your friend on the machine?
Paul	Yeah.

Similarly, 10 year old Gary said that playing violent games was better with friends:

SM	You said that you normally like to play with one other person when you play games. Why's that?
Gary	Because it's more enjoyable if it's two player.
SM	More fun?
Gary	Yeah. But on your own, say like beat-em-ups if you've got two big people you can't defeat them.
SM	So if there's two you've got more chance?
Gary	Yeah.

Gary shows another reason why playing these kind of games is better when you play with a friend - as well as it being more fun, it's easier to beat the characters in the game. In this way, it could be argued that children are learning to co-operate. However, Gottschalk, drawing on Provenzo (1993), argues that violent video games are based around 'the theme of the young white hero who single-handedly defeats countless others' (Gottschalk, no date:17) and therefore that these games are built to encourage solitary play. He states 'the electronic hero the player activates and identifies with does not co-operate, negotiate, or organize with others. He knives, maims, bombs, kills en masse, and dies alone' (n.d. p 17). However, Gottschalk is basing his argument on observation in video game arcades in Las Vegas and not in the domestic setting, where it might be that playing video games is experienced quite differently. Also, few of the games which Gottschalk and Provenzo discuss were in fact two-player games: these were not available until around the time that 'Mortal Kombat' was released for the home market.

Indeed, few of the existing studies of computer and video games examine their use in the home (Sanger *et al* 1997). Panelas (1983) argued that if video games were ever to be primarily centred in the home (as has now happened), that would provide a case for studying not only the 'relationship between consumer markets and the social organisation of leisure, but it would also arbitrate the question of whether the attraction of video games is primarily intrinsic or social' (1983:63). The following table shows how the children in this study prefer to play video games.

TABLE 5.5: Who do you like to play computer and video games with, by sex (all secondary school children)
(Whole sample: girls N = 725, boys N = 825. Figures are percentages)

	girls	boys
by myself	32.2	27.8
with one friend	11.5	20.1
with a few friends	4.9	11.1
with my family	9.7	8.6
it depends/multiple ticks	41.6	32.3
TOTAL	100 (n=689)	100 (n=801)

While many girls and boys say that they like to play by themselves, around 70% of the responses for both girls and boys indicate that they prefer playing with other people. Although clearly in many cases who these children prefer to play computer and video games with 'depends' (possibly on who is around at the time, or how the young person feels), this table shows that boys, more than girls, say that they like playing with friends. Girls are more likely to say that they prefer to play by themselves, or that 'it depends' who they like to play with. These findings contradict the argument of Selnow (1984), who claimed that video games and computers become an 'electronic friend' to children. He found that 74% of his sample reported playing alone, and states that 'video game playing is typically a solitary activity and that while children

are playing they are not likely to be interacting with people' (Selnow, 1984:155). Again, at the time of Selnow's study, two player games were not yet available.

Other writers however have contested this point, and have found that friendship is not affected by video game play. Kubey and Larson studied the social context of video game play, T.V. and video recorder use, and found that 46.5% played video games alone, 17.8% played with family members, and 35.6% played with friends (1990:119). Measuring for arousal, attention and motivation, they report that video game play was related to significantly higher states than T.V. viewing:

> 'Because simply being with friends - regardless of activity - was associated with more positive ratings on several .. scales and because video games were played more with friends than any other activity, it is also worth noting that all of the significance tests for video game playing remain significant, even when all occasions with friends are eliminated' (1990:122)

That is to say, these writers found that simply playing the game could allow for high states of arousal, although arousal states did vary depending on social context - they were lower when video games were played with siblings, and higher when played with parents or friends. The results I present here show lower rates than those found by Kubey and Larson, and this is more than likely due to the inclusion in the questionnaire used here of the category 'it depends', which allowed those who completed the questionnaire to respond to a wider range of choices. Analysis carried out on the data with just the boys who prefer playing beat-em-ups found that 35.7% say that they like to play with their friends, 29.7% like to play by themselves, and 28.2% say it depends. Only 6.4% of the boys who like beat-em-ups like playing with their family. For this 14 year old urban school pupil, playing 'Mortal Kombat' is:

> ... something you can do when you've got mates round and just have a laugh.

Being with friends in out of school activities has also been found to be positively correlated with self esteem, particularly in adolescent boys (Du Bois and Hirsch, 1993).

As I have mentioned earlier (see Chapter 4), boys friendships take place in the context of shared activity. That is, boys relationships are about activities, or 'doing'. Playing video games provides a context within which boys can be with (do) friendship. Girls, instead, are said to prefer 'just talking', or 'being' with friends, and this may be one reason why girls do not mention liking to play video games with friends as much as boys do. I suggested earlier that it may be that playing computer and video games might facilitate friendship, rather than lead to social isolation as some writers on the subject contend (e.g. Selnow, 1984). Certainly the statistical data I present here confirms this, although this is not something that can easily be gathered from interviews. I tried in each interview to find out whether finding or maintaining friendship was a factor in explaining why the children played video games, but the response to this was often a blank stare, or a hostile 'No'. Ian and Dave, for example, reject my ideas:

SM   *Did you want the particular machines you've*
            got for any reason? Might you have bought
            them because your friends had them and you
            could swap games or something like that?
Ian   *No, just got them 'cos they're something to play*
            on.
Dave   *Yeah, just summat to do.*

Or in this group interview at the urban school:

SM   *When you got some of your machines, did you*
            ever buy them because your friends had them?
            [pause]
All   *No.*
SM   *Did you buy the machines so that you could*
            swap games?
All   *No.*

In the following excerpt, Simon and Paul say that they bought the same machines as their friends so that they could swap games:

SM	When you bought your machines, or before you got them, did your friends have them as well, and did that kind of influence whether or not you wanted ..
Simon	Yes, that did a bit with me, 'cos you know like you can swap games and stuff, and you don't have to buy so many games.
SM	So that influenced what kind you got, so that you could swap?
Simon	Yes, and I got a game boy 'cause it's a bit cheaper.
SM	What about you Paul?
Paul	Well all my friends had them, but I got mine because it was something to do in my spare time.
SM	And did you buy the same machine as your friends have got?
Paul	Yes.
SM	And was swapping games the reason?
Paul	Yes.

Their reasons for buying games are presented as instrumental and pragmatic. The boys were wary of admitting that the ownership and use of computer and video games was necessary for friendship, although it has been shown in studies of younger children's friendships that contact over toys and other items does in fact lead to social interaction (Rubin, 1980). However, for boys to admit this means that you might be seen as 'sad' or a 'geek'. As Buckingham (1994) has pointed out, children are aware of the discourse around concerns over negative effects of electronic media, and in different ways attempt to distance themselves from them (Buckingham, 1994:93). That is to say, children who play video games are aware of the stereotyped 'computer nerd' figure, and indeed several children drew such a character on the back page of their questionnaire. Asking children in an interview if they are the kind of person who needs computers for friendship is tantamount, then, to describing them as being in some way an inadequate person. They are bound to distance themselves from this kind of representation because it

is not 'cool' to be such a person. In a group interview in the urban school, I had been asking why the children liked video games:

Pete	... and you can impress your friends if you've got one and they haven't got one.
	[amazed, disbelieving gasps from the girls]
SM	That seems to be one of the things about boys – what about you girls, is that a consideration for you?
	[All girls - No]
SM	So your friends aren't impressed because you've got a certain computer and they haven't?
	[All - no]
SM	So do you think that's just how boys see it?
David	No. I don't know anyone who thinks that apart from that geek there (to Pete).
	[girls laugh]

Because Pete admitted that, for him, owning and playing computer games is an important status symbol in peer relations, he was roundly condemned by the rest of the group. David had presented himself as a 'hard man' throughout the interview, performing for the girls and making them giggle by, for example, making the chair squeak, and saying that when he went out after school he liked to *'beat people up'*. After David's attack on Pete for his comments, Pete excused himself from the interview and left. I had the impression that Pete was not part of the group in any sense during the interview, so David's condemnation of him might have been to distance himself from Pete's views and to show that he (Pete) was not part of the group. Calling Pete a 'geek' both insults him and serves to distance the other members of the group from him. As James (1995) writes:

'One of the prime resources which children draw upon ... are sets of specialized words ... the 'argot' of youth subcultural style. Through the articulation of these words children and young people separate themselves of from the adult world and, at the same time, identify for themselves those who are, or who are not, stylish speakers; that is, those who do or do not yet belong' (James 1995:50).

It was not just David who was opposed to Pete's view - the girls gasps expressed their astonishment that anyone would admit to such a view. In all of the interviews I asked the children and young people how important that they thought computer and video games are to those who play them. Almost without exception, boys tended to say that they weren't important at all, although there were one or two boys (usually those who were interviewed either alone or with a close friend) who said that they were important to them:

SM   How important do you think that computer and video games are in kids lives generally - do you think they're very important, or not important at all?

Greg   Depends if you're a geek or not.
       [laughter]

Dave   Depends if you've got a social life outside the house, if you don't then they might be important, but people might have social lives and go out and stuff.

Ian   Mine in't real important cos I'm mostly out but if I get bored I just play it.

Greg   I used to play on mine quite a lot but I don't now. I hardly ever play on it.

These young people must avoid being seen as a 'geek' at all costs. Although it was Greg who made the remark about being a 'geek' (if you think that video games are important), later in the above excerpt he says that he used to play on his a lot, although now he 'hardly ever' plays on it because he goes out with his friends. The implication here is that if you have a social life, if you have friends, you're not a geek. This complements and at the same time contradicts the earlier argument about video games being important for friendship - at the same time it would appear that you need to have and to play video games for friendship, but that once you have a social life outside the house, you don't want to be seen as playing video games. What I am arguing here is that, for children and young people, friendship is about process rather than stasis. What is also illustrated in this discussion is the

tension between individuality and conformity in children's social relationships:

> 'Issues about conformity and difference are ... a feature of all children's interactions with one another, continually cropping up in the minutiae of their everyday social relations. On each occasion when a demand for conformity arises children must know how to deal with it lest their identities become devalued' (James, 1993:143).

This is well illustrated in the following two excerpts which are taken from an interview with Nick, Bill and David at the rural school. The first extract is from early in the interview when Nick was by himself, as the other two boys were late for their appointment. Nick told me that he played video games every night for about an hour. When I asked him how important he thought video games were to kids, he had this to say:

Nick   *Err, depends, really. Like I know some people*
            who don't play on them at all because they don't
            think they're any good, they just play football
            and all that lot, err, I find it good to relax me, so
            I find it an important piece of my life.

Contrast this with Nick's statements later in the interview when his friends were present:

SM   *A final question - how important do you think*
            that video games are to kids generally?
Nick   *Depends on the kid, really. Like us, we don't*
            really depend on them, but if you've got
            someone who isn't really popular...
Bill   *My brother! [laughs]*
Nick   *... and no body really talks to 'em or owt, he'll*
            just stay in and play on his computer all day
            and if you take the computer away he'll just sit
            there all day.
SM   *So, you're saying if they're not very popular*
            they'll stay in - don't you think that if they've
            got a computer, it'll make them more popular,
            'cos then they'll be like all their mates?
Bill   *Depends on what type of computer you got! If*
            all your mates have got a megadrive, and you've

	got summat like a...
David	*Commodore 64.*
Bill	*...Commodore 64, or an Amiga, or summat different to that...*
Nick	*You don't really want friends that just want your computer.*
SM	*No. And there's people like that, are there? If they can't afford one of their own they'll just find...*
Nick	*Someone with a computer.*

Interestingly, these boys are both denying that having computers and video game machines are important for friendship. At the same time, however, they are telling me that you need to have the right kind of computer - if you have a 'Commodore 64' (an old, very basic, machine) then you won't fit in. The way that Nick describes the importance of video games in his life changes considerably in the context of the interview - alone with me he reveals the important role which video games have in his life, but with his friends present he presents a very different view - that video games are only important for unpopular people.

To a large extent, then, my inability to discover directly whether friendship was an important factor in the ownership and use of video games through the interviews was a function of the methodology used. Group interviews are a useful tool to use when interviewing children precisely because they allow group dynamics to be illuminated in this way (May, 1993). In the excerpts presented here, then, not only can we see that friendship *is* a factor in the ownership and use of computer and video games, but we can also see the ways in which boys don't or won't talk about friendship in those terms. This is an important finding in itself. As Allan (1989) states:

> 'The social significance of friendship will be more evident in studies which are grounded to some degree in particular contexts than where questions are posed in a generalised or abstract form. For this reason, much interesting information on the working of friendship can be obtained from studies in which friendship itself is not the main focus' (1989:157).

Talking about video games in interviews with children and young people clearly shows the gendered nature of friendship. The following extract illustrates the ways in which friendship means different things to girls than it does to boys. Asking this group of girls and boys why they think girls don't like video games as much as boys do, this conversation developed. Incidentally, it was also the only time in the interview that the girls showed any interest in or commitment to the interview:

SM	*Do you girls have any opinions on why it is that girls don't like them?*
Jenny	*Well, you see we're more intellectual and brainy.*
Leanne	*We don't want to grow up square eyed.*
Jenny	*Well no, I think its the way you're .....*
David	*She'd look like John Major if she was! [girls giggling]*
David	*You'd have to wear square glasses.*
Jenny	*Sort of, its the way your.... I don't know .... it's not whether you're a girl or a boy, it's the way you, the way we've been brought up, like your parents....*
Leanne	*If you've got loads of computers ...*
Jenny	*Yeah, like your parents, if they hate computers ...*
Leanne	*Then they won't buy em.*
Jenny	*They won't buy them for you, then you never get interested in computers.*
SM	*Yes, but you've all got a machine in your house..*
Jenny	*Yes ... (thoughtfully)*
SM	*And yet your saying you're not ...*
Jenny	*Yeah, I mean ....*
David	*I know a bit about 'em, but...*
Jenny	*But telly and meeting your friends...*
Leanne	*It's a lot more interesting ... cos computer games, you're sat by yourself, it's not social.*

While denying that they think that there are gender differences in the ownership and use of computer and video games, Jenny and Leanne's description of watching telly and meeting friends as being more interesting than playing computer games is clearly indicating gender differences in friendship. As we saw in Chapter 4, girls, but not boys, prefer being with

friends. Caldwell and Peplau (1982) studied unmarried college students, and found no sex differences in the number of friends, time spent with friends or preference for intimate rather than good or casual friends. They did find, however, differences in the type of interaction. Men, rather than women (84% and 43% respectively) preferred to do some activity with friends. Women rather than men (57% and 10% respectively) preferred just to talk, and 57% of men, and 39% of women preferred a friend who liked to do the same things, rather than a friend who feels the same way. The authors state 'women's friendships appeared oriented toward personal sharing of information; men's friendships showed an emphasis on joint activities' (1982:728). For boys, then, friendship is performed through shared activities - 'doing' something - in this case playing video games, while for girls it is more to do with talking and simply 'being' together.

SM	*So you don't think it's a gender thing, then, you don't think it's boy and girl thing, you just ... some people are interested and some people aren't interested?*
Jenny	*Yeah.*
Leanne	*And what their friends are interested in - some people just do it because their friends like it.*
David	*'Cause they're sheep.*
SM	*So you think it's to do with friends then, people want to be like their friends?*
Jenny	*Yeah, yeah.*

Leanne and Jenny feel that people play video games to be like their friends (although David rejects this in line with my earlier discussion). Carl and Simon were virtually the only boys who admitted that computer and video games were important in terms of friendship. While I have already used part of the following extract earlier in this chapter, it is worth repeating it in this context:

Carl	*I used to be shy, but computer games, like ...*
Simon	*They bring yourself out of it.*
Carl	*Yeah, yeah, they bring yourself out instead of hiding inside all the time... it brings yourself out and you just get to meet more people, like*

	computer games, it's just enjoyment...
SM	So do they give you something to talk about with other people, then?
Carl	Yeah, cos like you'll say "have you seen that game, it's just come out" or "have you got any cheats for it" or "do you want to come round to my house and play it", so you want to ask all these questions, you wanna find out ...
Simon	Yeah, if ever you go to someone's house or they come to yours, you always end up on the computer, all the time
Carl	Yeah, even on mine
Simon	All the time.

Carl says people come to his house to play 'even on mine' - his computer is an old model, but 'even' that one attracts friends. In contrast, Creasey and Myers (1986) state:

> 'Contrary to what children might hope, owning a new video game did not change children's popularity or pattern of peer interactions in this sample. It may be that video games are not attractive enough to attract children to the owner's home' (1986:261).

These writers were, however, discussing a specific point in time, when the games machines were not as advanced as they are now. Also, most of the children in their sample already owned machines - it might be that rather than changing children's 'pattern of peer interactions', owning a video game provides a sense of belonging or conformity within the peer group (see the earlier discussion). The ownership and use of computer and video games, then, is important for boys friendships, as it provides a means of 'belonging' to the group, which is important in friendship formation as James (1986) has noted.

Egli and Meyers (1984) also found that video game playing was a social activity, although these writers were focussing on arcade play rather than in the home. Also writing on play in arcades, although about fruit machines rather than video games, Fisher (1993) discusses the 'rent-a-spacers' who 'gamble on fruit machines *primarily to gain access to the arcade venue, the*

cultural space where they meet and socialise with their friends' (1993:465, emphasis in original). Panelas (1983) discusses the ways in which ownership of computers and video games as cultural products 'provide the basis of both social solidarity within a large subculture and a reliable criterion for distinguishing members of the group from others' (Panelas, 1983:60).

In interviews with girls, they often expressed their belief that video games were important to boys' friendships and gave them a common topic on which to communicate. Hence Jolene, from the rural school, found the way that boys talk about video games puzzling as her tone of voice in the interview revealed when she said:

Jolene	*But that's all they talk about though, innit,*
	computer games. That's all the lads talk about
	at school, computer games.
Louise	*The girls talk about music.*
Jolene	*And they [the boys] swap computer games at*
	school.
SM	*Do they? And all you girls talk about is music?*
Jolene	*Yeah. And sing! We're all singing when we're*
	working!
SM	*What, in the classroom?*
Jolene	*Yeah.*

These excerpts clearly illustrate the gendered nature of friendship (Erwin 1993). While Carl and Simon, as I argued earlier, see the ownership and use of computer and video games as important in gaining and maintaining friendship, Jolene confirms this, but with some puzzlement. She is puzzled because the ways in which boys and girls perform friendship in and through leisure is so different. Like Leanne and Jenny, she doesn't use video games in this way. With her friends, she talks about music. This again confirms the data from Chapter 4 where it was shown that listening to music is important for girls but not boys. This, then, is one reason why girls don't play with computer and video games to the same extent as boys - it is because they don't need to. There are other leisure items which girls use to foster interaction.

Why else is it that girls don't play?

In each interview I asked the children why they thought that girls don't play to the same extent as boys. In many cases, the responses from both girls and boys centred around the lack of suitable games for girls to play.

