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Little Evils: Subversive Uses of Children's Games

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Introduction: Evil and the Little Ones

There are strict protective practices and classification systems in most countries that aim to keep games with violence, sex or, for example, those which feature adult language away from the hands of children. Children, however, are often quite capable of coming up with politically incorrect uses of 'safe' children's games themselves. Every parent can bear witness to the rough and sometimes rather violent events that take place in children's play, and the playful uses of digital games are no exception in this regard. The reference works on child development increasingly today include rough and tumble play as an important element for social skills development, and mostly emphasise that children are capable of knowing the difference between for example play fighting and real aggression (e.g. Barbarin & Wasik 2009; Brown 2010; Pellegrini 2009). However, the aggressive and destructive elements in children's digital game play have mostly not been approached from similar perspective as the rough physical play, and the cultural study of children's dark play practices in computer games is almost non-existing.

This chapter will discuss how the potential for dark elements in children's play have been addressed in the existing play research, and then move to analyse contemporary examples, firstly through analyses of Lego play videos created and shared by children and young persons, and then by investigating the transmedial adaptation of dark themes in *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* narratives into the children-targeting Lego series' video games. These discussions will provide an opening into children's digital dark play studies, and suggest directions for further research.

Dark Play in the Studies of Play

Brian Sutton-Smith, a leading scholar of play, has noted that there is no consensus on the play theory, and that study of this area is situated at the field of tension dominated by ideological bias derived to puritan work ethic and Enlightenment rationalism. For many theorists and researchers, play needs to be explained into something useful and uplifting before it can make sense: the examples Sutton-Smith (2004) provides are play as flexibility (Bruner), improvisation (Sawyer), metacommunications (Bateson/Garvey), emotional regulation (Carson/Parks), conflict mediation (Freud), enhancing imagination (Singer), increasing eco mastery (Erikson), facilitating abstraction (Vygotsky), and consolidating cognitions (Piaget). There are many different forms of play and not all of them fit equally well within the same theory or explanation of play; some play forms are based on competition, even aggression, while others are oriented towards social collaboration, and others simply turn play into fun and nonsense – thus, Sutton-Smith has also written about the inherent “ambiguity of play” (Sutton-Smith 1997).

In the field of child psychology, the style of play has been used as a source of information about the personality, developmental state, learning styles and potential problems of children, among other things. For example, Albert Bandura’s classic study of children learning aggressive behaviours through imitation used a large size “Bobo doll”, which was first treated violently by an adult, then by the imitating children, thereby giving evidence to the social learning hypothesis (Bandura 1965). In early education, observation of children’s play is a standard way to learn about individual children, and how their learning and development progresses (Gronlund & James 2013). There are nevertheless aspects of children’s play that divide the views of educators and researchers.

Jean Piaget’s cognitive theory of play is among the most influential approaches in the field of developmental psychology. Piaget approaches play from his dialectic of assimilation and accommodation: rather than rationally accommodating to the operations of the external world, a playing child assimilates reality to her or his own needs. Piaget’s classification of play is based on the idea of development, so that the child progresses from practice play to symbolic play, and then finally to playing games with rules. (Piaget 1962, 105-146.) In this view, play is essentially primitive behaviour and thought, and like Ageliki Nicolopoulou (1993, 6) has noted, Piaget’s theory does not explain play behaviours among those who are older than three years of age.

Nicolopoulou, a sociocultural developmental psychologist, further criticises play researchers who follow Piaget for failing to study play on its own terms as a vehicle for children's expressive imagination. Taking into consideration the full depth of play in emotional, intellectual as well as social life means approaching play not only as an interactive activity, but also as a cultural and imaginative one. (Ibid., 13.) When play is approached as an expressive, imaginative and cultural activity, its contents become framed differently as contrasted to the more purely utilitarian and rational approaches to play.

Play fighting and "rough and tumble play" are some of the more conflict-oriented forms of children's play, and also forms of play that parents and educators have sometimes trouble tolerating. Pam Jarvis and Jane George (2010) have studied rough and tumble play and the narratives that children attach to these activities, and noted that there are specific characteristics – reciprocal, physically active behaviours with positive emotional engagement that promote friendship formation – that differentiate rough and tumble play from real aggression and fighting. Yet teachers, for example, often notice nothing but "bad behaviour" when witnessing rough and tumble play (Jarvis & George 2010, 171). Rough and tumble play is often hybrid play, which includes running, chasing, jumping and play fighting, that children then attach in their talk with "battle" or "superhero" themes, for example, that are drawn from the surrounding media culture. This kind of physically assertive and aggressive style of play is particularly popular among boys. (Ibid. 165-187.)