> SM   *What do you think about the games that are*
> *available for girls - do you think there are any*
> *that are interesting and good for girls to play?*
> Jolene   *They're mostly all boys games. They should*
> *make a few girls games, 'cos then girls could*
> *have a chance to go on computer games.*
> SM   *Do you think they'd play more if there were*
> *some interesting games?*
> Jolene   *They might play more, but, they wouldn't forget*
> *about their friends as well would they?*

This excerpt confirms the earlier discussion about the gendered nature of friendship, as well as identifying the lack of suitable games for girls. This has been of concern to the video game companies, such as Sega, who have set up a 'task force' run by women games designers and marketers to try and develop games which will appeal to girls (Tetzali, 1993:72) as they realise the potential for increased sales. Girl Games Inc. takes a more feminist view in their attempts to design games for girls in order to encourage girls into technology. They work with girls and help them to create their own games (Girls Games Inc., personal communication, 1995). The girls I spoke to were disparaging about these attempts:

> SM   *Sega, the games people, have set up a*
> *department run by women and girls to design*
> *games for girls, because the only ones so far have*
> *been, like 'Barbie' and shopping games and*
> *stuff..*
> *[girls scoffing]*
> Jolene   *They'd probably put a girl hedgehog on or*
> *summat like that. [sarcastically]*
> Louise   *And use girls names instead of boys, cos all the*
> *games have got boys names, like 'Streetfighter'.*

Sometimes the children thought that girls didn't play video games because they are in some way inherently different from boys and so the available games wouldn't appeal to them, as these 14 year old boys argue:

SM   *What do you think about girls and computer games, why is it that girls don't play as much?*

Ian   *They're not into it*

Dave   *Some of the girls in my class are really, like, childish, they don't like computer games, you know like Mortal Kombat, it puts 'em off with all the blood and gore and things, and like err.. shoot em ups, they don't like the idea of killing people, so they don't play. That's what girls do.*

Ian   *Yeah, some games, most of the games wouldn't appeal to girls.*

It is true that the majority of games available are designed by, and for, boys and young men and that there are few games which would appeal to girls. On the questionnaire the children were asked who they thought that video games were for, as the table below shows.

TABLE 5.6: Who are video games for?
(Whole sample: girls N = 751, boys N = 851. Figures are percentages)

	Primary pupils		Secondary pupils	
	girls (n = 26)	boys (n = 26)	girls (n = 709)	boys (n = 814)
for girls	0	0	0.1	0.1
for boys	7.7	23.1	3.5	11.5
for anyone	73.1	61.5	95.2	85.5
don't know	19.2	15.4	1.1	2.8

At primary school age it would seem that many children are uncertain about who computer and video games are for, but the secondary school pupils seem to have now made up their minds - few of the secondary school children say

that they don't know who they are for. Fewer secondary school children think that they are for boys than primary school children, but more boys than girls at both ages say that they think they are for boys. Virtually no children of any age think that they are for girls. While some children think, then, that these games are for boys, all the children understand that there is no way in which it can be said that video games are intended primarily for girls.

What do children think about video games?

As I discussed earlier, many commentators argue that video games are, in one sense or another, 'bad' for children. Few of those writing around children and video games have however actually asked children themselves what they think of the games. This was explored in the present study through the questionnaire and through the interviews.

TABLE 5.7: Are computer and video games good things for children and young people to play with?
(Whole sample: girls N = 751, boys N = 851. Figures are percentages)

	Primary pupils		Secondary pupils	
	girls	boys	girls	boys
	(n = 24)	(n = 25)	(n = 678)	(n = 779)
yes	62.5	80.0	66.1	83.2
no	20.8	4.0	31.0	14.1
undecided	16.7	16.0	2.9	2.7

This table shows that the majority of children think that computer and video games are good things for children and young people to play with, although more girls than boys think that they are bad things. One 8 year old boy has an explicit personal reason for saying that they are 'good things' - he wrote '*I think yes yung peple shude be able to play on them so that I can*'.

By secondary school age, children are more definite in their opinions - while around 16% were undecided at primary school age, only around 2% felt this way at secondary school. For many of the children who liked playing video games, and thought that they were good things, one popular reason for liking them is that 'it's *summat to do when you're bored, innit? Really bored*'. Playing a video game is not, then, the first activity that children turn to. As we saw in Chapter 4, there are a variety of other activities which children like to do. Again we hear from Carl and Simon:

SM	*In a general sense, how important do you think computer and video games are to kids?*
Carl	*They're not important. They don't rest their lives on 'em, do they?*
SM	*So what do you think the attraction is, why do people like them?*
Carl	*'Cos its fun? It's fun and it's something to do.*
Simon	*It's if you're bored ...*

Boredom was often talked about in relation to video game play. Games are either played because the children are bored: '*I don't go on it all the time, but sometimes when I'm bored I just go on it*' or not played because they're boring '*they're a bit boring after a while*'. Computer and video games are, then, useful as 'time-fillers' for some of those who play them.

On the blank page on the questionnaire, many took the opportunity to engage with the debate around the effects of video games, and the points the children raised focused mainly around health issues, addiction, violence and anti-social behaviour. The majority of those who commented in this way were girls. For example, a 9 year old primary school girl wrote on her questionnaire '*I think they are not good for children. It is bad for peoples eyes. It is addictive*'. An 8 year old girl was undecided. She said '*yes I think they are good things to play on. Play on them for a long time you will hurt your eyes you will get square eyes*'. The information about the effects on health, especially the video games/epilepsy link, was clearly something the children were aware of. James, aged 6, had this to say:

James	In winter I play every day. For one hour.
SM	Just one hour?
Lauren	I play for 2 hours.
James	No, you get epilepsy for that.
SM	So does your mum make sure you just play for one hour?
James	Yes. One day I played for 2 hours and 10 minutes! I got epilepsy. I think I took pills.

As far as I am aware, James was not epileptic. He was aware of the concerns, however, and tried to incorporate his knowledge into his description of the way he played. Many children mention that playing video games damages eyesight as this 11 year old boy describes:

> I like computers because you can get a lot of exitement out of
> them, but they are bad for your eyes. I was told by the optician
> to keep off the computer for a while, I was only aloud about half
> and hour on it at a time, so it's not that good for everyone
> because it might damage their eyes. I have cut down quite a lot
> because the optician said so and I don't want to damage my
> eyes.

Interestingly, one of the themes which runs through the children's opinions of video games is age - an important definition of a child's identity which children use themselves (James 1993). Many children of all ages say that video games are not good for younger children - even the 8 year olds say that video games are OK for them, but not for very young children. For example, a 15 year old boy wrote 'I think computer games are ok for older children, but not for really young children who can be easily confused by the violence in games', while a 9 year old girl said 'well I think that they are not very good for children because it might pull the telly over I think it should be 6 and over'. Clearly related to my earlier discussion around friendship, a 12 year old girl from the rural school wrote

> I don't think computer games are suitable for young children
> because it blows their mind out and they don't understand
> whats really going on. I think that computer games are
> suitable for 8 - 11 year olds because they don't really have
> anything to do after school so they play on their computer

*games But when people get to about 13 they like to go out
with their mates and they don't play on their computer games
a lot. I like to go out with my friends every Friday night and
we have a lot of fun.*

Some of the children under six who I have interviewed clearly think that video games are for them. It would seem that whatever age the child is, playing video games is OK for that age group and older, but not for younger children. In this way, younger children are seen by those older as 'other' and less capable than themselves. A 15 year old girl wrote:

*'Computers are not at all good for children. They are not good
because they make children un-sociable and they end up
spending all of their time glued the handset. I know this
because I have a 9 year old brother'.*

The issue of computer games making children unsociable was also a theme which was often repeated in the comments on the questionnaire. For example, one 14 year old girl from the urban school, who didn't like playing herself, clearly disapproves. She wrote

*I think playing on a computer is totally acceptable if it is
played with now and again. Once or twice a week is totally
O.K. but if you play with it every day it tends to make you
anti-social. When I go places like orchestra or Youth Club I
notice that many children are entirely incapable of socialising.
This is because they very rarely talk to people, they just sit and
stare at the video screen.
        In the olden days, children went outside and played and
talked with each other. This made them far more sociable and
mature.*

Some of the children were concerned about the issue of addiction to computer and video games, and about the effect they had on young children. For example, this girl from the rural school wrote '*I don't think video and computer games are good for young children as they influence them throughout their most influencial [sic] years'* and in contrast a boy from the same school wrote on his questionnaire '*I play on super mario land, which is a little man who jumps on mushrooms and that hasn't influenced me in any way'.*

Not all the children took this kind of perspective. They were much more likely to argue that computer games should be played in moderation, and that there could be positive things said about them as this 12 year old wrote.

> *I think that people should only stay on the computer for a*
> *certain amount of time I can usually go on my computer when*
> *I want to but [not?] if I've got homework to do.*
> *Good points:-*
> *1. Some educational games are good .*
> *2. It's good for family entertainment.*
> *3. Good if you get bored.*
> *Bad points:-*
> *1. bad for your eyes*
> *2. Some people can get adicted to them when they could be*
> *doing more useful things.*

While some of the children are critical of the playing of video games then, the overwhelming majority (over 80%) think that they are not damaging. Asking children themselves how they understand the use of computer and video games provides a very different picture to the notion of the child as socially isolated and withdrawn due to their use of electronic media. The moral panics around this activity which I discussed in the opening chapter can thus be seen to be groundless.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the playing of computer and video games in the home. By taking the children's own accounts of what it is that they like about these games, we are able to see that panics around children as passive recipients of the negative messages found in computer games is misplaced. We have also seen that there are gender differences in the kinds of games which girls and boys like. I have argued that one important factor in the popularity of these games is, for boys, that they are used as a tool in friendship and peer relations, and this argument is useful in countering fears of social isolation in children who play video games. I also argue that girls do not play as much as boys because they don't need to use these games as a tool

in this way. Another reason why girls don't play is that there are few games which are attractive to them. Further reasons why girls do not play to the same extent as boys are examined in the following chapters.

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[1] The classes of game he describes are similar to those which I use here, with some small differences - he uses the genre of 'platform blasters' to signify platform games where some shooting of targets is involved whereas I don't use this category.

[2] I am grateful to my son David (who wrote the following extract after a discussion we had) for the following description of the origin of this particular game genre: 'Shoot-'em-ups were a genre largely born of the late eighties trend amongst Hollywood producers to promote and perpetuate their product via the medium of computer and video games. This was typified by violent, high-action variants on the traditional and infinitely more cosmetically appealing platform genre - designed and marketed towards pre-pubescent/adolescent males to increase the limited shelf-life on the high-concept exploitation action film blockbuster genre'.

[3] It should be noted that these classifications apply to the games which were popular at the time of the fieldwork (1994 - 5). The technology of games design and indeed the consoles and computers to play them on, has advanced, and the separation between genre is not now by 1997 as clear cut.

[4] There will not be any discussion of the reasons why primary school children like particular games as they were not asked this on the questionnaire which they were given.

[5] this response could refer to the music in the game, the bright colours, the way a character moves and so on.

[6] Responses were coded in this category if the subject gave reasons such as 'I like platforms' or 'I like Sonic' for example

Chapter 6: *Inside the family: siblings, parents and children*

> 'Space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power' (Foucault, in Rabinow, 1984:252).

> 'An analysis of family dynamics should be set in the context of the home as a physical space because the spatial configuration of the home can reinforce or weaken patterns of behaviour' (Lowe, Foxcroft, and Sibley 1993:153).

Introduction

This chapter examines social relations within the household which become apparent when focusing on the leisure patterns of children and young people. Themes discussed and developed in earlier chapters are further explored, and the playing of computer and video games is discussed from a comparatively new angle. To do this I will be drawing on some of the literature in social geography as well as sociological analyses, and examining notions of place and space within the home. Still concerned with the issue of boundaries and control around what children do, part of what I intend here is an explanation as to why it is that girls do not play video games as much as boys do. I will, following Simmel, argue that it is because girls' use of space within the home is unequally distributed, and is controlled by their male siblings and by their parents. Simmel has argued 'Domination requires spatial expression ... The exercise of authority over people ... usually also takes the form of territorial control' (Lechner 1991:198). O'Brien (1995) has noted that when looking at the distribution of resources in households (including space) 'rather than a simple dualism between power and its absence ... multiple sources of power can exist within families' (1995:514). This chapter explores some of the

sources of power which can be seen in operation when focusing on video games.

In particular, I want to discuss the way in which domestic space has become contested space when both boys and girls are using the home as a leisure site. Traditionally, domestic space has been considered the main province of girls and women. From the adolescent girls 'bedroom culture' to the housewife watching soaps, women's leisure has traditionally been seen as taking place within the home but, as I have shown in Chapters 4 and 5, the leisure of boys and young men is becoming increasingly based around the home rather than out on the streets. More particularly it is located in the bedroom and around the computer (see also Wheelock, 1992). The question arises, therefore, what happens to those whose space that traditionally has been?

Firstly, however, I want to discuss some more general issues around the use of computer and video games within the family, and later to assess the impacts of family composition (that is, families with no siblings, brothers and sisters, brothers only, etc.) on the ownership, playing and siting of computers and video games in the home. Sibling relations have not previously been the focus of any systematic sociological, or anthropological, study. Family studies have concentrated on adult family members, class position, gender or leisure, and such studies generally fail to include the children who live in those families, let alone to investigate relations between children in families (Brannen and O'Brien, 1996). The position is little better in psychology.

I also intend later in the chapter to re-examine some of the data presented earlier on leisure activities, this time taking into account family composition. It is surprising, in view of the fact that computers and video games are a home-based leisure activity, that many other commentators on this activity appear to take no account of social relations in the home when discussing the issue of, for example, why it is that boys play more than girls. In this study this is especially important for, as I have found, there is little gender

difference in actually liking to play computer and video games - only 5% of girls and 2% of boys say that they don't like playing them. I intend to examine this in the following section.

Who owns the computers and where are they kept?

Almost all the children, 97% in the secondary schools and 83% of children in the primary school[1], have at least one computer or video game machine in their home. The rates of ownership in this study are much higher than have previously been found, and may reflect a significant drop in the price of the machines the year before the study, making them more affordable. For example, Parsons (1995) found that 70% of his sample owned computer or video games, and a recent study published by the Child Poverty Action Group[2] found only 62% of their sample owned a computer or video game machine. Around half of all the children surveyed had two or more computers, with some having as many as 5 computer or video game machines in their house.

Table 6.1: Do you have a computer or video game machine in your house, by sex and family composition. Secondary school pupils. (Whole sample: girls N = 725, boys N = 825. Figures are percentages)

	mixed siblings girls	mixed siblings boys	brothers only girls	brothers only boys	sisters only girls	sisters only boys	no siblings girls	no siblings boys
yes	91.4	98.5	92.0	94.5	89.1	97.5	76.1	97.6
no	8.6	1.5	8.0	5.5	10.9	2.5	23.9	2.4
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
	(n =140)	(n =201)	(n =276)	(n =275)	(n =201)	(n =243)	(n = 88)	(n = 83)

Overall, this table shows that more boys than girls say that they have computers and video games in their house. Where there are mixed siblings,

or brothers only, the gender difference in percentages for having video games is small, and is only slightly higher where there are sisters only. The main gender difference concerns children without siblings - in this family composition, boys without siblings are much more likely to say they have a computer/video game in the house than girls without siblings - 21.5% more boys than girls in this type of family own these machines. This finding is interesting, and will be discussed later in the chapter when I talk about the effect of family composition on leisure, including computer/video game use.

Table 6.2: Who owns the machines in your house?
(Whole sample: girls N = 725, boys N = 825)

other family members/shared machines	49.9%
boys own outright	35.2%
girls own outright	14.9%
Total	100%
Total number of machines owned	2802

We can see from table 6.2 above that, while half of the computers and video game machines in the homes of those who took part in the survey are either owned by other family members or are shared with the respondent and at least one family member, over 35% are owned exclusively by boys compared with only 14% owned exclusively by girls. In view of the expense involved in purchasing these machines, and the games to go with them, it is unsurprising that so many are shared with other family members. This does not, however, explain the gender difference in owning machines outright. Kath and Bill, parents of three children aged between 10 and 14 seem to be in disagreement about who the computer in their house was for:

> SM   And who did you buy it for - was it for all of them or
> was it...
>
> Kath We bought it for Paul. It was more ... he came with us
> to buy it...
>
> Bill [talking over Kath] ... it was a joint present, but the
> girls have argued that it was for Paul.

Kath, then, argues that because Paul went with them to buy the machine, it is then mainly his, although Bill states that it was bought for all the children. The girls aren't fooled, however, and in this excerpt a glimpse can be seen of the arguments which must have gone on in this family, even though both Bill and Kath tried throughout the interview to present their girls as not particularly interested in the machine. The reasons why they would do this can only be speculated on, but it may be that girls being interested in computers does not fit in with these parents' rather traditional views on gender appropriate behaviour, as later excerpts show (see West and Zimmerman, 1991). Similarly, in the excerpt below 7 year old Alan justifies excluding his sister from playing with the Sega in their house for precisely this reason - that the children present when the computer was bought are the ones who can say that it is theirs. I am asking who plays with the machine:

> Alan My sister isn't allowed, only my brother is.
> SM Why?
> Alan 'Cos she was asleep when we went out shopping with my mum and bought the Sega.
> SM So she's not allowed to play? Who says she can't play? Do you say she can't play?
> Alan Yeah.
> SM And what does your mum say?
> Alan 'She is!'
> SM [laughing] and you still won't let her?
> Alan No!
> SM Well!
> [Alan giggles]
> SM And does she want to play it as well? [Alan nods] Does she get upset?
> Alan Yeah.
> Julia I bet!
> SM But you still won't let her?
> [Alan shakes head, smiling]

At 7 years old, Alan is confident in his ability to interpret his world and here he is using his interpretation (his sister was asleep when the computer was bought so she can't play with it) to subordinate his sister. That computers tend to be bought for sons rather than daughters has been discussed

previously - Gailey informs us that in her study, and in others she had reviewed, 'almost all the parents claimed to have bought the Nintendo sets for their children, particularly their sons' (1993:85-6, see also Wajcman 1991:153, Wheelock, 1992). It has been noted within the literature that video game machines tend to be located in boys' rooms, even when they are bought for all the family. For example, Mitchell discusses relations between family members based around the video game, and informs us:

> 'Videogame consoles were usually considered property to be shared by all members of the family. However, in families with sons, possession by the boys was considered appropriate; and sisters had to request permission for access to the games. When the games were located in a bedroom, instead of the living room or family room, it was always the boys bedroom even though he may have been the younger of the siblings' (1985:129).

The siting of the machines in the home are, I want to stress, not accidental. They are sited in a particular place for particular reasons which may be articulated by parents as being chosen for the purpose of parental control. While it would be too simplistic to state that this is done in order to ensure that girls are excluded, this is often the effect, as I go on to show.

The following table examines ownership of the machine by where it is kept in the home for the secondary school children.

Table 6.3: Ownership of machine, by sex and siting of machine in the home. Secondary school pupils.