The violently themed play behaviours and associated fantasies are sometimes equated with violence, and taken up in public discussion as potential sources for real violence. In the field of psychiatry, where real violence is sometimes very much an issue, it is defined as "forceful infliction of physical injury" (Blackburn 1993, 210) and aggression more generally as activities involving harmful, threatening or antagonistic behaviour (Berkowitz 1993). When a child or young person is being evaluated by a psychiatrist due to violent acts they have carried out, a number of factors are being considered: a possibility of specific mental disorders or personality disorders is examined, as well as violence witnessed by or perpetrated against the child and other situational factors, such as repeated loss and rejection in relationships (Bailey 2002). The difference is crucial: whereas violently themed play is regarded as a normal part of socialization and important for developing healthy self-conception, the development of actually harmful, violent behavioural patterns relates

to a complex network of interrelated factors such as negative family features, antisocial or psychopathic personality features as well as other possible negative situational factors in child's life. (Bailey 2002.)

The study of "dark" themes is not a major area in the research of children's play. When the play on violent or, for example, death related themes is explored in children's play research, it is often from the perspective of psychological coping. There are reports of pre-school children "playing out" their grief after the death of family members or close friends (Smith 1991). The foundation of play therapy as a method relies on the concept that play is a way of making sense of the world and sometimes also of tragic life experiences, and that play can be actively used in the healing processes of abused children (Cattanach 2008, 29-46). Not only serious traumas, but also the common frustrations related to the powerlessness of being a child have been linked with the needs and pleasures of engaging in "dark play". Psychiatrist Lenore Terr has argued that play gives children new perspectives on their frustrations, and fantasy play enables children to "express sexual and aggressive feelings, hopes, and terrible frustrations with past or present realities" (Terr 2000, 106). Author and media educator Gerard Jones (2002) has written about various "monster killing" and dark fantasy related forms of play as empowering fantasies, fuelled by feelings of frustration, rage or fear.

There are games and toys that are deliberately designed for conflict-oriented and violent play styles and themes. War toys are among the oldest examples of these. Psychologist and toy scholar Jeffrey Golstein has studied the history and cultural character of war play, and he has pointed out that toy soldiers are among the oldest and most common known toys. Miniature weapons and soldiers have been discovered from the ruins throughout the ancient world, and the mass-manufactured tin soldiers have been produced in Germany from 1760 onwards. The popularity of play fighting extends apparently to young males in all primate species and Goldstein refers to a long standing argument where some researchers claim that war play diminishes the imagination of children, promotes imitative violence and perpetuates war, whereas the opposite arguments hold that play fighting and war toys heighten imagination, teach role taking, and provide the children opportunities to come to terms with war, violence and death. (Goldstein 1998, 55-57.)

While shunned by many adults, the play fighting and war toys appear to enjoy lasting popularity. Goldstein has categorized the dozens of reasons that research has suggested for children's play with war toys into three main groups: biological and physiological reasons, psychological reasons, and, thirdly, social or cultural reasons. The physiological reasons focus on the biological needs of discharging energy or achieving the desired level of stimulation, as well as on the "hard-wired" tendency to practice adult skills and roles. The obvious gender imbalance of predominantly boys playing with war toys is in these theories related to hormonal and genetic influences. The psychological studies have also suggested the need for intense and intimate, emotional and social experiences as some of the key attractions in war play and war toys, but they also point towards the importance of needs for gaining the sense of controlling and resolving conflicts, as well as achieving the experience of mastery from goal setting and effective action that this style of play entails. There are some studies that suggest that popularity of violently themed toys correlates with periods of war or heightened public support for military expenditures. The social and cultural theories of war themed play take into account both the direct as well as indirect influences from family, media and surrounding society, and more generally the role of cultural values such as dominance, aggression and assertion and the character of male roles in the culture in particular. (Goldstein 1998, 61.) Thus, there appear to be several, complex reasons why children enjoy war toys and killing themed "dark play".

Games as Digital Toys

The play enabled by digital games – console video games, computer games, as well as games on mobile and other electronic devices – has grown into a mainstream area of play culture in few decades. While holding visible position in contemporary popular culture and daily lives of millions of people, digital games continue to evoke controversy, particularly when the game play of children is concerned. There is disagreement even on the fundamental character of game playing; for example, what constitutes a "violent game" and what is "violence" in a game context divides opinions. There are studies that claim that a clear majority of commercially available digital games contains violence of various kinds and degrees (e.g. Thompson & Haninger 2001; Smith, Lachlan & Tamborini 2003; Haninger & Thompson 2004). On the other hand, the game industry is eager to publish statistics that point out that shooter and action games are in clear minority (at c. 10

percentage share) in computer games sold, for example, as compared to casual games (27 percent) or strategy games (25 percent; ESA 2013).