(Whole sample: girls N = 725, boys N = 825. Small n in tables refers to number of responses. Figures are percentages and do not add to 100)

Who owns it	all the family		I own it		shared with brother		shared with sister	
where is it	girls	boys	girls	boys	girls	boys	girls	boys
	(n = 188)	(n=185)	(n = 409)	(n=966)	(n = 61)	(n = 118)	(n = 44)	(n = 34)
family room	62.7	54.6	19.0	14.2	37.8	16.8	34.2	25.5
unspecified bedroom	22.8	27.5	41.8	43.2	44.2	43.2	34.1	38.3
my bedroom	10.6	12.4	36.7	40.1	8.2	33.9	18.2	29.4

The table above shows the relationship between ownership of machine, sex and location within the home. We can see that where the machine is owned by all the family, both boys and girls say that it is more likely to be kept in a family room. Conversely, when the young person themselves owns the machine, it is more likely to be kept in a bedroom. In both these cases, there is little difference between girls and boys, although girls are slightly more likely to say that their machines are kept in family rooms. When the machine is shared with a brother, however, we can see that for girls, this has an effect on where the machine is kept - almost 20% more girls than boys who share a machine with their brother say that the shared machine is kept in a family room, while girls who share a machine with a brother keep it in their own bedrooms 25% *less* than boys who share a machine with a brother. This can also be seen in the last column - when a machine is shared with a sister, boys sharing the machine with a sister are more likely to keep it in their own bedroom while girls who share with a sister keep their machine in a family room. I mentioned earlier that only 14% of all the computer and video games in the homes of the secondary school sample are owned by girls outright, and that most of the machines owned by the families of girls in this study are shared machines. The data and analysis presented above shows that girls

who share computers or video game machines with other family members are least likely to have that machine in their own room.

The issue of space is important for an understanding of gender relations, as Massey (1994) points out (see also Hunt, 1989). She says:

> '... space and place, spaces and places, and our senses of them ... are gendered through and through. Moreover they are gendered in a myriad different ways, which vary between the cultures and over time. And this gendering of space and place both reflects *and has effects back on* the ways in which gender is constructed and understood in the societies in which we live' (1994:186, emphasis in original).

One effect of the gendered siting of computers in the home is that girls have less access to the machines, and so play less. For example, the Sega in Amy's house was located in a family room. While she first told me that this didn't stop them playing (in that if her parents wanted to watch the TV the children could move the machine into another room which also has a TV set) it became clear in the course of the interview that her access to the machine was in fact constrained in a way which it wouldn't be if it had not been located in shared space - for example, none of the children could play with it at the weekends when their mother was doing the laundry. In another interview with some parents in the urban area, I asked Sue, the mother of three teenagers, who uses the computer most:

> Sue   *It tends to go in cycles ... and it tends to depend on where it is in the house. The first year we had it in the front room because I was ... and I had lots of work to do on the word processor ... My eldest son was doing his GCSEs and had coursework to do on it. The other two used it occasionally for word processing but they - the three children - mainly used it for video games. Since .. we've sort of re-vamped the front room and moved the desk out, and the table that the computer was on, it's now gone up into the loft which is our middle son's bedroom ... accessible to all of them ... the use of the games has gone down significantly since it's been up there ... So it's out of the way ... it's almost like out of*

Sue might be right - it may be a case of out of sight out of mind, but although she seems convinced that all the children can have free access to the computer which is now in one of the boys' bedrooms, it might be more likely that her son controls his space and therefore that he doesn't allow anyone else access to it. I didn't ask these parents why they chose to put the computer in their son's room, but one such reason might be that found in the following excerpt with Bill and Kath.

> Bill *Well, Paul sometimes ... he gets the preferential in some respects 'cause .... I don't know, you tend to, it's the old fashioned ideas, innit, he's the only lad, and lads play with computers, girls play with dolls......but .... it in't like that now. [pause] That's why, in a way .... originally it was going to go in the attic room, which was going to be Fiona's room and a shared room, in the other half of it, but that never worked out. Fiona dominated that room, so .. no way was the computer going up there.*

It seems in this case that, through negotiation, the computer was sited in the shared space of the living room because of the potential for conflict if it had gone in Fiona's room as originally intended. Bill suggests that putting the computer into one of the girls' bedrooms would have meant that Paul would not get the 'preferential treatment' in terms of access to the machine to which, as '*the only lad*', his parents believe he is entitled. As I discussed earlier, these parents were keen throughout the interview to present their daughters as not being interested in using the computer, and I argue that their traditional notions of gender appropriate behaviour might be one explanation for this. During the interview with Sue and her husband, it became clear that, unless she was using the computer for her work, when she had priority use, her middle son used it the most and her daughter used it the least. Sue also remarked that when the computer was downstairs, there were a lot of arguments over use:

> SM *Have there ever been any arguments about using it,*

> between the kids?
>
> Sue   Lots. Especially when it was down here. More so if
> they had friends in .. you know, 'well me and Julie want
> to play on it' or 'me and Ben' ...

Moving the machine has resolved the arguments, but it also means that use is mainly going to be decided by the son in whose bedroom it is situated.

Keeping the machines in a family room allows parents to exert control over the time their children spend playing on them:

> SM   Whereabouts did you keep it? Did you say it's in the
> caravan?
>
> Kath   It was in there (indicating the living room).
>
> SM   And was there ...
>
> Bill   We din't have it in the bedroom, we didn't think that
> was right. I mean, I'm not in for ermm Sky TV or
> watching boxes too much. So .. **we tried to keep it
> under control, and that's one reason I suppose we
> had it downstairs is ... especially when his mates
> come, they aren't all traipsing upstairs, at least
> they're only ... they're all in here and we...**
>
> Kath   When we think they've been on it long enough we just
> chuck them outside.

Bill is explicitly stating here that the siting of the machine in this house was decided upon so that his son and his friends (notice, he is not talking about his daughters or their friends using it) could be more easily controlled. Parents might find it more difficult to exert such control as 'chucking them outside' if the machines were located in a bedroom. However, as I am arguing, girls' access is more constrained than that of boys when they are in a family room, or in shared space. Bill and Kath said that their daughters, Emma and Fiona, weren't really interested in playing with the computer, and preferred to do other things. Indeed, throughout the interview whenever they discussed the computer, it was clear that Paul, the middle child, was the main user.

> Kath   Oh, she does all sorts of things, does Emma. She'll do a
> bit of sewing ....
>
> Bill   Sometimes she'll sit on his shoulder and watch for a bit,

	don't she?
Kath	*But they're not that interested really. They'll have a*
	little go ... used to have a little go now and again,
	Emma, but nothing ....
Bill	*Emma was painting with the computer the other day ...*
Kath	*Yeah, Fiona does painting. She likes drawing and stuff*
	like that.
Bill	*.... Making patterns and colouring different colours.*
	That's about as far as they go. Sometimes Emma'll
	play the one where all the things go down from above ..
	I don't know what you call it .. you have to centre them
	all down, every time you get a line they all drop ..
SM	*Oh, Tetris.*
Bill	*Tetris, yeah. She likes that game*
Kath	*Yeah, 'cos she has been moaning a little bit - because*
	it's in the caravan ...
Bill	*Yeah*
Kath	*She says 'there's nothing on that computer for me to*
	play on. There's one or two games on the Amigo, why
	does it have to be in the caravan?' Because she won't
	go out there and play on it 'why don't you bring it back
	in the house?'. Well the other thing I've got about
	them as well, they take up so much space. 'Cos I'm not
	having the house filled up with computers, I can't do
	with it. So it's one at a time really. The other one's
	gone in the caravan. There's an electric socket in there,
	they can have it on in there if they want.

Because Paul dominates the computer which is kept in the house, Emma
tends to have to watch him playing over his shoulder. Although Bill and
Kath said at several times during the interview that the girls weren't
interested in playing, Emma wants to be able to play games on the computer,
but doesn't want to go outside into the caravan to do this - aged 10, she may
be scared to be on her own in the caravan. The caravan is sited to the side of
the farm house, out of view from the house, which in turn, is located down a
remote country lane with no other houses in the immediate vicinity.

I want now to examine further the ways in which the siting of machines in
particular domestic spaces has effects on who plays with them. It will be
remembered from an earlier chapter that boys report playing more frequently
than girls - girls are more likely to report playing 'sometimes' and 'not very

often', while boys play 'every day' and 'most days'. Of those who report playing every day/most days, 28.8% are girls, while 62.1% are boys. The following table takes the siting of the machine as the independent variable (that is, the siting of the machine is used to explain patterns of play). Here I present only the figures for playing every day/most days.

Table 6.4: All who play video games every day/most days by siting of machine and sex
(Whole sample: girls N = 725, boys N = 825. Figures are percentages and will not sum to 100)

	girls (n = 198)	boys (n = 498)
unspecified bedroom	29.8	66.7
brothers bedroom	33.3	58.1
shared space	32.6	66.9
my bedroom	42.1	67.0
sisters bedroom	32.4	74.4

Here we can see that, as described, boys play every day/most days more often than girls, but they also do this no matter where the machine is sited in the home. For girls, it is when the machine is located in their own room that they are more likely to say that they play every day/most days. We have already seen, however, that girls are less likely than boys to have the machine in their bedrooms. Interestingly, the highest rate for boys concerns those whose machine is located in their sister's bedroom. This clearly shows the ways in which boys are invading their sister's space.

The location of the machine in domestic space is, then, a factor in explaining the gender differences in play. There have been other explanations offered as to why boys play more frequently than girls do. Tinnel (1985) found that 'the most dominant cultural theme was a gender gap surrounding the personal computer in the family setting' and this, it is argued, is due to gender

socialisation and to men's (and boys') orientation to rational things, and women's orientation to people (Tinnel, 1985:61). Another reason may be that girls are expected to help with household chores in their leisure time more than boys are. It has often been noted that access to leisure is unequally distributed within households (Seymour, 1992). Wajcman has stated 'Overall, girls simply have fewer opportunities to use computers than boys because the experience of leisure time is deeply divided along sex boundaries'(Wajcman, 1991:154). My data confirms this. For example, Sarah, a 14 year old girl with two younger brothers can only play on their games machine when she has finished washing up: *sometimes I can play on the computer when I've done the washing up .... the dinner pots. I always get landed with that'*. Similarly, Bill and Kath described how their daughters helped with domestic tasks, but were in agreement that their son wasn't expected to and indeed didn't help in the house, but was encouraged to go outside and help his father on the farm, which he did only rarely.

However, there may be another factor as to why boys play more than girls and which I put forward here as a complementary explanation: parental and sibling control over access to computers and video games.

The control over access to computers and video games

<u>Primary School Children</u>

One question in the survey asked 'who decides when and where you can play computer and video games?' Most of the primary school children (63%) said that they decided for themselves when and where they could play. For those who have someone else (parents, siblings) decide, analysis showed that age was the important variable here. Younger children (8 and 9 year olds) were more likely to be controlled by someone else in their access to computer and

video games than older children (10 and 11 year olds). At primary school age it is mainly parents who control access.

Secondary school children

In the majority of cases the secondary school children also said that they decide for themselves when and where they can play, as the graph below shows.

Chart 6.1: Who decides when and where you can play computer and video games? (variables recoded into 'self' and 'other').
(Whole sample: boys N = 825, girls N = 725. Rural children: boys n = 386, girls n = 310; urban children: boys n = 405, girls n = 349)
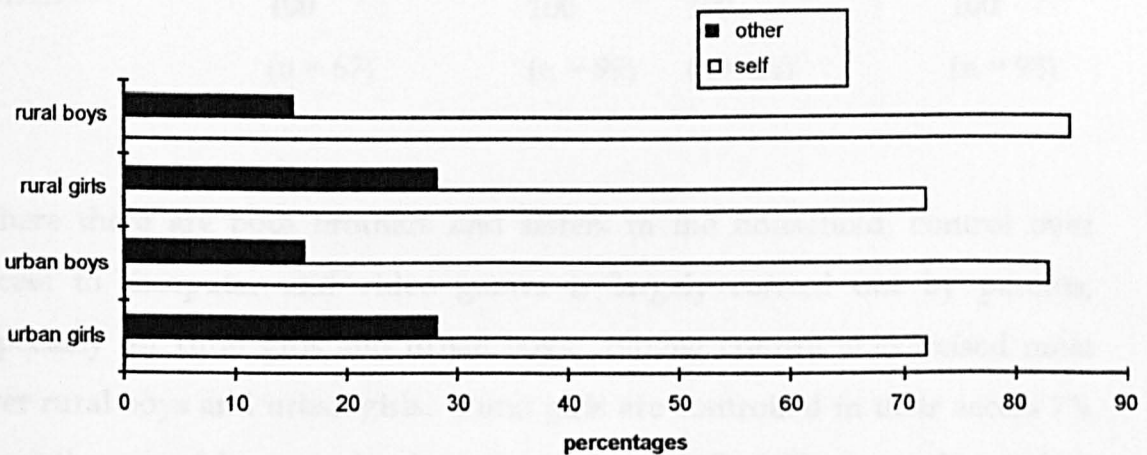
However, in both the rural and urban areas, girls are more likely than boys to have someone else decide when and where they can play - around 28% of girls have someone else decide, compared with around 15% of boys. In comparison with the primary school pupils, analysis showed that for the secondary school children, gender was the important variable - girls were more likely to be controlled whether they were younger (under 13) or older (over 13). This confirms James' (1993) argument that gender becomes more salient to children's identity as they get older. Further analysis of this question by family composition and by geographic location reveals several other interesting details.

Table 6.5: Who decides when and where you can play video games, by family with mixed siblings, sex and location
(Whole sample: girls N = 725, boys N = 825. Figures are percentages)

	Mixed siblings			
	rural children		urban children	
who decides	girls	boys	girls	boys
I do	71.6	78.8	73.4	77.6
parents	17.9	14.1	14.1	20.4
sibling(s)	4.5	6.1	7.8	2.0
someone else/multiple	6.0	1.0	4.7	0
TOTALS	100	100	100	100
	(n = 67)	(n = 99)	(n = 64)	(n = 98)

Where there are both brothers and sisters in the household, control over access to computer and video games is largely carried out by parents, especially for rural girls and urban boys. Sibling control is exercised most over rural boys and urban girls. Rural girls are controlled in their access 7% more than rural boys, and urban girls are controlled 4% more than urban boys.

Table 6.6: Who decides when and where you can play video games, by family with no siblings, sex and location
(Whole sample: girls N = 725, boys N = 825. Figures are percentages)

who decides	No siblings			
	rural children		urban children	
	girls	boys	girls	boys
I do	87.2	93.6	80.0	91.2
parents	7.7	2.1	14.3	8.8
sibling(s)	0	0	0	0
someone else/multiple	2.6	4.2	5.7	0
TOTALS	100	100	100	100
	(n = 39)	(n = 47)	(n = 35)	(n = 34)

Here we have the highest rates of autonomy - especially for boys. Children from the urban area report that they are controlled more by their parents than rural children. Urban girls are controlled 11% more than urban boys, and rural girls are controlled 4% more than their male counterparts. Without siblings, however, both boys and girls are more able to decide for themselves.

Table 6.7: Who decides when and where you can play video games, by family with sisters only, sex and location
(Whole sample: girls N = 725, boys N = 825. Figures are percentages)

	Sisters only			
	rural children		urban children	
who decides	girls	boys	girls	boys
I do	73.7	86.9	74.8	89.1
parents	19.7	11.1	18.9	8.8
sibling(s)	2.6	0	2.7	1.5
someone else/multiple	3.9	2.0	3.6	0.7
TOTALS	100	100	100	100
	(n = 76)	(n = 99)	(n = 111)	(n = 137)

Again, where there are sisters only, there is little sibling control. Girls with sisters are controlled more by parents than boys with sisters - overall rural girls with sisters are controlled 13% more than rural boys, and urban girls in this family type are controlled 14% more than urban boys. There is little control by sisters for either girls or boys.

Table 6.8: Who decides when and where you can play video games, by family with brothers only, sex and location
(Whole sample: girls N = 725, boys N = 825. Figures are percentages)

who decides	Brothers only			
	rural children		urban children	
	girls	boys	girls	boys
I do	65.6	84.1	67.7	80.6
parents	16.4	12.1	17.7	14.7
sibling(s)	15.6	2.3	13.1	0.8
someone else/multiple	2.4	1.5	1.5	3.9
TOTALS	100	100	100	100
	(n = 122)	(n = 132)	(n = 130)	(n = 129)

Where there are brothers only, girls have the least autonomy in their access to computers and video games, and are controlled heavily by their brothers. In the rural area, girls are controlled 18% more overall than boys are, and in the urban area, girls are controlled almost 13% more. Between 13% and 15% of all the girls have their brothers decide when and where they can play, while boys in this family type have almost no control exerted over them by their brothers.

Taking all four tables into account, parents do the least controlling when there are no siblings. They are more involved in controlling girls, but not boys, when there are sisters only. Urban parents control more than rural parents, except when there are sisters only, when rural parents control more heavily than in any other family composition. Girls are most controlled when there are brothers only, and most autonomous when there are no siblings. This analysis shows that girls access to computers and video games is controlled more than that of boys, and that much of this control is exerted by their brothers. These findings are in line with Baskett and Johnson's (1982)

argument that sibling relationships are characterised by attempts to control each other. This kind of control has also been noted by Wheelock (1992:110) who informs us '... daughters are squeezed out of using the computer by their brothers, sometimes aided by their parents'. In interviews with parents, only one father explicitly mentioned controlling his daughter's access. He told me that their family had a pecking order for using their computer: *'the lad comes first, then me, and Carol's third in line'.*

Sibling control

I have shown, then, that girls are less likely than boys to own their own machines, that the machines in their homes are less likely than those of boys to be kept in their own bedrooms, and they are also less likely to be able to decide when and where to use them as their parents and their brothers exert control. As the following excerpts demonstrate, sibling control over access is linked to issues of control over domestic space.

SM *You've got a sister, Phil. You said that your Nintendo was shared with her - do you ever fight about going on it?*

Phil *Well, it's always kept in my room and there's a lot of arguments because I won't let her on it because it's in my room. I won't let her in my room.*

SM *Did you say your sister was older or younger?*

Phil *Younger.*

SM *How much younger?*

Phil *Ermm, she's 11.*

SM *So you won't let her in your room, you won't let her use it?*

Phil *She likes different types of games to me so if I let her, she like...*

SM *Does she ever complain to your mum about it?*

Phil *Yeah. She starts getting real annoyed and that and starts saying 'Oh well that's it now. Next time I'm gonna trash your room' and all this lot.*

SM *What does your mum say?*

Phil *She tells us both to pack it in. She usually blames it on me sister.*

SM *Does she? Does she ever threaten to take it off you?*

Phil *Yeah. She has done a couple of times.*

SM   Why? For fighting?
Phil   She says it causes nothing but problems.

Phil, quoted above, is 14 years old. Like many of the young people in my study, he shares his computer game machine with another family member, in this case with his younger sister. What is also common is that, even though the machine is shared property, it is situated in his bedroom. Conflict such as that described above by Phil can arise when one sibling refuses to allow access to their space, as Raffaelli (1992) argues:

> 'Conflicts centred on property issues are regarded primarily as evidence of rivalry between siblings. It has been theorised, however that possessions are integral to self definition (Furby 1978), and control over possessions has been linked to a sense of competence and self identity (Bettleheim 1974). Thus, property disputes may reflect not rivalry but rather age-appropriate issues of self definition and personal boundaries. This is supported by the fact that in this study, youngsters did not describe fighting over ownership but rather over unauthorised use of possessions or personal space' (Rafaelli, 1992:660).

Phil justifies excluding his sister from his room by telling me that it is because she likes different types of games to him. However from the extract they appear to be arguing not so much over the use of their machine, but over access to his personal space. Twice he tells me he won't let her in his room. His sister retaliates by threatening to 'trash' his bedroom, indicating that she is aware that it is his room, rather than his control over the machine, which is important to him. In this sense the machine becomes a focus for disputes over gendered domestic space. The conflict over the machine is often resolved by their mother physically removing it. He says 'she tells us both to pack it in', acknowledging that both of them are involved, but then qualifies this with 'she usually blames me sister'. This might be an effort on Phil's part to avoid appearing to behave at the same level as an 11 year old girl - the interview with Phil was carried out as part of a group interview and his best friend Levi was also in the room while we were talking. The conflict between Phil and his younger sister is highlighted by disputes over the machine, but this is not

to say that brothers and sisters would get on well if there were no machines in the house, as anyone who has been a sibling will acknowledge. Dunn *et al* (1994) studied mixed sex siblings and found differences in warmth and intimacy - older brother/younger sister dyads exhibited less intimacy than older sister/younger sister and older sister/younger brother dyads (1994:320). They state 'by the last time point in the study, when the older siblings were on average 12-13 years, significant gender composition effects were apparent, with the adolescent boys reporting less warmth and intimacy with their younger sisters than the adolescent girls with younger sisters' (1994:322). There would, then, be conflict between siblings anyway, but this study allows us to see the ways that such conflicts are played out around the use of leisure equipment and space in the home.

This issue of (threatened or actual) destruction of personal property by siblings is also demonstrated in an excerpt from an interview with Jenny, a parent of two teenagers. Her children Colin and Louise have each got a games machine in their own bedrooms. She describes a recent event in their house:

> Jenny *Louise never wants to borrow Colin's, but Colin would*
> *like to often use the Super Nintendo. Which can cause*
> *problems! [Laughs] in fact I was thinking about this ..*
> *it's only the other .. well, week before last, 'cos I was in*
> *the bath, and there was all hell on earth upstairs, and I*
> *wondered what the hell was happening! He wanted to*
> *play a game on hers, and she didn't want him to, so he*
> *wanted to then take the system out of her bedroom and*
> *put it in his, and she didn't want that either. She said*
> *'I might want to play it later'. She probably never did,*
> *but... she was just being awkward. So, yeah, there was*
> *fireworks then .....*
> SM   *So who won that time then? Did he get it in the end?*
> Jenny *He didn't, no! She might be the youngest, but by hell!*

Colin came into the lounge where Jenny and I were talking after the interview had ended. Jenny asked him to tell me about this particular fight. He made it clear that although Louise had won the original argument, he later went into

her room and ripped up her favourite poster of a soap star in retribution. Although Louise appeared to have exercised control over her brother in terms of the defence of her belongings and space, he later ensured that this was repaid by the destruction of one of her prized possessions. Like Phil and his sister, Colin and Louise fight over and destroy (or threaten to destroy) not the games machines themselves, but other items which may be more closely concerned with personal space and identity. More pragmatically, one young woman said she would damage things belonging to her brother if he wouldn't let her use their games machine rather than damaging the machine itself because '*I wouldn't be able to play with it then, would I?*'

Carl and Simon, two 13 year old teenagers, also have conflicts with their siblings over the games machine. Carl has two older sisters aged 16 and 17, and Simon has an older brother.

SM	*Do you ever fight with your brothers and sisters about...*
Carl	*Yeah, my sister beats me up*
SM	*Your sister beats you up?*
Simon	*My brother has a go at me, 'cos if he wants to go on the machine I'm on, but he wants to play a different game, like, I don't wanna get off my game so he can have a go so we end up having a fight*
SM	*Who wins?*
Simon	*My brother, now, 'cos he's a kick boxer! [Laughter] so I have to watch it!*
SM	*What about you, Carl, you said your sister beats you up?*
Carl	*Yeah [unclear].*
SM	*So does she get her own way - does she get to play on it?*
Carl	*Yeah, probably.*
Simon	*[giggling at Carl] Does she? [surprised tone]*
Carl	*Yeah.*
Simon	*[to Carl]Does she win you if she wants a game?*
Carl	*Yeah mostly, 'cos she always punches me in the arm and dead-arms me and then mum goes [puts on a high pitched whine] 'now then stop it you two' and then I always get into trouble.*
SM	*Does your mum ever threaten to take it off you?*

Carl	[nods]
Simon	*She does with me.*

Carl's older sister 'beats him up' in order to get access to the game machine. This entertains Simon, who keeps asking him about it and giggling. Simon was not surprised at the news that Carl and his sister have physical fights, but his astonishment is at the knowledge that Carl's sister wins the fights. Carl resolves his discomfort at this seeming loss of face by both stressing the extent of his injuries and mimicking his mum's reaction to the conflict. Similarly, Simon lets us know that he can't hope to win against his brother because 'he's a kick boxer'. Both of these young men attempt to save face during this exchange.

The conflicts around the machine are not simply, then, to do with wanting to use the games, but involve a whole set of wider power issues which in the recounting of these tales extend outside the home. Powerless against older siblings, these young people attempt to re-present themselves in a different light to their peers, and to the interviewer. Colin makes it clear that he ripped up his sister's poster for revenge, Phil says his mum usually blames his sister, Simon can't compete against a kick boxer and Carl presents his mum as whining and himself as stoically accepting injury. In this way, the stories told to me by these male youths about the events at home can be seen both as an attempt to regain control over those events, and also as re-presenting themselves as more 'masculine' - they feel that they cannot be seen as 'losing' in a conflict with their sisters - than might be inferred from their stories. A focus on computer and video games shows, then, how sibling conflicts may be the site of the performance of gender relations in the home and that this performance can be reconstructed to suit a different audience.

Widmer (1995) looks at sibling sociability, which he defines as 'the activities within which people are jointly engaged' (1995:1). He found that sibling dyads differ in the frequency of sociability according to gender. Sister dyads were found to be more active (talking, going out together, sharing domestic

work) than mixed sex or brother dyads. Mixed sex dyads were found to have low levels of shared activities, while for brother dyads sociability was based on playing games, sports and sharing hobbies (1995:3). Age differences in levels of sociability were not found to be significant although there were age effects: both conflict and sociability between siblings was found to be more frequent when one of the siblings was aged between 13 and 15 (1995:4). Widmer also found that where family sociability is high, sibling sociability is also high, and peer sociability is low. He states 'in fact, family sociability promotes a specific type of sociability between siblings, which is centred around the house ... such sociability is based on activities such as watching TV, playing games, discussion and domestic work.' (1995:6) He calls this sociability 'intra-familial sociability' and claims that this is much more frequent than sibling, or peer, sociability outside the home.

Raffaelli (1992) has studied conflict among adolescent siblings. Examining the role of sibling conflict in terms of cognitive, social and individual development, she found that frequency of conflict was positively (but not significantly) associated with spending time together and with family conflict, but not with the emotional qualities of the relationship. Frequency of fighting was also found to be unrelated to gender and age, although there was more conflict when there were 2 siblings in the family than when there were 3 or more. The most common causes of conflict were to do with 'power issues' and 'personal property disputes'. She states with regard to her category of 'power issues':

> 'Fights centring on behavioural control were common .... quarrels about sharing or turn-taking focused on achieving a fair distribution of family resources, whether the disputed resource was a closet, the front seat of the car, or the TV set .... The second most common category of conflicts was personal property disputes, typically resulting from one sibling's unauthorised use of the other's belongings or space' (1992:655).

We now turn to Amy, and examine the power issues which beset her use of video games. Access to video game machines is not only an issue of personal space, for, even where the machines are located in a family room, conflict arises. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Amy first told me that she never had to ask permission to play video games because the family has televisions which can be used for the games console in two rooms. Whoever wanted to use the machine could set up in either room. I asked her whether she liked to play on her older brother Tom's video game machine. She told me that she did, and that she and her younger brother Paul played it the most, unless Tom was in the mood to play it himself. She went on to describe the ways in which she and Paul were at the mercy of Tom's whims:

SM   *What do you think of it, Amy? Do you like it, or have you gone off it since Tom first got it, or ...*

Amy   *I quite like it actually, but I just ... its just when my brothers on it, he says 'oh you can play on it' then he just faffs about, then he goes ' oh I'll have it back now', so really, he's just messing about with it.*

SM   *So you just get going and he pinches it back?*

Amy   *Yes, but sometimes I play on it when he's out, me and Paul.*

SM   *So you get chance to play it when he's out?*

Amy   *Yes, but when he comes back he goes 'get off it' so you get off, then he goes 'oh, play on it then' and then he goes to the other room and plays on his. He doesn't bother when I play on it, but if its like his best game like 'Streets of Rage' or something that he's just got off someone, he won't let no-one play on it, so he said only I can play Sonic, he said.*

SM   *So he won't let you play on anything but Sonic? Why?*

Amy   *Yes, Sonic 1,2 and 3. He won't let me play the other ones 'cos they're all fighting games and he says 'oh, they're too boring for you'.*

SM   *And what do you think?*

Amy   *I think some of them are quite good.*

SM   *Do you play them when he's not in, then?*

Amy   *Yeah, sometimes. He's taken most of them back to the owners, but we've still got one, but he's hidden it.*

Tom had bought the games machine a year earlier, and after getting a newer computer which he used more, the games machine had been designated for

family use. However, it would appear that access to the machine is still controlled by Tom. Amy and Paul use the machine when he's out of the house. If he comes in while they are playing, he reasserts his control over the machine by telling his younger siblings to '*get off it*' and then after this display relenting and allowing them to play. That this control over the machine may be about sibling rivalry can be seen when Amy *says 'He doesn't bother when I play on it',* so perhaps it is more important to Tom to stress his dominance over access when the younger boy in the family is also present.

It is not only access to the machine which Tom attempts to control but also access to particular games. Tom only allows Amy to use 'Sonic', a cartoon-type game featuring a 'cute' blue hedgehog. Violent games are removed and hidden by Tom, although Amy does play them when he is not present, and enjoys doing so. Amy's use of language is very telling here. She says '*we've still got one*' (a violent game) thereby identifying that she sees the game as belonging to all the family (at least until her brother takes it back to the person he borrowed it from), but '*he's hidden it*'. He has the power to remove the game and hide it so that Amy can't have access. Nava has stated with regard to youth cultures:

> 'Girls are less of a problem on the streets because they are predominantly and more scrupulously regulated in the home. It is therefore not only through the family, but also through the interaction of girls with boys outside it, that the femininity and thus the policing of girls is assured' (Nava, 1992:79-80).

Tom appears from Amy's description to be policing her femininity by not allowing her to play with violent games, although Amy subverts his control by playing, and enjoying the game, when he is not present. This subversion is not in any sense an act of power on Amy's part, however. Because she can only play when and at what she chooses <u>when her brother is not present</u>, she is both spatially and temporally on the margins. It would seem that girls can only use domestic space on their own terms when boys are not there.

Morley's (1986) analysis of families watching television offers parallel insights into the processes I have reported here. He found that the men in the family 'possess' the remote control unit, or 'zapper', for the television set, and use it to control what can and cannot be watched, often interfering in and obstructing the wife's viewing. When the father is absent, then the control of the zapper passes to the son. Morley sees this as reflecting a particular social construction of masculinity (1986:148-9). Morley informs us that the way that men in the families he studied talk about their control over the zapper and ultimately the TV habits of the rest of the family demonstrates a fragile power. He states:

> 'It is noteworthy that a number of the men show some anxiety to demonstrate that they are "the boss of the household" and their very anxiety around this issue perhaps betokens a sense that their domestic power is ultimately a fragile and somewhat unsecure thing, rather than a fixed and permanent 'possession' which they can always guarantee to hold with confidence. Hence perhaps the symbolic importance to them of physical possession of the channel control device' (Morley, 1986:150).

From the material I have presented in this chapter it becomes clear that the physical ownership of computer and video games, and the physical control of space which arises from it is also of <u>symbolic</u> importance to young men in the domestic sphere. Young men are controlling and policing their sisters' access to computer and video games in the expression of their masculine identity and in opposition to feminine identity as boys' construct it. As I have argued, even when their control is successfully resisted by their sisters or their mothers, in the re-telling of the stories to me and others the young men represent themselves in a more stereotypically masculine way. Like the men in Morley's (1986) study, these teenage boys seem anxious to demonstrate their power.

Parental control[3]

Diana

Diana was the only parent who volunteered for interview who didn't have a son. She has two girls aged 10 and 13. The girls' main interest was ponies, and they competed in shows and other events at a high level. Her husband's family is a well known and successful farming family in the rural area. Although the family had a PC which was bought as a Christmas present for all the family, she said it was used only infrequently by the girls, who were the main users. These parents were not interested in playing with their children on the machine, and there were very few games actually on the machine. I asked Diana if she had any concerns over her children playing video games. She replied *'If they were that interested in playing them, I would restrict them. But because they're not that interested in them, I don't have that problem'*. Diana's comments were striking. It made me wonder why it is that parents would stop, or restrict, certain activities which their children enjoy doing. It has been said that 'at some point in all cultures adults step in to place limits on children's games' (Baird and Silvern, 1990:46). This section examines material from interviews with parents in order to illuminate why this might be. A further contradiction is that in view of the expense of computers and video game consoles, it is the parents who buy them for their children, and yet very often the parents are not at all enthusiastic about their children playing with them. This section discusses some of the contradictions and ambiguities parents express around their children's use of computer and video games.

Mary and Frank

The following excerpts are taken from an interview with parents from the urban school. Mary is a primary school teacher, and Frank is a white collar worker. They have one child, a 12 year old boy.

SM   Do you have any kind of rules and regulations within
      the family about how often he can play and what he can
      do?
Mary If we feel that he's using them over much then he's told
      to come off. He isn't allowed to play. He isn't allowed
      to play with the hand held game gear particularly when
      we're around because it irritates us.
SM   The noise?
Mary Yes. Extremely irritating ...

This child may well not enjoy playing his computer games if he is constantly irritating his parents, so would be unlikely to mention this as a favourite activity. This might go some way to explaining why boys with no siblings play often, but do not report playing as a favourite activity. Mary's son had a hand-held Game Gear and a computer in his bedroom. The Game Gear had been bought for him several years earlier as a birthday present, and the computer had been bought second hand as a Christmas present two years before. While the Game Gear had been bought because their son had simply wanted one, the computer was bought for a different reason:

Mary ... but we went for the computer ... we wanted to
      upgrade the computer so that he used ermm other
      programs, not just games
SM   Right. And does he do that? Does he use it much?
Mary Not a lot. Because he hadn't got the skills. He's one
      that gives up immediately if he can't ... if he comes
      across a problem he just gives up. So ... he couldn't get
      into or utilise the programme sufficiently well, so we
      have got a tutor come for him so that he can really use
      the computer properly, which we hope will help in his
      studies.

The computer, then, was bought for Mary's son so that he would be encouraged to stop playing games and learn to 'use the computer properly' - which means that he would use it for educational reasons (learning to programme, become IT literate). Although these parents had invested a considerable amount of money, and the ongoing expense of a tutor to encourage this educational aspect, neither of them were at all interested in computers, and did not play with their son on them.

> SM   *Do you, or your husband ever play with him on the*
>   *games?*
> Mary *Never.*
> SM   *You're not interested?*
> Mary *Not at all.*

In fact, Mary and her husband had often argued about the amount of time that their son spent playing on the machines. Power dynamics in Mary and Frank's relationship are revealed in the ways that Frank makes decisions about the merits of video game play, Mary implements his decisions. For example, while Frank was the one who expressed the most concern about their son playing with it, it was Mary who confiscated the games in order to control his use. She would, she told me, hide the Game Gear behind the settee so that the boy couldn't play with it. Mary defended her son to her husband by pointing to another, more acceptable, activity - '*I say but look, look at his reading. Because he's read all the classics. He's constantly reading, so ...*'. Because the boy was interested in reading, she felt that the video games he played were 'not an undue influence'. Morley (1992) has commented on the ways in which mothers' involvement with computers is 'indirect' and is confined to the need 'to acquire home computers to secure perceived 'educational' advantage for their children' (Morley, 1992:234). We can see, therefore, in the ways that Mary and Frank argue over their son's use of computers, Mary's role in being responsible for, firstly, acquiring the tools with which their son will learn computing skills, and secondly, the need to justify educational progress to her husband.

After the interview with Mary, she asked if I would like to speak to her husband, so that he could tell me his views, which were, she said, quite different to hers.

> Frank *The impression I get is that they almost become*
>   *mesmerised by them after a while. It stunts any .. it*
>   *stunts creativity is my belief because it's presented to*
>   *them. The games, the principle of the games seems to be*
>   *very repetitive. OK, they dress them up in different*

> *ways, but the same principle is there. It's not*
> *particularly teaching them how a computer works, or*
> *how to become IT literate, so it's an amusement ... my*
> *guess is that more conventional play leads to more*
> *challenges, more opportunities.*

Frank was talking about conventional play as being riding about on bikes, or playing outside. Frank was totally opposed to any child being in the bedroom 'glued to a screen' - and yet the machines were bought by the parents. The ambiguity here is that their child was not allowed to play outside, but was chaperoned to and from his friends houses.

> SM *...Does your son have problems in getting out to see*
> *his friends - I'm thinking of playing out in the street,*
> *for example.*
> Mary *Well, obviously we live on a busy road, so until very*
> *recently yes he did have problems - we wouldn't let him*
> *out to cross roads. Now his friends seem to be quite*
> *spread apart so again, it's a car drive to certain friends.*
> *So, it can be difficult to get to them.*

The 'busy road' Mary refers to had struck me as a nice quiet, leafy road where children would be able to play outside safely. There is clearly a tension between what parents want from their child's involvement with computers centred around education/amusement and 'proper' play/fear of letting the child out on the street.

Bill and Kath

Bill and Kath are parents of three children from the rural school. Although the family live on a farm, they are by no means middle class farmers.