This kind of debates can easily overlook the deeper issue of how the “violent contents” of a game are used in actual game play, and whether those elements are experienced by game players as “violence” in the first place. Researchers have witnessed, for example, completely non-violent, as well as highly aggressive, play sessions in a supposedly violence-focused *Grand Theft Auto 3* (Lachlan & Maloney 2008). Rather than seeing digital games as totally pre-scripted environments that force players to follow certain action lines, it is important to take into account also the player freedom, even while there are clear differences between games that are more or less open for emergent, player-created action lines (Juul 2002). It makes sense to see also digital games as toys – as playthings that stimulate different kinds of behaviours and experiences from different players. While adults and adolescents also explore and express playful creativity, playfulness is a much more visible part in the lives of children (Barnett 2007). Toys are generally mostly confined as a children’s domain, and they appear to require more actively creative mind-set than games to actively play with. Chris Crawford, in his early work on computer game design and theory, suggested that games and toys differ in the degree that their design is able to influence the actual use: while the game designer has set the rules that regulate how the game operates, “the toy user is free to manipulate it in any manner that strikes his fancy” (Crawford 1984).

A toy is, however, never a completely blank slate. Particularly commercial toys are also designed products, like digital games, and they carry and are surrounded by messages of various kinds that guide the child to use them in certain ways. Stephen Kline has studied toys as media, and he has noted that a toy does not operate in isolation, but rather in the context of extensive cultural knowledge, involving media, and fantasy worlds, as well as knowledge about surrounding everyday world. According to Kline, children are making sense of toys primarily through their “design-for-action”: figuring a new toy out involves finding what it can do. Kline’s case study involved observing Canadian boys aged 3-6, who were provided new “Rescue Heroes” toys, which were designed as non-violent and pro-social line of action toys, and as alternatives to the common fighting oriented superhero toys. When the boys engaged in free play with the Rescue Heroes toys, they quickly divided the action toys into “good and bad guys”, and started play-fighting with them, using the rescue tools like fireman’s axe or the grappling catapult as weapons. Only after

they had been provided an ad and a video to watch, explaining the names, traits, equipment use and rescue roles that define the Rescue Hero universe, the intended pro-social play scenarios were included in boys' play behaviours. Kline emphasises that "we cannot comprehend how action toys communicate to children without understanding first what the film or TV series and ads communicate about that toy's meaning to them". (Kline 1999.)

Next, the Lego video games will be addressed as interesting examples of hybrid toy-game products that rely both on pre-existing action scripts as well as on user creativity in inviting rich variety of different possible play behaviours.

Lego: Studying Transmedial Toys

Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga (2007) and *Lego The Lord of the Rings* (2012) are both examples of "transmedia storytelling" (Jenkins 2007) as well as cross-media franchise products. A transmedial storyworld is an assemblage of characters, storylines and milieu that extends beyond the boundaries of a single medium; Marsha Kinder, who coined the 'transmedia' concept, referred to the "dual form of spectatorship" that is at the root of popularity of transmedial phenomena such as Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles – the children are positioned both in passive and interactive modes as they are provided television series, commercials, movies, video games that fuel their ambiguous "consumerist interactivity" (Kinder 1993, 1-5). Henry Jenkins has most vocally touted the empowering aspects of transmedial storytelling, and he has emphasised that narrative-inflected play is nothing new, and points towards several examples from literature with children's play being based on characters and events picked up from books, myths, and fairy tales (Jenkins 2013). What is novel in the contemporary transmedia franchises is that they actively invite their audience into playful and creative participation, as well as into buying and consuming toys, media and merchandise of various kinds. Jenkins (2006, 95) argues that the fragmentary, dispersed character of transmedia storytelling makes it intellectually stimulating and social, due to requiring collective intelligence to figure it out. More critically, development of transmedia franchises such as Star Wars has been seen as a particularly efficient marketing strategy, contributing to the rapid increase of toy and video game sales from the late 1970s onwards (Kline, Dyer-Witthoford & de Peuter 2003, 102).