> SM *Why did you buy the machines in the first place? Was*
> *it because the kids were nattering for them or...*
> Bill *Probably.*
> Kath *Yeah.*
> Bill *Kids pressure, yeah.*
> Kath *We thought that the Amiga was ...*
> Bill *Well it ...*
> Kath *Educational.*
> Bill *Well yeah. The Amiga is more like a computer as well*

> *and so there was a lot of it what it could, if they*
> *wanted, do 'Paint Pot' and all that sort of stuff so ...*

Kath *We wouldn't buy them just a game machine, would*
> *we?*

Bill *No, we wouldn't have a Sega Megadrive and all that*
> *sort of stuff. It was mainly er...we got the Atari because*
> *you can bootleg copy. That's about the top and bottom*
> *of it. It costs you ... once you've got the machine you*
> *can run it for nowt.*

Unlike Mary and Frank the ongoing cost of the machine is of concern to these parents, and so that influenced their decision to buy this particular one. Like Mary and Frank, Bill and Kath also want to see some educational benefits from their investment.

> Bill *They had to have them. They go through that phase, I*
> *suppose. I mean we could have just said 'no, no, no', it*
> *would have been... it would have been just mental*
> *torture, wouldn't it? I think they're under that much*
> *pressure, you have to get 'em summat. Then you have*
> *to limit the amount of use. With anything - it's like*
> *watching telly, it all has to be some sort of regulation on*
> *it. Mebbe it would be handy if there was .. err .. a lot*
> *more of the games were linked to some sort of*
> *educational part of it. Had to solve a problem before*
> *they could sort of move on, mebbe. I don't know...*

Here Bill, like Frank, expresses concern and demonstrates the tension between what parents want their children to gain from computers and what they actually do with them. Again we see a tension between education and amusement. Like Mary and Frank, Bill and Kath were not interested in the computers they had in the family, although Kath had recently done a word-processing course to help in her work, and so she had started using their PC for that. The way that the tensions were expressed in this family were quite different to the more subtle negotiations in Mary and Frank's house. Where Mary would hide the video game machine to try and stop her son using it, Bill has a more direct approach as he explained when we were talking about how much the children, and Paul in particular, used it:

> Bill *They're not too bad I suppose, our kids, in that respect*

> *in that they'll ... if you don't give them it they'll find*
> *summat else. I mean occasionally I would take the*
> *power supply - "I'll take the power supply" ... "I'll take*
> *the power supply off you and I'll smash it and you'll*
> *not have it" and then I'll give them it back, you know ..*

SM   *mmmm*

Bill   *That's what happens in this house, you know, the*
> *television goes out the window if you ... [laughter]*
> *forget the price of it, yeah, right, the telly's going out*
> *the window. Get great pleasure out of seeing it land on*
> *the flagstones outside the front window.*

As far as I know, Bill had never actually thrown a TV set out of the window, but on one occasion he had thrown one of Paul's games into the fire, because he was angry with him. Interestingly in terms of the earlier discussion in Chapter 5, the game in question was 'Mortal Kombat'. It was burnt because the noise of the sound effects irritated Bill, not because of the content of the game. Immediately after Bill had told me about throwing the game into the fire, he contextualised his action in terms of the following extract:

> *You see, and there's another thing .... I'd rather he'd be doing*
> *summat ... well all the time you're expecting, hoping, that he's*
> *gonna start writing his own software and doing his own games,*
> *but he always argued that he didn't have the right software to*
> *do that 'cos we never got him the right package.*

Paul's use of the computers his parents had bought him did not fit in with their hopes of the way he would use it. He played games instead of using it in an educational way, which would have both justified the expense and would have perhaps fitted in more with his parents aspirations.

So why did Diana say that if her girls were interested in using the computer she would restrict it? I would argue that it is both because she thought they would be using it in the 'wrong way', and also because it is the 'wrong' sort of leisure. After all, she is more than willing to support her daughters' expensive hobby, with which she says they are really obsessed - ponies. Why support that and not another? If her children were obsessed with using a computer, Diana says that she would have to control it. Halldén (1991)

argues that parenting differences in either controlling their children or allowing children to just 'be' (that is, accepting the child as an individual), relate to the world views which parents' hold. She states 'the parents create a life world and niche for the child. In this creation we can see how they are directed by the interpretation of what constitutes a good life for a child' (1991:345).

An explanation for this can be found relating to the discourse around images of healthy and unhealthy leisure, mentioned in chapter 1, where I discussed Rojeck's (1985) avocation of a Foucauldian perspective on leisure. He contends that the use of such a perspective allows us to see the ways in which images of healthy and unhealthy leisure exist in society; that it will show how the discourse on leisure relates to practice and that a Foucauldian perspective on leisure will also reveal the operation of power in society.

It is considered that, as I have stated elsewhere (see chapter 4), children should be part of nature - they should be outdoors. Ian, a GP and father of an 11 year old boy, had earlier told me that his wife wouldn't let their son play on the video game if the weather was nice, she would 'kick him outside' if it was sunny as she felt children should be outdoors. This excerpt from the interview sums this notion of childhood equals nature up well.

> SM *So parents have to monitor ...*
> Ian *To some degree. .. it really depends what the children are doing. if you live in a situation where there's other kids and there's nice woods and forests outside and they can go and run through them, I don't think they would watch telly, or play the video games. We went to visit my niece. She's married and she's got young ones, they live in the country. They played with the computer games for about an hour. The rest of the time they were outside running up and down the streams ... you know, chasing cows, chasing sheep...*

This excerpt presents an idealised notion of childhood and the way that time in childhood should be spent (Stutz 1991, Gittens, 1998). However, few

children are lucky enough to live in an area with nice woods, forests and streams. It would seem from these discussions with parents that the point at which video games create conflict between parents and their children is focused around the use of them for games rather than the use of them for education and that power is exercised at the intersection of this conflict. Baird and Silvern (1990) comment that 'children ... selected [electronic] games for their ability to entertain, not their specific educational content. Adults typically reverse these criteria ...' (1990:48). In the view of adults generally, then, and in the view of these parents particularly, children having the 'right' sort of leisure are having the 'right' sort of childhood. It is when children are using leisure in the 'wrong' way that problems arise.

The effects of family composition and geographic area on leisure activities

I want now to turn to an examination of these issues by geographic location, while noting that the geographic differences may also in part be class differences as discussed in the methodology chapter. Firstly, it would be helpful to return to the issue of playing with computer/video games every day, but to look at this taking also into account family composition and geographical area. The following chart illustrates playing every day/most days by sex, geographic location and family composition.

Chart 6.2: Playing video games every day/most days by sex, location and family type.

(Whole sample: boys N = 825, girls N = 725).
(Urban area: mixed siblings: girls n = 25, boys n = 63; sisters only: girls n = 41, boys n = 95; brothers only: girls n = 41, boys n = 95; no siblings: girls n = 9, boys n = 26)
(Rural area: mixed siblings: girls n = 19, boys n = 57; sisters only: girls n = 14, boys n = 56; brothers only: girls n = 34, boys n = 75; no siblings: girls n = 9, boys n = 23)
(bars indicate percentages of response and do not add to 100.)
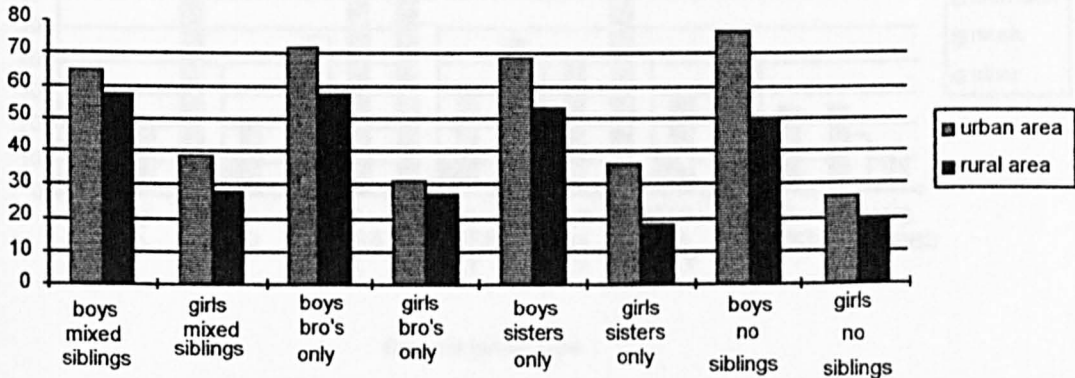
That boys play more than girls remains constant. This analysis also shows how frequency of play differs according to family composition. Boys with brothers only and boys with no siblings have the highest rates of playing every day/most days, but only for the urban children. Boys in the rural setting report playing every day/most days less than the urban boys. Urban girls with mixed siblings, or with sisters only, report playing more than any other girls[4].

Chart 6.3: Indoor activities by sex and family type. Urban school.
(Whole sample: girls N = 379, boys N = 422).
(mixed siblings: girls n = 68, boys n = 100; sisters only: girls n = 119, boys n = 140;
brothers only: girls n = 142, boys n = 138; no siblings: girls n = 40, boys n = 35)
Bars indicate frequency of response.

Sex and family type
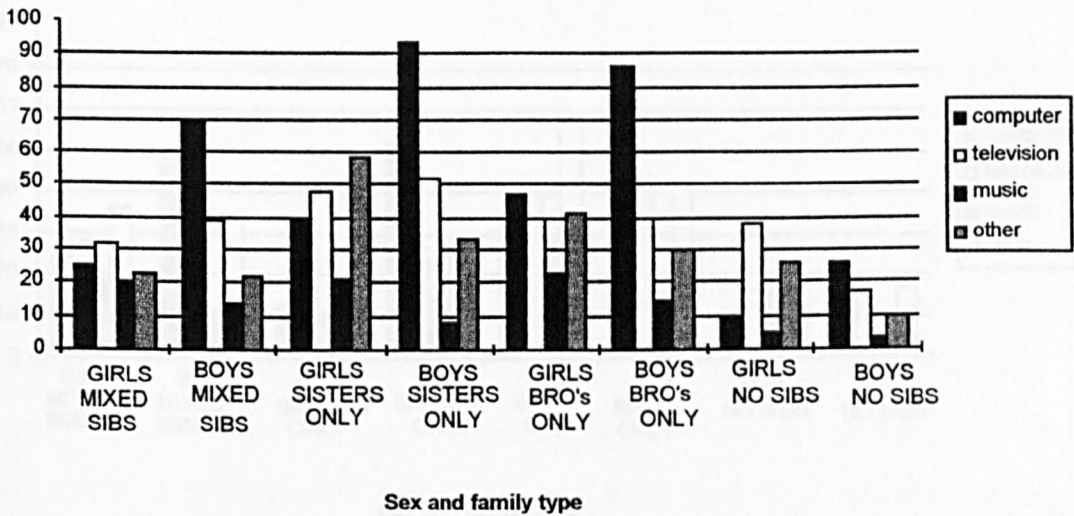
For indoor activities, when a geographical element is introduced as shown in Charts 6.2 and 6.3, immediately we can see that there is a contradiction here: urban boys with no siblings have reported playing video games more frequently than other boys, but when asked what their favourite activities are, they mention playing on the computer significantly less than any other boys. Indeed, their total activities are less than any other boys, and some girls. It would seem that although they play computer and video games frequently, they do not particularly like it, and so don't mention it as a favourite activity. Girls with no siblings have the lowest rates of video game play.

Chart 6.4: Indoor activities by sex and family type. Rural school.
(Whole sample: girls N = 347, boys N = 408).
(mixed siblings: girls n = 72, boys n = 101; sisters only: girls n = 82, boys n = 105;
brothers only: girls n = 135, boys n = 137; no siblings: girls n = 49, boys n = 48)
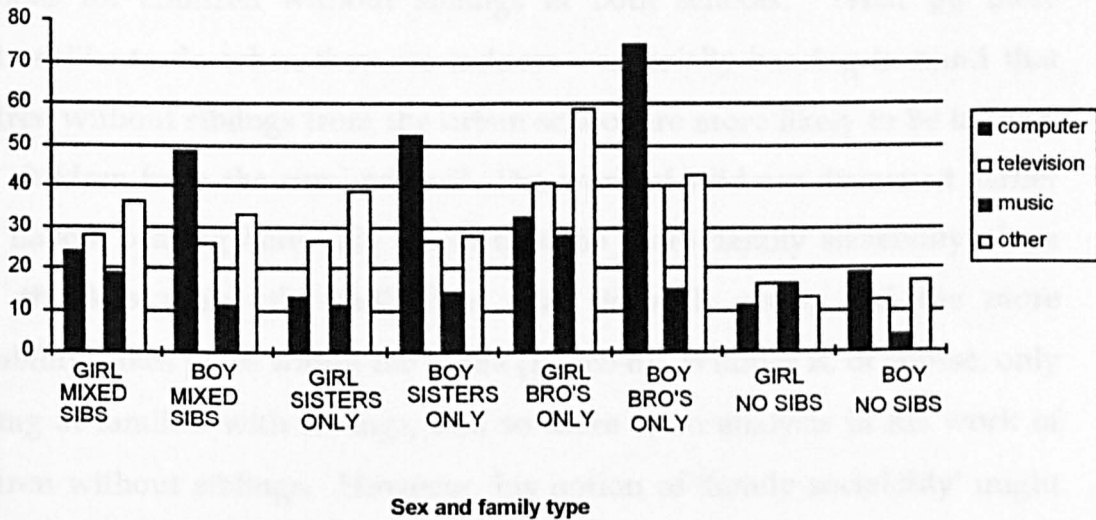Bars indicate frequency of response.

Sex and family type

The above chart looks at indoor activities of rural children. Again, boys with no siblings report playing computers as a preferred activity less than other groups. Here, the highest rate for liking to play computers is for boys with brothers, whereas in the urban school, this rate was higher for boys with sisters. Girls with sisters only, and girls with no siblings have the lowest rates of video game play. Berndt and Bulleit (1985) studied mixed sex siblings in relation to pre-schooler's behaviour both at home and at school. Their findings in relation to school behaviour and peer interaction are interesting in the present context. They state:

> '... the children who were most often unoccupied or onlookers were girls who did not have any brother. Rather than being generally low in social competence, these girls may have been at a disadvantage in their pre-schools because they had failed to learn certain skills for stereotypically masculine play that other girls had learned during interactions with their brothers' (Berndt and Bulleit, 1985:766).

It might be that playing with computer and video games is reported less for the girls without brothers simply *because* they do not have brothers, which

poses a conundrum: if girls do have brothers, they are controlled in their access to video games but, without brothers, they are less likely to get any opportunity to use this technology at all.

What is interesting here are the comparatively low rates of preferred indoor activities for children without siblings at both schools. What <u>do</u> these children like to do when they are indoors - especially bearing in mind that children without siblings from the urban school are more likely to be indoors than children from the rural school? The work of Widmer discussed earlier may have a bearing here. He found that the more 'family sociability' there was, the less active the individual child is with peers, and the more 'sociability' takes place within the home (1995:5-6). Widmer is, of course, only looking at families with siblings, and so there is no analysis in his work of children without siblings. However, his notion of 'family sociability' might explain what it is that children without siblings are doing in the home. It is likely that there is more interaction between the child and the parents in families where there is only one child. Much of what these children are doing, then, might be simply being around their parents - perhaps 'doing nothing' (Corrigan, 1979), and so not considered an activity to write down on a questionnaire.

Summary

In this chapter I have discussed some of the issues around social relations within the family which become illuminated when looking at the ownership, siting and use of computer and video games. I have shown that family composition has an effect on control, and on leisure activities more generally. I have also tried to show that parental control over playing games is related to images of healthy and unhealthy leisure activities, and that there is a tension between buying the child these items, with the hope that it will lead to increased educational opportunities, and the child's use of them for games. I have also highlighted some answers to the question of why it is that girls

don't play computer and video games to the same extent as boys. These explanations revolve around gender differences in ownership, the siting of machines in the home, and the control of domestic space and access to the machine. Girls are controlled in their access to computers and video games by their brothers and by their parents, and sibling control is often linked to control over domestic space. A final reason why it might be that girls play less than boys is discussed in the following chapter where I focus on another kind of space.

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[1] The data from the primary school questionnaire will not be discussed as thoroughly as the secondary school data here. The questionnaire for the primary school children was not strictly comparable with that of the secondary school. I will however be including some of the interview material from the primary school children.

[2] Middleton, et al, 1994:24

[3] It should be noted that because few parents volunteered to take part in the study, I am not claiming that any generalisations can be made from the interviews with parents. Rather, this the value of this material lies in the insights it provided and the glimpses gained of familial struggles around video games which prompted analysis in this area.

[4] Later in the chapter I return to this data, when I will discuss these findings in the light of the other findings on leisure presented earlier in the thesis.

Chapter 7:   *Inside the imagination: 'other' spaces.*

I have argued that children and young people are subject to varied controls on their leisure, using the example of video game play to highlight issues of power and control. Children's own experiences of everyday life have been explored to counter what I describe as moral and other panics around children and leisure. In this chapter I consider a different kind of space, and one which is less amenable to parental (or any other kind of) control. Here I discuss the notion that the child playing video games is using the game as an imaginary space within which he (for here I am almost exclusively talking about boys when I discuss the playing of video games in this way) is able to do the things he could not be allowed to do in 'real' life. To do this I draw on the work of several authors who have in one way or another visualised 'other' spaces'.

The chapter argues that here we have another, and hitherto unexplored, answer to the question of why it is that girls don't play video games to the same extent as boys. Quite simply, girls do not need video games for the same reasons as boys do. They find their imaginary or 'other' spaces through other media.

Foucault and heterotopias

Foucault (1977) has said little on space, but one of his ideas may be useful in this context. He discusses the notion of 'utopia' and 'heterotopia' (1986:24). A utopia is a site with no real place, it is an analogy - an inversion, or a direct representation of, a real space in society. A heterotopia is, he argues, a real place which is like a countersite - 'a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted'. The study of heterotopias could provide 'a sort of mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live' (1986:24) he states. He uses the

ship as an illustration, a heterotopia par excellence, he says - 'the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself ...' (1986:27). Similarly, the cinema, he contends, is also a heterotopia in that it is 'an odd room where on a 2D screen a 3D space is projected ..' (1986:25).

Video games as heterotopias

Here I suggest that the playing of video games by children can be seen as a strategy for contesting spatial boundaries through the argument that a video game is a kind of heterotopy - it can be seen as a place without a place ... where on a 2D screen (or monitor) a (sometimes) 3D unreal, inverted and mythical space is there for the player to control and contest.

Gottschalk (n.d.) argues that the playing of video games provides an inversion of everyday life, where:

> 'The video game inverts the passive viewer-screen relation by allowing the player to intervene, and to exercise some control over the pace and unfolding of the electronic text. These characteristics allow a momentary sliding of power from the outside world to the self ...' (no date, page 7).

In two of the interviews with teenage boys, they mentioned that playing with computer and video games was not much different to the way they would use other electronic media in the house - TV and hi-fi, for example - except that '*you actually get to play on it. [you can] move things about and do it yourself*' (Phil, aged 14). In this sense, playing with video games provides an extra dimension in which the child is able to control his or her environment, and in which the child is able to do things which they are unable to do in reality. Carl, for example said '*...it's like an adventure, in't it? Like an adventure 'cos you want to see what's on in the game, like you've finished a level, and you want to see the other one, that's what spurs you on, don't it? So in the end you go 'oh my god I've finished the game''*. In this way, when Carl plays a game, he is

experiencing that game as an adventure - he is in a real place (his bedroom) engaging with a real piece of technology, but the space in which he experiences and enjoys the game is not real. It is a heterotopia - one of Foucualt's 'other spaces' - not a real space.

I have noted elsewhere in the thesis the idea that historically children's time and space has become subject to further and further control (see Chapter 1) - playing with video games may, then, provide those who play them with the adventures that they are no longer allowed to have, in spaces which they do not inhabit in any real sense. The following two excerpts are taken from an interview with two brothers, aged 5 and 7, illustrate this. I asked the eldest why he likes playing 'Doom', a violent shoot-em-up game:

> Sam   *Because on 'Doom' I get to use a gun.*
> SM   *Why do you like using a gun?*
> Sam   *Because I aren't allowed to use a gun in real life so when I play 'Doom' I can use a gun.*
> SM   *If you could use a gun in real life what would you do with it?*
> Sam   *I'd get a tidgy piece of paper put it on a stick and see how many holes I can get in it.*
> SM   *Would you kill people with it?*
> Sam   *No.*

Sam, as do other children, likes playing games because he can be, or do, things that he is not allowed to do in real life. He finds that his imagination is the one place which is beyond control - the imagination cannot be policed. Indeed, some of the bloodthirsty games he enjoys precisely because '*mum thinks it's gross*' - playing the game allows him to revel in the gore and mess which he isn't allowed to do in reality. His younger brother Joe, aged 5, had this to say:

> Joe   *I especially like Mortal Kombat 'cos I can win Terry and she's 8 or 9... on the dinosaurs world there's blood.*
> SM   *Do you like the blood?*
> Joe   *Yeah, cos Sam thinks its always mine .. when I'm always a ninja and we go on that level .*
> SM   *Is the blood real?*

> Joe   *No, it's just on a computer.*
> SM   *Would you make someone bleed in real life?*
> Joe   *No, not on purpose. Blood comes out the people when*
>   *you kick 'em or anything, it comes out the figures on*
>   *the computer, they're only moving plasticine.*

For Joe, playing the game means that he can beat a much older girl. The game gives him the chance to demonstrate a prowess not in accord with his age and size. In the game he *is* a ninja, not a five year old. We can also see here that playing the game affords Sam enjoyment - while obviously refrained in everyday life from seriously injuring his annoying younger brother, on screen he can make any violent moves he likes and torment his brother with the suggestion that the blood on screen is his own. Sam is able to be much more powerful through the game than he ever could be (or would want to be) in real life. This excerpt also shows that at a very young age, children are aware that the characters - the same life-like characters that the panics in the press thought would lead children to believe were real - are *'only moving plasticine'*.

Other writers have noted that playing video games allows children and young people a sense of competency and escape:

> 'They are temporarily transported from life's problems by their playing, they experience a sense of personal involvement in the action when they work the controls and they perceive the video games as not only a source of companionship, but possibly as a substitute for it ...' (Selnow, 1984:154).

While in agreement with his first claims, I would argue that this last hypothesis of Selnow's is unfounded. As discussed in Chapter 5, video games are important in promoting and sustaining boys' friendships through providing a space for both communication and shared activity. Gailey states:

> 'The new video games offer a way of closing out the real world, on one level, and controlling conditions not ordinarily in one's control, on another. The offer non-threatening competition with constant feedback ... This sense of being in control in a society

where such feelings are rare in everyday life, was a theme expressed by most of the adult players' (Gailey, 1993:83).

One of the 13 year old girls who completed a questionnaire said ' *I like video games because they are fun and can take you away from real life*'. While by no means all of the children who took part in the study expressed these sort of sentiments, it is likely that on an unconscious level, this aspect provides some of the attraction of playing.

Other spaces, other theories

Winnicot's (1993) work, which is based within a psychoanalytic paradigm and discusses object relations theory, also discusses the notion of 'another space', although it is quite a different space than that described by Foucault. Winnicot argues that psychoanalytic literature focuses only on 'inner' and 'outer' reality, or space. He describes a third space where culture (play) takes place. It is, he contends, 'a potential space' which is located between the baby and the mother. He holds that transitional phenomena (for example the comfort blanket, going to sleep rituals, the teddy bear) are essential for children's development. The infant at its earliest stage is not able to distinguish between 'me' and 'not me'. Because of the close relationship it has with the mother, who responds to its demands, the infant is omnipotent. The good-enough mother, he contends, has to manage the withdrawal of the breast at weaning (the child's first object) skilfully in order to ensure that the child can relate to other objects. As the infant learns there are objects which are 'not me' and which it cannot control, he argues that objects which ease the transition are essential for the child's mental health. He states: 'good-enough environmental provision at the very earliest stages makes it possible for the individual to cope with the immense shock of loss of omnipotence' (1993:71). The space for transitional objects is, however, only a potential space in as much as if the mothering is not 'good enough', the child will not develop

trust, which is needed to fill the space of separation from the breast with creative play (Winnicot, 1993:195).

While I do not intend here to debate the merits or otherwise of psychoanalytic theory, it might be that, in an era when the boundaries of childhood are ever more subject to adult control and children's time and space are policed routinely, the child can be said to be experiencing a similar loss of omnipotence. It might then be said that in the playing of computer and video games, and in the imagination, the child can experience an un-policed reality. For example Sam's enjoyment of using a gun in the unreal space of the video game, allows him to regain omnipotence. The child playing a video game is in a sense in momentary control of his/her destiny - dying, the ultimate fate over which we have no control, is experienced as something that can be avoided (by playing the game well), or that can be overcome (because in a video game you get several lives, and when these are used up you can start over again). The future for children is uncertain (James and Prout, 1997; James 1993) and here it can be to some extent controlled.

Two other writers who have discussed ideas of escape from reality are Cohen and Taylor (1976). They have argued that individuals utilise many strategies in order to escape from everyday life, or 'paramount reality'. In regard to the ways in which fantasy is used in popular culture they argue:

> 'Standard critiques of mass culture invariably make a great deal of the escape status of fantasies disseminated in films, plays and comics, implying that the depiction of excessive hedonism, violence, promiscuity, sensuality or whatever can undermine people's attachment to paramount reality. But no such undermining can be assumed: the fantasies of popular culture may, on the contrary, support and enhance paramount reality' (1976:85).

The fantasy of being another person while playing a video game, I have argued, supports and enhances reality for children. One of the secondary school children wrote on his questionnaire '*I think computer games are good*

because children can be people who they couldn't be in real life like sonic, a football player they like or a famous cartoon character'.

In regard to very young children's play, Cohen and Taylor take a romanticised position. They are of the opinion that very young children's play *is* reality, and that it is later, due to adult controls and the fact of growing up, 'hived off' to a separate area. By the time the child is at school, they state:

> 'Play ... becomes an enclave within life rather than life itself. There will be a time allocated for play, even a part of the house set aside as a playroom ... This drawing of boundaries around the child's play does not institutionalise the activity [as it does for adults] but play is now an escape from reality rather than reality itself ... this 'enclaving' of play is a prototype of the enclaving of other aspects of childhood consciousness as a result of the conflicting demands of paramount reality' (Cohen and Taylor, 1976:140).

In this way Cohen and Taylor suggest that children's play becomes, through the fact of growing up, an escape from reality.

Conversations as escape attempts / heterotopic landscapes

Another strategy which Cohen and Taylor describe as an 'escape attempt' is that of 'distancing' oneself from routine tasks. They use as one example the use of distancing in occupations, such as working on a factory conveyer belt line, and contend that distancing makes sure that others see you as an individual: 'with sympathetic others available, the task can readily be shown to be below our dignity, to be a source of humour, an opportunity to assert special competence, or demonstrate authority' (Cohen and Taylor, 1976:43). In the light of this argument, I want here to examine some of the material gathered in an interview with one group of 14 year old boys. All the way through the interview, several stories concerning the bravado of the boys developed and were elaborated, and what is especially interesting is Nick's role in the narration of these stories. Nick had arrived first for the interview, the other two being about 15 minutes late. When he was alone with me, Nick

described his usual evening routine as having his tea, playing on his computer and then watching TV. On Saturdays, he said that he normally went into town. Nick was physically much younger looking than the other two boys, a thin young man with glasses and troubled with acne. I formed the opinion that Nick was a quiet, somewhat solitary boy. When his friends came in, however, the tone of the interview changed completely. Nick started talking about risks they had taken with the sea recently.

> Nick   ....Bill climbed down this cliff thing, din't yer, and he
>   couldn't climb back up, and the waves was like
>   splashing him, and he couldn't get back up.
>   [all talking together again, so I can't hear]
> Bill   ....and I was running along, and I slipped and ended up
>   in the water. Quite a laugh.
> SM   you dangerous people!
> Bill   Well, this weekend we're off in a raft out to sea
> SM   is that quite safe, do you think?
> Bill   No, 'cos you can get dragged out by undercurrents
>   quite easily.
> SM   Yes, I know. Do your parents know you're doing it?
> All   Yeah.
> SM   They do? And they haven't actually locked you up yet
>   then?
> All   No.
> Bill   My dad says I'll never get it made, and I won't get it
>   off the beach...[unclear again because Nick's talking as
>   well].

By this point in the interview the boys were beginning to enjoy this story. Recounting it to the interviewer, and to each other, the boys' story becomes a leisure episode, an escape attempt, in itself. I seemed to have become, for them, the 'sympathetic other' Cohen and Taylor discuss. The more I appeared shocked, the more dangerous the stories became, as can be seen below.

> Nick   There's only one person who objects - when me and Bill
>   went - what was it, a really high tide and his grandma
>   goes, er, 'I won't expect you back 'cos you're gonna get
>   dragged out or summat' [unclear] and I was holding on
>   to a metal pole, and it was like my lifeline.
> Bill   We was just like walking out and grabbing on to
>   wooden posts and holding our breath and letting waves

> come over our heads.

Nick   *[unclear] and we was all running through and I fell in and (boys name) was getting dragged out and I was sitting on a pipe and I was the only dry person.*

Bill   *[to me] do you know the time when it was really big waves that was coming right over? [I nod - this was a recent unusually high tide which caused a lot of damage to the sea front and some houses] well, I was running underneath the wall, it was up to about here [indicates to his chest].*

SM   *Don't you ever get scared?*

Bill   *No. Well, yeah, I did. I was running and all of a sudden a massive wave hit me, pulled me off and I was just holding on to a little rock stuck out the wall.*

Nick   *And you lost your grip, din't yer? And someone grabbed hold of yer...*

Bill   *Yeah. A friend of mine, and he's like six foot.*

SM   *God, you were lucky.*

Bill   *There was just me, and these lads on the night-time...*

SM   *Were you all daring each other to run?*

Bill   *No, there was just three of us, we just ran - a lot of people could see my shadow, a lot of people got scared upstairs and they were looking down, and they couldn't see me but they could see my shadow and all of a sudden my shadow just vanished.*

This story is quite plausible. It is quite common for groups of (usually teenage) boys to go down to the beach and act in this manner when the tide is as unusually high as it was on the occasion that Bill is talking about. Many of the houses which run alongside the promenade were flooded, and the occupants, as Bill notes, were upstairs in their houses watching the progress of the sea and the antics of the youths. The stories now move on to other risky behaviour which the boys say that they like doing:

Nick   *Sometimes you get like a big rubber ring and you go out to sea, and a wave just like crushes yer ...*

David   *Sometimes you get a big rubber ring and put it round you and you jump off the top of the wall while somebody's sat on the other side and you jump and they go flying.*

Bill   *We like danger.*

SM   *Why?*

David   *It's just the rush, really. The adrenaline rush. It's better than sitting at home all day watching the TV.*

SM   Is it something to do with, like, being macho, then?
All   No!
David   Definitely not. You see girls doing it as well.
Bill   Yeah!
SM   Do they?
David   If you don't take a chance in life it's just boring.
SM   Well, I agree, but I think you should take chances
        within certain parameters...
Bill   Nah!

Boredom is something which all the young people in the study talked about. Things are either 'boring' so they won't do it, or good because whatever the activity is, it stops them from being bored. In this sense, the boys are here using fantasy in order to escape, although they may in reality have done these things, or might want to do these things. The boys are for the duration of the story, at least, inhabiting another space - a landscape built in fantasy and within which they are free to take risks and flirt with danger.

SM   ..you don't have to try and kill yourself while you're
        doing it
Bill   I'm jumping out of a plane, when it's my birthday.
SM   Yes, but you'll have a parachute on.
Bill   No, I'm not wearing a parachute.
SM   Oh god.
Bill   I'm having an air-board.
SM   An air board? Really?
Bill   Yeah, you lay on these boards and you go down and you
        hit the water at the bottom, you have to land on the
        water, to like paddle yourself in, it's like a massive lake
        you land on.
David   When I go on holiday I'm gonna jump off a cliff into the
        sea.
        [Bill's giving me information so that I can understand
        what David's doing, but the tape is unclear because
        Nick's talking about parascending]
Nick   You're attached by a string to the back of a speedboat,
SM   Yes, parascending.
Nick   Yeah, and then you just like - I cut the line. I had a
        pair of scissors and I said, 'I'll pay you for my own
        line' it was about a fiver, and I said after a while I was
        gonna cut the line and I did. I cut all the parachute and
        I was just falling and I cut the line and I just slammed
        into the water
        [pause].

SM   Well, *you're obviously all quite insane, then.*
Bill   *Basically, yes.*

This last part of the interview is where it can be seen that the stories become less plausible. Nick eventually gets carried away and comes up with an entirely unlikely scenario about taking scissors up with him while parascending. He tries to make it seem reasonable by acknowledging that the owner of the parachute wouldn't allow someone to damage his property, so he claims that he paid for the line. The other two boys were silent during and after the telling of this part of the story, and seemed to be embarrassed by it. It was as if they knew that Nick had gone too far - that he had somehow 'spoiled' the effect that they had hitherto created.

What is going on in this extract from the interview can be seen as similar to the leisure activities described by Corrigan (1979):

> '... the boys do not talk in order to explicate their ideas or to search for some kind of truth. Rather they ... exchange stories which need never be true or real, but which are as interesting as possible ..' (1979:128).

In the context of 'doing nothing', such stories pass the time for 'the boys'. In the context of an interview, such stories serve to pass the time, and also to shock, excite and interest the interviewer. As Cohen and Taylor point out, fantasy helps pass the time (1976:82). Green and Hart (1995) used focus group discussions to examine primary schools children's perceptions of accidents and accident risks. While not setting out to examine gender differences, they found that 'girls were more likely to tell stories which stressed their own safety consciousness and their acceptance of responsibility for the safety of others, and boys were more likely to tell stories about risks which were deliberately courted' (1995:23). They go on to argue that:

> 'Deliberate risk taking clearly has many benefits in certain situations ... it relieves boredom, provides a way of testing

developing physical skills and competence and provides a store
of 'stories' which form part of the shared culture of a friendship
group ... such stories are a vehicle for producing and rehearsing
group norms' (Green and Hart, 1995:38).

De Certeau argues that:

> 'Stories ... traverse and organise places, they select and link them
> together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They
> are spatial trajectories ... Every story is a travel story - a spatial
> practice. For this reason, spatial practices concern everyday
> tactics ...' (1988:115)

It has been said that '...talk is one important medium through which children
and young people carve out for themselves particular cultural locations for
Self and identity' (James 1995:60). Willis' 'lads' talked to keep themselves from
being bored when they were truanting (Willis 1977:33). The interview excerpt
then, recounts a leisure experience, and in the recounting it becomes a
performance, managed for the benefit of the interviewer, and for themselves.
Through the recounting of their stories, the boys show me and each other
(and themselves) what kind of people they are, or would like to be. Indeed,
when the interview was over the boys asked me about the research, and what
I would do with their interview. I explained about confidentiality, and that
their names would be changed. They were affronted at this, and insisted that
I use their real names. When I explained my reasons for not doing so, Bill
asked me to use a name for them he had thought of. 'Call us the Mad Three' he
insisted. The boys all laughed in delight. This, then, is how this group of
boys wanted to be perceived - not as the paramount reality of their physical
appearance would suggest, that is, three quite ordinary 14 year olds of
various stages of maturational development, but as three daredevils, dashing,
unconventional and brave. They use the stories they tell me to present an
alternative reality, as a distancing technique to escape from their everyday
lives and also, as De Certeau points out, to describe a spatial trajectory - a

travel story of their movement from everyday life to another space. It is this movement from everyday life to another space which video games do too.

Gender and other spaces

It will be remembered that in Chapter 4, where I discussed the indoor leisure activities of children inside the house, it was found that, for boys, the favourite indoor activities were watching the TV and playing video games. While girls liked both these activities (although at different rates than boys) they also mentioned liking to listen to music and reading much more than boys did. I have been suggesting that, for boys, playing video games has a hitherto unforeseen dimension, in that it allows them an imaginary space. Is this to argue, then, that there is no such space for girls, in view of the fact that they do not play computer and video games as much as boys do? Revisiting the data presented in Chapter 4 allows a slightly different interpretation.

Table 7.1: Some favourite indoor activities, by sex and location

(N for the whole sample: girls n = 725, boys n = 825. Figures are percentages and will not add to 100)

	urban girls (n = 379)	urban boys (n = 422)	rural girls (n = 167)	rural boys (n = 206)
playing video games	32.6	66.8	34.7	58.3
listening to music	21.0	9.5	16.8	8.3
reading	11.1	2.6	19.8	4.4
TOTALS	64.7	79.0	71.3	70.9

I have omitted 'watching TV' as the rates for this are similar for boys and girls in each location, and I have only included the most popular other indoor activities which also show clear gender differences (in rates of mentioning). While there is a difference in the totals between the urban boys and urban girls, which is due to urban boys mentioning video games to such a great extent, the totals for rural children are almost identical. What this data suggests, then, is that girls imaginary spaces are, like those of boys, to be found in playing video games, but that they are also to be found in listening

to music and reading - things that boys, on the whole, do not like doing. This 12 year old girl from the rural school appears to have reached this conclusion earlier than I have - she wrote

> 'I like video games sometimes. Not very often. I prefer to
> watch TV or read. Computers can make your eyes go blind
> because some people sit too close. Also your imagination fades
> away or you just don't want to use it anymore'.

For her, reading is where she uses her imagination. In the same vein, a 15 year old rural girl wrote '*I think that computer games isolate children, and stops them using their imagination, I belive (sic) children should be allowed to play on computer games but only for limited periods*'. This girl's favourite activity was music. This could be one reason why girls don't understand why it is that boys like playing with computer and video games. For girls, these items are not necessary to provide them with an 'escape' - instead they use music, books, even shopping. Kayleigh said about video games

> 'We're not obsessed, and like we don't always play on it but,
> like, when we play on it we only go on 'cos we're like bored,
> and I suppose we could live without 'em, we don't exactly need
> 'em there'.

Kayleigh and her friends didn't 'need 'em there' because they liked reading. The books they read, and which they laughingly told me they had once been addicted to, were 'Point Horror' books. These were mentioned frequently by other girls in the study.