Lego bricks have been celebrated as creative and educational toys that have also been used for various therapeutic purposes (LeGoff 2004 & Owens & al. 2008). In his analysis of the evolution of Lego toy products, Stig Hjalvard (2004) has discussed the immaterialization and mediatization of these toys: in recent years, the Legos have gone through the interrelated processes of imaginization, narrativization and virtualization. The classic plastic brick, originally introduced in 1949, was an open-ended construction toy and the different Lego brick boxes sold in the 1970s and 1980s were still largely lacking any ready-made narratives; this changed during the 1990s when Lego not only started producing toy products that were essentially imitations of specific, high profile fictional universes such as the worlds of Star Wars, Disney or Harry Potter movies, but also started producing video games and movies that were based on Lego toy lines such as the Bionicle. Hjalvard emphasises that this transition towards mediatization of toys is also a move deeper into consumer culture, as consumer values, rather than engineering values, start to dominate the content of play (Hjalvard 2004, 60). The move created controversy, also inside the company. According to media reports, there was resistance from company traditionalists against both the story-based, multichannel brand approach adopted, as well as towards the war-like appearance of toys like the Bionicle characters, which ran against the Lego company values: “high-quality products, an emphasis on free play and encouraging the imagination, and no modern warfare or violence” (Widdicombe 2004).

Because construction toys are open for play behaviours of various kinds, there is naturally nothing to stop children from using classic Lego bricks to construct guns, or to play out violent or war-like scenarios. As noted in play research literature, this is also exactly what commonly happens in kindergartens (Holland 2003). The difference in playing with Lego Star Wars bricks, for example, nevertheless is that such narrativized toys carry with them links to characters, situations and storylines that are derived from the war-like mythology of Star Wars. Regardless of the violent or confrontational themes, this transition can be interpreted as lessening opportunities for creativity, or as Maaïke Lauwaert (2009, 59) has written, as a transition from play as construction process to “play with finished product”. It remains nevertheless questionable whether the changes in the toy design and product branding are enough to change the character of Lego play so that the imitation of pre-scripted media narratives would automatically replace children’s own creativity and constructive play. More likely outcome is that the mediatized Lego play will take different, additional forms that will co-exist with, and extend, the traditional forms of play. The children

creating and sharing of online videos that use Legos as tools and media themes as an inspiration provides one way of having a closer look into this development.

Such user-created videos are not emerging from a cultural vacuum, of course. To point towards the wider background in popular culture, it is important to note that the fictional universe of the Star Wars films, games and other franchise products are based on the conflict between forces of good and evil, and focused on the life-changing adventures of its protagonists. The close links between the main storyline of Star Wars and Joseph Campbell's famous monomyth study, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) has been often commented upon. Mary Henderson has discussed the "Jedi philosophy" and the mystical "Force" that underlies and ties together the Star Wars universe, noting that it incorporates many elements from Eastern philosophies, while maintaining the Western emphasis on the importance of the individual (Henderson 1997, 34). The mythic or "archetypal" quality of Star Wars may have played a role in its rise to popularity as an important element, not only in children's culture, but in the Western popular culture more generally. As described by Henry Jenkins, Star Wars quickly became the focal point of enormous amounts of grassroots media production, extending and sometimes also going against the attempts of control by George Lucas and his Lucasfilm corporation – most notably in the case of the controversy surrounding the "cease and desist" letters issued by Lucasfilm's attorneys aimed at shutting down Star Wars websites and fanzines publishing sexually explicit stories set in the Star Wars universe (Jenkins 2003).

From Toy Play to Children-Created Videos

The production of user-created videos with Lego toys and games is not a new phenomenon – as noted in Wikipedia and elsewhere in fan-updated web pages, the earliest known Lego stop motion videos were apparently done already in the 1970s with Super 8 film cameras. Today known as "brickfilms", the Lego animations have developed into a full-grown hobby, with its dedicated discussion forums, tutorials and video sharing archives (see www.brickfilms.com and www.bricksinmotion.com). With sophisticated scripts, camerawork, voice acting, editing and sometimes also CGI (digital special effects), many of such animated short films are clearly produced by adult Lego fans or adolescent, aspiring movie makers. Many films are nevertheless made by young children, as is evident from the voice acting and camera work, and the Lego

corporation has also actively encouraged and marketed the hobby of Lego movie making to children by releasing their own product line, *Lego Studios* (marketed in years 2000-2003), which included a toy-like video camera, video editing software and models designed for amateur movie making.