Julie	*We went into those for a while, didn't we, but after a while they're not challenging ...*
Kayleigh	*[murmurs agreement]*
Julie	*.. you've read one, you've read them all, 'cos like everything that happens the same.*
SM	*I've not read any, but a lot of people seem to really like them.*
Kayleigh	*I bought a load of them when I was into them ...*
Ann	*I bought 22, but they're all the same, really - something horrible happens at the end of the chapter, and you turn the chapter and it's not*

Julie	scary. And you sort of get half way through the book and sort of like it's really complicated to understand who's supposed to be who, and they've all got such strange, queer names in them ....

The 'Point Horror' series is very successful, as is the 'Point Romance' series. The books are a collection of short stories which have simple, repetitive narratives - much like some video games. The following reproduction of the back page of a 12 year old urban girls' questionnaire describes her favourite things and illuminates the present argument.

10: 20188

WRITE OR DRAW ANYTHING YOU LIKE ON THIS PAGE

A few years ago I had a computer but I wasn't really interested in it. I think video games are boring and I don't see the point in them!

I prefer reading magazines, books and watching t.v.

I also enjoy going to town on a weekends instead of playing video games all the time!

← Watching The Telly Reading Book → TOP SHOP / SHOPPING!

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR FILLING IN THIS QUESTIONNAIRE

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This girl has used the page to draw some of her favourite things - a figure with long hair sitting in an armchair watching 'Neighbours'; a 'Point Horror' book, 'Topshop' store fascia, labelled 'SHOPPING!'. All the things this girl mentions liking best allow the same potential for the imagination as do video games. She doesn't need to (or want to) play video games because she *doesn't see the point*. She has other routes of escape.

Larson (1995) found that listening to music increased with age and discusses the ways in which adolescents use the media in their bedrooms. He states that:

> 'Solitary music listening ... is a fantasy ground for exploring possible selves. Sometimes this involves pumping oneself up with images of power and conquest; other times it may involve fantasies of merger and rescue by an idealized lover ....The images and emotions of popular music allow one to feel a range of internal states and try on alternate identities, both desired and feared.' (1995:547).

Larson focuses on the use of media as a way that young people deal with the stresses of adolescence, and argues that 'a retreat to one's bedroom and headphones after school returns one to a forum of emotional images for reassembling a sense of personal stability after surviving the slings and arrows of the day' (1995:548). Brown *et al* (1994) have also commented on the ways adolescents use their bedrooms for 'identity work'. What both writers are saying is, in line with the argument I am developing here, that activities such as these can be seen as escape attempts.

The imaginary spaces which girls inhabit, though, are all 'legitimate' spaces in the sense of adult's perceptions. Reading, for example, is seen as being educational by parents who are thus less likely to control this activity. Many of the parents I interviewed said that they would rather their child read than play video games, or they would argue that because their child still reads books then they weren't overly concerned about the amount time their child spent playing video games. We can link this back to Rojeck's (1985) point about what a Foucauldian analysis can reveal when brought into the study of leisure. Quite plainly, reading is perceived as 'healthy' leisure, and as such is not something which parents' feel that they have to control.

This interpretation is foreshadowed in De Certeau's (1988) distinction between 'space' and 'place'. 'Place' implies stability, he argues, it is 'part of the order'. A 'space' on the other hand, is not stable, it is not part of the order, but comes into existence when it is 'activated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it' (1988:117). He states:

'In short, space is a practised place. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers. In the same way, an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text, i.e. a place constituted by a system of signs' (De Certeau, 1988:117).

Reading is an activated space, a 'secret scene':

'... to read is to be elsewhere, where *they* are not, in another world, it is to constitute a secret scene, a place one can enter and leave when one wishes; to create dark corners into which no one can see ..' (De Certeau, 1988:173)

Girls enjoyment of reading, then, allows the creation of an 'other' space which might be called a 'secret scene' or, *pace* Foucault, a heterotopia. In the same way that boys' enjoyment of video games lies in the potential for escape from control which video game play provides, reading also allows escape from everyday life.

There is one other space which girls inhabit more than boys - as we have seen in Chapter 4, girls play video games less than boys, but say that they like to read and go shopping more than boys do. In that chapter, I discussed the work of Ganetz and her notion of the fitting room as providing several kinds of space for girls. I described there that the fitting room, according to Ganetz, is a relating space, an identity space and a free space:

'The fitting room comprises an attractive mixture of the public and the private; it is a closed and intimate place protected from others' views and control while it also lies outside the home and in a public place, which makes it more exciting and lends a feeling of freedom' (1994:87-8).

The act of trying on clothes with friends, which many of the girls in this study like to do, transforms the real place of the fitting room into a space where, for Ganetz, identities are tried on.

Conclusion

Simmel's work on space, Lechner (1991) informs us, allows us to see the way that 'bounded space makes any social order more concrete and intensely experienced. But spatial ordering not only reinforces social order, it also lends greater clarity to conflictual relations'. In the introduction to the thesis I reproduced a quotation from Sibley, who said 'The child, the family and domestic space need to be considered together in order to understand the role of boundaries in childhood' (1995:28). The role of the boundaries I have described in the life of the child, the family and in domestic space is, as Simmel notes, to make the social order of childhood 'more concrete and intensely experienced'. The spaces I have described in this chapter are not bounded by anything other than the child's imagination. The bounded space of everyday life is transformed by some of the leisure activities I discuss into unbounded imagination which inverts the everyday life of the child.

Chapter 8:   Conclusion: the spatial and gendered aspects

of children's leisure

Through the exploration of the spatial and gendered aspects of children's leisure, with which this thesis has concerned itself, several important findings have emerged. In order to summarise them, I will firstly return to the original aims of the research which were outlined in the introduction to this thesis. The main findings will be rehearsed under each aim, with recommendations for further research where appropriate. Following this, what I want to do in this final chapter is to draw out the two main themes which have been of concern throughout the thesis - gender and space - and to offer some ways forward for theory and practice.

Summarising the main findings and recommendations for future research

- Are boys still to be found on the streets, in gangs, or are they increasingly to be found in the home, playing video games?

In Chapter 4, I presented findings which showed that there are a wide range of activities which children and young people enjoy. By no means can it be said that children who like video games do little else with their time. However, the boys who took part in this study mentioned only two preferred leisure activities to any great extent: playing football, and playing with video games. Few boys explicitly mentioned liking to be with friends. In contrast, many of the girls in this study said that they liked to *'hang around'* with friends. Overall, girls mentioned a wider range of favourite activities than the boys did, and as I argued in Chapter 4, this is a finding which is not in keeping with the previous literature.

What appears to be happening, then, is that boys are spending less time on the streets, and spending more time indoors watching the TV and playing

video games. This is an important finding which could be complemented and informed by further study into the siting of children's leisure.

- Where boys are in the home, what are the implications for girls? Are girls able to share in the video game culture, or are they excluded due to gendered power relations/role expectations? What are the social relations between boys and girls, and how are they negotiated and expressed?

Chapter 6 showed clearly that there are important implications for girls when boys use the home as a leisure site. I have shown, through the interview and questionnaire material, that girls are controlled in their access to computers and video games by their male siblings, and by their parents. This control is exacerbated when the machines are located in particular spaces. What happens is that computer and video games become a focus for the expression of gendered power relations in the home.

- Do video games inhibit social interaction as has been suggested or can the reverse be true: that the ownership and use of video games actually facilitates interaction between young people and adults, and may be used as a basis for friendship?

In Chapters 4 and 5 I argued that video games are important for boys in fostering and maintaining friendship. This is not a feature which is relevant for girls, as they have other leisure activities which do this. I have highlighted that research into this issue is difficult, as when asked directly whether video games are important in this way boys will vehemently deny it, categorising those who admit it as 'geeks'. However, that video games fulfil this function can be seen when, for example, the focus is taken away from friendship and the boys are asked instead why they like particular games.

- How far do young people have control over their use of video games in domestic space or do parents exert the greater influence? How far can it be said that children and young people have control over domestic space anyway, not just in terms of playing games?

Parents' attempts to control their children's access to video games was discussed in Chapter 6. I argued that the material gathered through interviews with parents showed the tension between parents' aspirations for the technology and children's use of it. On the one hand is the parents' hope that the machines would be used 'properly' - that is, in an educational sense; and on the other is the child's resistance to that use. In this research, it has not been possible to address the second part of this question, due to an inability to access the home for observation. This question is an important one in view of the fact that children's leisure is now taking place inside the home. Further studies in which it is possible to gain access to the home may find this answer.

Video games as a gendered activity: implications for the gender and technology argument

Throughout the thesis I have offered several answers to the question of why it is that girls don't play video games to the same extent as boys. In Chapter 4, it was found that girls had a wider range of favourite activities then boys do, and I argued in Chapter 5 that this is related to issues of friendship - that for boys playing video games helps facilitate friendship in that boys friendships are based on shared activities. Girls on the other hand quite simply don't need to play video games in order to be with friends in the same way that boys do.

Chapter 6 highlighted a further reason why girls don't play as much as boys - that they are controlled in their access to computers and video games by parents and (male) siblings. Finally, the argument developed in Chapter 7 illustrated a new interpretation as to why girls don't play: girls have means of 'escape' other than video games. In these ways, this thesis has been able to clearly demonstrate the gendered nature of video game play. These

conclusions offer a different slant to those usually discussed in relation to technology.

Much of the literature around gender and technology takes the view that computer technology is masculinist. Cockburn and Ormred (1993, see also Kirkup and Keller, 1992) state, for example, that:

> 'Gender relations ... shape technology in use, and give it a certain meaning. Conversely, a new technology entering the home opens up a new arena in which, and new material on which, gender relations will act' (1993:129).

Cockburn and Omerod (1993) further contend that girls and women are afraid of technology. Similarly, Bamossy and Jansen (1994) found that, in their study of gender differences in children's apprehension and comprehension towards computers, girls were more anxious when using computers than were boys. For Cockburn and Ormred (1993) this 'technofear' has serious implications - they argue that because research spending is increasingly awarded in the area of science and technology, women are losing out in career terms:

> 'If women are to control their own lives, they must have an everyday knowledge of how things work. Girls could acquire this effortlessly at a young age, were it not that masculinist culture of home and school stand in the way' (1993:175).

Those working in the area of gender and technology recommend therefore that girls should learn about computers at an early age, as boys do. One way often suggested to facilitate this is for girls to play computer and video games, but as I have shown, they do not do this for several reasons.

We have seen throughout this thesis that gender relations are indeed mapped onto the use of computer and video games. However, in contradiction to the authors cited above, I contend that it is not that girls are afraid of the

technology. Rather, as this thesis has shown, they do not incorporate it as a regular leisure activity in their everyday social lives. To an extent, the maculinisation of computer and video games does hold some girls back from playing, as does the literal holding back which their families sometimes do. However, what really seems to be the issue here is that girls <u>do not need or want</u> to play with computer and video games. In the attempt to improve girls' access to computers and video games for future careers, what is needed is to take into account that equality of provision will not, of itself, do this. Rather, a consideration of the social aspects discussed throughout this thesis need to be taken on board in future work around gender and technology.

Exploding fears: arguments against moral panics

The thesis opened with a series of headlines from newspapers which showed the kinds of concerns around video games which are focused on in the media and in common sense understanding. Throughout, I have argued that it is important to counter moral panics such as these through academic work which takes as its starting point that the child is not a cultural 'dupe', but is a competent social actor who is able to make sense of social reality. The findings I have presented in this thesis show this clearly. In Chapter 4, it was demonstrated that the notion that children do little else but play computer and video games is erroneous. In fact, there are many other activities which the children and young people in this study say that they like to do. Also in Chapter 4, we saw that, counter to the notion that video games are taking over all of the child's leisure time and displacing other social skills, what happens instead is that for boys, interest in other activities is in fact higher when they report that they play video games frequently.

Similarly, in Chapter 5, an examination of the children's own accounts showed that it cannot be said that children passively imbibe negative

messages from video games. Rather, the children whose voices I presented demonstrate both a clear understanding and competency in relation to video game usage. To some extent, therefore, the debate over children and (violent) video games (and moral panics about children generally) may reflect a particular construction of childhood. A construction of childhood as innocent and in need of protection from 'adult' concerns means that when children transgress the boundaries of what is considered 'appropriate' a moral panic ensues. It is not thought appropriate that children should so avidly enjoy killing and maiming in computer games, although there is no corresponding concern when adults play these games. The age grades on video games are there both in order to 'protect' children (in response to demands from government and moral panics in the media as I outlined in Chapter 1) and to mark certain games off as adult, although children can, and do, overcome this by using the 'cheats' built into the game.

It was seen in Chapter 5 that children and young people who like to play violent video games are no different in terms of socio-economic background than any other child in the study. What they like about violent video games, I argued, is that they provide an opportunity to play and to compete with friends; to demonstrate knowledge (about the cheats); and they like the technical content of the game, in terms of graphics. Children playing violent video games should not, I argue therefore, be the focus of moral panics. As the interview material reveals, children are aware of the distinction between fiction and reality.

Finally, what this thesis has shown is that there is an hitherto unexplored aspect to children's leisure which has to be taken into account in a deconstruction of moral panics and concerns: that of 'other spaces'. I turn to a reconsideration of these arguments in the following section.

Life in a different key

In Chapter 1, *pace* Foucault, I argued that children's social lives are shaped and policed in relation to the particular needs which both the state and parents demand. So what kind of child, what kind of disciplined body, is society demanding in the 1990s? I have argued (Chapters 1, 6 and elsewhere) that the 'right' space for the child is now seen as being inside the house, and that this can be demonstrated in current and proposed legislation (for example the 9pm curfew) which is reclaiming the street as 'adult space'.

There is, however, a tension here - when the child is indoors then it is also seen as being in the 'wrong' space. Children, as part of nature, should be outdoors, not indoors staring at a screen. Video games have, I suggest, become the focus for these tensions - important indoor leisure activities for children and teenagers, the concerns and moral panics around this activity highlight the dissonance between the 'right' use of leisure and the ways in which children prefer to spend their time. This is echoed by Elias and Dunning in their contention that 'the strength and pattern of emotional needs differ according to the stage a society has reached in a civilizing process. The mimetic events which serve these needs differ accordingly' (1969:72).

What I am arguing, then, is that the mimetic aspect of video games serves particular needs - video games are an attraction which keeps the child indoors and out of adult space. In this way, video games serve the interests of society at the present stage of what Elias and Dunning call the 'civilising process'. And yet, they are also the focus of concern. We will recall from Chapter 6 the anxiety which parents who took part in interviews expressed about the way their child played with video games, using them for amusement when the parents interviewed would rather the child used them in the 'right' way: for education. We can also recall their irritation at the child's immersion in a game. The body is not disciplined enough - it is indoors (in the right space)

but it is not doing the 'right' thing. The attempt to control children's use of video games is an attempt to enforce the final discipline - that of education over amusement.

The work of Elias and Dunning (1969) can illuminate these tensions. They argue that:

> '[excitement is] the very antithesis of self control, to rational or reasonable conduct. Those responsible for law and order ... have again and again fought bitterly against the upsurge of excitement in people ... (1969:82).

A parallel can be seen here to Clarke and Critcher's (1985) argument in relation to the policing of leisure, described in Chapter 1. Video games are of concern, then, because they are too exciting. I have argued in Chapter 7, however, that the importance of video games for children lies in the potential for escape which they provide: that they create an 'other' space where the child can do those things which they are not allowed to do in real life. In keeping with my illustration of video games as heterotopias, the ideas of Elias and Dunning confirm this analysis when they say that 'the pleasurable excitement people experience in relation to mimetic events thus represent a social enclave where excitement can be enjoyed without its socially and personally dangerous implications' (1969:82), and further that:

> 'The mimetic aspect which is the common characteristic of all leisure events classified under that name, high or low ... from tragedies and symphonies to poker and roulette, is not that they are representations of 'real life' events, but rather that the emotions, the affects aroused by them are related to those experienced in 'real life' situations, only transposed in a different key and blended with a 'kind of delight' (1969:70-71).

This argument, which I have outlined throughout the thesis, can be considered as one way to explode some of the fears around video game play. The child playing video games should be seen not as an object of concern, but

as someone experiencing a 'kind of delight' in their leisure. Perhaps in the final analysis therefore it might be that adult concern is not so much focused on the rights and wrongs of this activity, but simply that children playing video games are experiencing the same kind of enjoyment as adults do in their leisure, thus breaking down the adult/child dichotomy (Jenks, 1996). I argued in Chapter 2 that the social study of childhood has not so far embraced the study of children's leisure but only focused on play. Exploring the boundaries between adulthood and childhood through a focus on children's leisure in order to see what this can tell us about 'the child' can therefore aid the enterprise of theorising childhood.

Childhood as a heterotopia

In this final section I return, therefore, to childhood itself through focusing further on Foucault's (1986) notion of the heterotopia to identify that part of his work which could aid the social study of childhood. I described in Chapter 7 broadly what Foucault means by the term 'heterotopia'. To reiterate, he contrasts 'utopia' (a space with no real place) with 'heterotopia' (a real place with unreal spaces). Heterotopology (the study of heterotopias), Foucault contends, would be useful in contesting 'the space in which we live' (1986:24). In order to study heterotopias, Foucault advises that we use his five principles which I outline below in relation to their potential for theorising childhood:

- *there is no single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias*

All cultures in the world have constituted or constructed childhood, although the form which that construction takes is culturally variable.

- *through history, a society can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion*

It has often been noted that the ways in which childhood has been constructed vary over time (Ariès, 1962, Jenks, 1996, see also Chapter 1, this thesis). I have argued earlier in this chapter and in Chapter 1 that the reconstructions of childhood over time function to serve different requirements which society has of 'the child' - to draw on Elias and Dunning (1969) the differing conceptions depend on what kind of child society demands at each stage of the 'civilizing process'.

- *in a single real space, a heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing several spaces and several sites*

Here I am thinking of Valentine's (1996) argument about the 'moral landscape of childhood'. Her discussion demonstrates the ways that at one and the same time children can be seen as either 'angels' or 'devils', depending on the perspective of the viewer. In this way, the image of 'the child' becomes fluid: the 'good' child can also be the 'bad' child. Hence our conceptions of the child in social space juxtapose several contradictory images.

- *heterotopias are often linked to 'slices in time' which open onto 'heterochronies'*

Foucault states that 'the heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of traditional break with their traditional time' (1986:25). The example which he uses to illustrate this principle is that of death. After death, the cemetery becomes a heterotopia in that it is a space for dead bodies and also the place where mourners retain links with the dead and with history. In a similar way, childhood is temporally bounded and separated from adult time and space, and yet adults can maintain a link with history in terms of their own childhood.

- *heterotopias always:*

> '... presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopia is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications' (Foucault, 1986:24-27).

Childhood is not a freely accessible state. Only children can actually *be* children, and entry into the state of childhood is, for the child, truly compulsory. In this way, it is a closed system. Children do have children's bodies. An adult cannot truly re-enter childhood in this sense. However, while reminding us that childhood is differentiated from adulthood in the sense that adults do not have children's bodies, Foucault's work also allows us to further develop the social constructionist position in that childhood is, at the same time, always penetrable: it is always subject to adult intervention. This thesis has shown some of the ways that childhood is subject to adult intervention - for example, the use of legislation which proscribes what a child can and cannot do has the effect of altering the state of childhood.

Foucault's notions of heterotopias and heterochronies may, I contend therefore, benefit further attempts to theorize childhood. For example, using these notions will aid the social constructionist argument: a view of childhood as an unreal space which exists in a real place allows a more convincing demonstration of the concept of childhood as subject to change and alteration both over time and cross culturally. From this position it becomes easier to see the ways in which it is constructed, and for what ends. While Foucault states that the study of heterotopias allows a contestation of the real spaces in which we live, what I am arguing is that the value of this work is that it can also be extended to offer a means of contesting the ways in which childhood is constructed, without forgetting that 'the child' does exist in a corporeal sense (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998).

Finally ... back to the beginning

The value of this work, I contend, lies in the perspective which has informed it throughout: that children are competent social actors and that research on children's social lives needs to take the child's voice as central. I want to finish the thesis with a quote from one of the children who took part in the study - indeed the same quotation which opened the discussion:

> computer games are a part of every kids life, they cannot be ignored. If games are over-violent they are censored, like videos. I can't see why parents are so wary about computer games, its simply entertainment and it can improve reflexes and hand-eye co-ordination. TV was all the rage when parents were young, and I'm sure TV is more influential than computers. There is a lot more violence on TV. AND computers CANNOT give kids epilepsy, it only triggers seizures, but so does discos and any other flashing lights.
> Back to the point about violence, do you see kids beat up others with killer combos, after playing streetfighter? Did Fred West own a gameboy? I think not. If parents restrict their children from video games, they are also boring them to death. Computer games can release stress, which is common in teenagers. Some parents only stop kids playing games because they don't like new technology!
> Cheers for listening.

I accept his thanks, and return them. To all of the children whose ideas and thoughts have helped shape my work, thank you. I'm glad I listened.

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Appendix 1: Frequency tables

TABLE A1: MOST FREQUENTLY MENTIONED FAVOURITE ACTIVITIES. URBAN 11 - 13
YEAR OLDS

outdoor activity	girls	boys	indoor activity	girls	boys
riding bike	4.51	11.46	watching TV	41.64	38.42
friends	23.08	11.93	video games	32.63	66.83
playing out	7.16	11.22	listening to music	20.95	9.55
roller skates	1.33	1.91	watching videos	0.53	0.72
going out	9.55	7.40	reading	11.14	2.63
scouts/guides	1.59	0.48	creative	10.34	2.63
youth club	1.86	0.72	fantasy games	0	0
arcades	0.27	0.24	homework	0.53	1.19
bowling	2.65	0.72	housework	1.33	0.24
cinema	9.02	2.63	pets	5.84	1.43
ice skating	9.28	1.67	play indoors	2.65	5.25
leisure centre	0	0	sleeping	2.39	3.10
shopping	3.45	0.95	eating	1.86	3.58
town	20.16	6.44			
doing sport	8.75	63.25			
riding	10.34	0.95			
surfing	0	0			
swimming	16.18	4.77			
fishing	0	2.63			
golf	0	3.82			
athletics	5.31	0.95			
other sports	3.46	6.21			
shooting	0	0			
TOTAL	45.63	43.92		131.83	135.57

TABLE A2: MOST FREQUENTLY MENTIONED FAVOURITE ACTIVITIES. RURAL 11 - 13 YEAR OLDS

outdoor activity	girls	boys	indoor activity	girls	boys
riding bike	5.99	13.11	watching TV	29.34	24.27
friends	31.74	14.08	video games	34.73	58.25
playing out	18.56	17.96	listening to music	16.77	8.25
roller skates	0	1.46	watching videos	1.80	2.91
going out	8.38	6.31	reading	19.76	4.37
scouts/guides	0	0	creative	8.98	7.77
youth club	0.60	0	fantasy games	0	5.34
arcades	2.40	1.94	homework	2.40	1.46
bowling	0	0	housework	2.40	1.94
cinema	1.80	0.49	pets	2.99	0.97
ice skating	5.99	0.97	play indoors	4.79	4.37
leisure centre	0	0.97	sleeping	2.40	0.49
shopping	6.59	0.49	eating	2.40	0.97
town	4.19	0.49			
doing sport	8.98	60.86			
riding	18.56	0.97			
surfing	0	2.91			
swimming	22.75	8.74			
fishing	0	6.31			
golf	0	0.97			
athletics	1.2	3.88			
other sports	3.60	0.58			
shooting	0	2.91			
TOTAL	64.67	52.92		128.76	121.36

TABLE A3: MOST FREQUENTLY MENTIONED FAVOURITE ACTIVITIES. RURAL 14 - 18
YEAR OLDS

outdoor activity	girls	boys	indoor activity	girls	boys
riding bike	1.67	9.09	watching television	31.11	29.80
friends	38.33	9.09	video games	13.89	40.40
playing out	1.67	4.55	listening to music	25.56	14.14
roller skates	1.11	0.51	watching videos	2.78	3.03
going out	25.00	10.1	reading	12.78	3.54
scouts/guides	1.11	1.52	creative	6.67	5.56
youth club	0.56	0.51	fantasy games	0	1.52
arcades	1.11	3.03	homework	1.11	2.02
bowling	0.56	0	housework	1.11	0
cinema	8.33	1.01	pets	1.11	1.52
ice skating	3.89	0	play indoors	4.44	4.04
leisure centre	2.22	0	sleeping	6.11	6.57
shopping	18.33	0.51	eating	4.44	3.03
town	6.11	0.51			
doing sport	15.00	59.09			
riding	7.22	0			
surfing	0.56	4.04			
swimming	6.11	2.53			
fishing	0	8.59			
golf	0	2.53			
athletics	1.11	1.01			
other sports	1.68	4.56			
shooting	2.00	6.06			
	143.68	128.84		111.11	115.17

Appendix 2: Letter to parents

Dear Parent/Guardian,

In the near future I will be carrying out some research in the High School as part of a large research project which is for the purpose of my PhD thesis, and is on the subject of children and young peoples' use of computer and video games. There will be a questionnaire which the children will fill in, and later I hope to carry out some interviews with those children who are willing. The interviews will not disrupt class times, and will probably take place after lunch or at break time. All information gathered through the research will be confidential, and names of the children and the school will be changed when I write my report, in an effort to ensure anonymity. I write to you at this time in order to give you the opportunity to contact me should you have any concerns about the project, and so that you can, if you wish, indicate that you do not want your child to take part in the research. Should this be the case, please send a note to me, care of the school, to that effect. If you are happy for your child to be involved in the research, there is no need to respond. Later in the project I would be very keen to talk to parents, in order to understand their concerns and feelings about computer and video games, whether or not you have a computer or video game in your house. I would like therefore to take this opportunity to invite you to take part in the research, which would involve a short interview with me lasting around half an hour, at a time and place convenient to you. If you are interested in taking part in this stage of the research, please complete the form below and return it to school. I will then be in touch to give further information, and arrange mutually convenient times for the interviews.

Thanking you in anticipation,

Yours sincerely,

Sally McNamee

Computer and Video Game Research

I am interested in taking part in the parental interviews and would like Sally McNamee to contact me to arrange a time & place / give me further information.

NAME: ....

ADDRESS: ....

EVENING PHONE NUMBER: ....
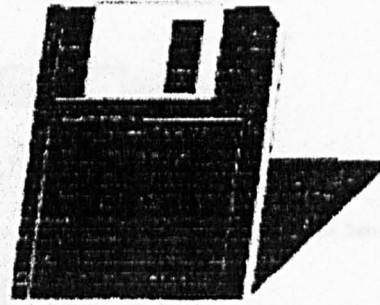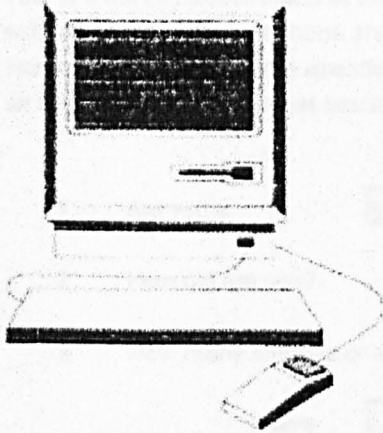
COMPUTER AND VIDEO GAME QUESTIONNAIRE

COMPUTER AND VIDEO GAME QUESTIONNAIRE
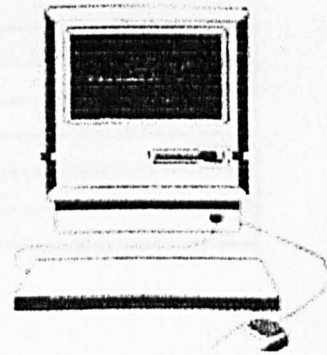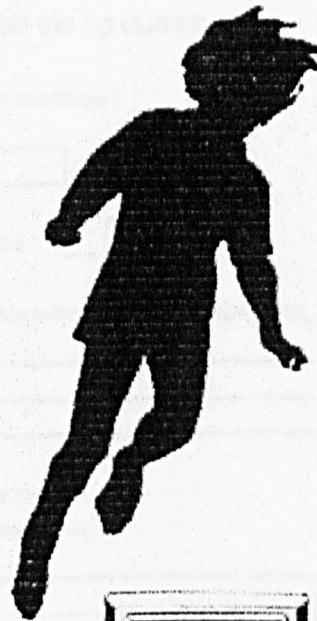
This is a survey about some of the things that children and young people like to do after
school. Most of the questions are about computer and video games, but even if you don't
like them, please fill in the questionnaire. Please follow the instructions, and try to answer
all the questions. If you get stuck, or need any help please ask your teacher.

1   Are you a: | girl ____ | or a | boy ✓ | (tick one box)

2   How old are you?   I am ___8___ years old.

3   How many brothers or sisters do you have who live with you? Please fill in the boxes.

   I have | 2 | brothers & | ____ | sisters

4   Do you have a computer or a video game machine in your house?

   | yes ✓ | | no | (tick one box)

IF YOU DON'T HAVE A COMPUTER OR VIDEO GAME, PLEASE GO TO QUESTION 10

5   Do you have more than one computer or video game machine?

   | yes ✓ | | no | (tick one box)

6   How many do you have? (write the number in the box) | 2 |

7   Please write here the type of machine(s) you have (for example, Sega, Nintendo, BBC)

   ___Game boy nintendo___
   ___me and my Brother___

8   Who does the computer or video game machine belong to?
    (If you have more than one, write down who owns each one).

me	
brother	
sister	
me and brother/sister	✓
my mum	
my dad	
all of us	

PLEASE TURN TO THE NEXT PAGE

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COMPUTER AND VIDEO GAME QUESTIONNAIRE

-9   Please write here which room(s) each computer(s) or video game(s) is usually in.

Bed room
~~Sity~~ Study

10   Do you like to play computer games and video games?

yes ✓
no   ☑ (please tick one box)
sometimes

IF YOU DON'T LIKE TO PLAY COMPUTER AND VIDEO GAMES, PLEASE GO TO QUESTION 16

11   Which kind of computer and video games do you like best?
        Write down all the games which you like here:

12   How often do you play computer or video games? Do you play:

every day ✓   ☑
most days
sometimes   (please tick one box)
not very often

13   Who do you mostly like to play computer and video games with?

by myself ✓   ☑
with one friend
with a few friends   (tick as many boxes as you like)
with my family
it depends how I feel

14   Where do you play computer and video games? Do you play

at home ✓   ☑
at a friends   (tick as many as you like)
at the arcades
anywhere else?

PLEASE TURN TO THE NEXT PAGE

COMPUTER AND VIDEO GAME QUESTIONNAIRE

15 When you play computer and video games at home, who decides when and where you can play, most of the time?

I do ✓
my parents
my brothers/sisters

✓

16 If you don't like to play computer and video games, please write here why not.

_____
_____
_____

17 Do you think that computer and video games are:

mainly for boys
mainly for girls
for anyone ✓
for adults
don't know

✓

(tick one box)

18 What kinds of things do you like to do when you're not at school? Please write down the three things you like best.

1 _on my game bay_
2 _reading a book_
3 _whatching tv_

19 Please write in this space what you think about computer and video games - do you think that they are good things for children and young people to play with or not?

I think it is sootabell for every one
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

20 You can use the space at the end of this booklet to write anything you like about computers and video games, or you could write about anything else that you like to do. If you don't want to write anything, you could draw a picture, either of your favourite video game, TV programme, or indoor or outdoor game. If you draw a picture, please write underneath what it is about.

21 It would really help my research if I could talk to some of you, either in small groups or by yourselves, about computer and video games and other after school activities. The interviews could be done after lunch at school. If you would like

COMPUTER AND VIDEO GAME QUESTIONNAIRE

to talk to me, whether or not you like computer and video games, please fill in the boxes and write your name in the space below.

I would like to be interviewed in a group
I would like to be interviewed by myself.
I would not like to be interviewed.

My name is _____

Write or draw in the space below.

Thank you very much for filling in this questionnaire.

Appendix 4: The secondary school questionnaire

This is a survey about some of the things that children and young people like to do after school.

Most of the questions are about computer and video games, but even if you don't like them please fill in the questionnaire.

Please follow all the instructions, and try to answer all the questions. If you get stuck, or need any help, please ask your teacher.

When you have finished, please check that you have answered all the questions before you hand it in.

PLEASE DO NOT WRITE YOUR NAME ANYWHERE ON THIS QUESTIONNAIRE.

		col.	code
1	Are you a: girl boy (circle one answer)	6	
2	How old are you? . I am _____ years (write your answer on the line)	7 to 8	
3	How many brothers do you have who live with you? _____ (write your answer on the line)	9	
4	How many sisters do you have who live with you? _____ (write your answer on the line)	10	
5	Do you have a computer or a video game machine in your house? yes no (circle one answer)	11	

IF YOU DON'T HAVE A COMPUTER OR VIDEO GAME, PLEASE GO ON TO QUESTION 9

		col.	code
6	Do you have more than one computer or video game machine? yes no (circle one answer)	12	
7	How many do you have? (write the number in the box) [ ]	13	

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8

What machines are they? example: *Megadrive*	col.	code	Whose is it? *mine*	col.	code	Where is it usually kept? *In the living room*	col.	code
	14-17			35-38			55-58	
	18-22			39-42			59-62	
	23-26			43-46			63-66	
	27-30			47-50			67-70	
	31-34			51-54			71-74	

col.	code

9   Do you like to play computer games and video games?

yes   no   sometimes   (circle one answer)   75

10   If you don't like to play computer games and video games, write here why not and then go on to question 16.
(If you do like them, carry on answering the questions)
                                                                                               76

_____

_____

_____

PLEASE TURN TO THE NEXT PAGE

NOW TELL ME ABOUT YOU AND COMPUTER AND VIDEO GAMES.

			col.	code

11 How often do you play computer or video games? Do you play:

every day   most days   sometimes   not very often   (circle one answer)   **1**

12 Who do you mostly like to play computer and video games with?

by myself   with one friend   a few friends   my family   it depends   (circle one answer)   **2**

13 Where do you like to play computer and video games? Do you usually play:

at home   at a friends   at the arcades   at a relatives   (circle one answer)   **3**

14 When you play computer and video games at home, who decides when and where you can play, most of the time?

I do   my parents   my brothers/sisters   someone else   (circle one answer)   **4**

15 Which kind of computer and video games do you like best? Write the name of the game, and what you like about it.

Name of the game:

example: Sonic 1

	col	code
	5 to 9	
	10 to 13	
	14-17	
	18-21	

I like it because:

Sonic is very fast

	col	code
	22-25	
	26-29	
	30-33	
	34-37	

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		col.	code

16 Do you think that computer and video games are:

mainly for boys　　　　mainly for girls　　　for adults　　　for anyone　　　　don't know　　　(circle one answer)　　　| 38 |

17 What kind of things do you like to do best when you're not at school? Please write down the three things you like best here.

1 _____　| 39-42 |

2 _____　| 43-46 |

3 _____　| 47-50 |

18 Do you think that computer and video games are good things for children and young people to play with?

yes, they are　　　　no, they're not　　.　(circle one answer)　　　　| 51 |

19 Turn over the page to write anything you like about computer and video games, or you could write about anything else | 52 |
you like to do. If you don't want to write anything, you could draw a picture of your favourite computer or video game,
or TV programme, or indoor or outdoor game. If you draw a picture, please write underneath what it is about.

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WRITE OR DRAW ANYTHING YOU LIKE ON THIS PAGE

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR FILLING IN THIS QUESTIONNAIRE

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Appendix 5: Parental Interview Guide

Number, ages, sex of children

Occupations of parents, housing type, school children attend

If have video game/computer:

Why bought
When bought
Who bought
Family decision?

Frequency of buying video games
Who buys games
Preferred type of games child/parent

Where machine kept
Who uses it
Amount of time used
Conflict over use? Who with?

Friends - allowed in to play?
Their child to other houses?
Proximity - e.g. Transport problems

General opinions on video games, worries, likes

Domestic tasks (children)
Any gender differences in family use of computers/domestic tasks/other?

If don't have computer/video game:

Why not?
Kids views - same as parents or not?
Kids friends - do they have them?
Do their kids ever get to play them?
Opinions re. Computers and video games generally
Would they ever consider getting one?
Reasons?
Kids favourite occupations and time spent on/who with/ where?

Friends - proximity, visiting
Conflicts over leisure activities?
Domestic tasks (children)
Any gender differences noted in domestics tasks/play?

Appendix 6: Child Interview Guide

name   age   form   date   tape no.

Thank for filling in questionnaire

Brothers/sisters

Older/younger

Parent's jobs

Computers/video game machine in house?

Type? Where? Who uses most?

Who bought, why?

Like/not

Type of games liked

How long play for

How feel when playing

Important to kids/not?

Friends

Conflict in house?

Gender

Other leisure activities

Describe typical evening after school

Describe last Saturday - what did, who with, where

Appendix 7: Stages of research design and numbers participating

Primary School	
Letter to parents	Letters sent to parents of each child in school. None responded. 1 pilot interview was carried out with a personal friend who had children at this school, but this data is not included in the thesis.
Questionnaire	52 children completed a questionnaire
Interviews	41 children took part in interviews
Parents	
Letter to parents	Schools responsible for delivering letters via each child. Using the schools' estimates, 2,000 letters were delivered to schools. I have no information as to how many were received by parents. 13 responded.
Interviews with parents	Of the 13 who responded, interviews were carried out successfully with 9 parents.
Windytown High	
Questionnaire	754 children completed a questionnaire
Interviews	Of the 193 who volunteered, 25 were invited for interview. 20 turned up.
Greendlands	Of the 91 who volunteered, 19 were invited. 13 turned up, of these not all were those invited, but some were 'volunteered' by the head teacher.