Collecting a sample of Lego Star Wars videos produced by children is relatively easy; there are over 280 000 videos shared in YouTube that fit the “Lego Star Wars” search description. Many of the most viewed videos are either commercially produced trailers, cartoons or high-quality videos created by older fans, but particularly when the popular English language videos are excluded, most of the remaining Lego videos are made by children – in my sample I focused on videos created by children using my native Finnish language. Rather than the millions of views gained by the most popular Lego videos, these small scale productions have typically gained only a few dozen or hundred views, maximum. Sometimes the video creators reveal their age in the video description texts or in the comment discussions, and in these animated Lego videos it appeared to be typically around ten years. The videos feature the toy Star Wars characters, vehicles and weaponry familiar from the games and the films, and generally focus on play-acted battles. Smaller scale videos present animated lightsaber battles between few of the key characters and often display severed heads, limbs and bodies cut in half in their finale. Sometimes red play dough has been applied generously to simulate splatters of blood, or intestines. The more ambitious productions have required the patient stop motion animation of tens of droid and clone trooper minifigures and their weaponry, often culminating in sizable animated massacres of Lego figurines.

The dominant stylistic features of such children’s videos include exaggerated violence, combined with a slapstick variety of comedy. The Lego body parts fly all over the place, bigger and bigger guns are brought into the battle, and the sound track is filled with curse words at the moments of heated battle or at surprising turns of events. This characteristic of children’s Lego videos is also something that the older brickfilm fans have commented upon. For example, in the Bricksinmotion.com discussion forum, in “Things you don't want to see in a brickfilm” thread, as the top sources of irritation are listed unoriginal videos, videos that contain nothing but violence, and “swearing for the sake of swearing”. As one member there commented: “The violence in so many brickifilms come across to me as a little kid shouting: "lol, killing people is kewl, right?!”

right?!". This usually happens in the aforementioned 'Starwars/Indiana Jones/Batman brickfilms.' More generally, the topic whether all content produced using Lego toys should be suitable for everyone appears to be one that divides the views of Brickfilms members, particularly since the films that belong to action, horror or war genres appear to be among the most popular in this community.¹

The design of Lego video games relates to similar kinds of negotiations: on the one hand, violence or play fighting is obviously something that many of the younger players are interested in, on the other, the Lego brand is carefully controlled to stay as a child-safe and predominantly non-violent one. There is nevertheless an on-going change in the expressive range that Lego products are allowed occupy. A study that compared and statistically analysed the facial expressions of all Lego minifigures released between 1975 and 2010 did find out that since 1989 the classic smiling Lego face has been partially displaced by other expressions, such as disdain, confidence, concern, fear and anger. Researchers' interpretations of this finding are related both to the commercial reasons and Lego including increasingly conflict oriented themes in their product portfolio, and also on the world of toy design becoming a progressively complex design space, "in which the imaginary world of play does not only consist of a simple division of good versus evil, but a world in which heroes are scared and villains can have superior smile". (Bartneck et al. 2013.)

Death and Evil in Lego Star Wars

The tension between non-violent or neutral play space and violently themed, conflict-oriented narrativized toy play is also apparent when the designs of digital Lego game products are examined more closely. *Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga* (2007; LSW) was developed by the British game studio Traveller's Tales and is commonly classified belonging to a puzzle platformer genre. The player is provided with a story-based framework where each of the six Star Wars episodes is divided into six playable missions. There are various challenges designed into navigating the game world, and getting into another game area might require both skilful jumping as well as using some special object or skill. Much of the environment and all the game characters are made of Lego bricks, and can be broken, as well as put back together. The destructive play of hitting and shooting almost everything in the game is rewarded with Lego studs that can be

¹ See: <http://www.bricksinmotion.com/forums/topic/13849/things-you-dont-want-to-see-in-a-brickfilm/> .

gathered in a manner that provides a similar continuous stream of achievements as in Nintendo's games Mario collecting coins or Sega's Sonic the Hedgehog collecting golden rings. The continuous score feedback provided for collecting Lego studs or coins, and the associated sound effects can be related to the techniques used in casinos, where the clanking sound of coins falling to the metal slot is designed not only to provide engaging auditory stimulation, but also to psychologically impact the player with the constant evidence of winning (Lucas 2003; Griffiths 1999; Schüll 2012, 63). Similarly, the Lego studs have money-like value in the Lego video games, where studs can be used to buy new items. While there are also several opportunities for engaging in construction play in LSW, the main emphasis in the digital game design is clearly tilted towards the pleasures of breaking things, as well as enjoying the speedy movement and combat style action. The ability to manipulate characters that are famous from movies and other media in the format of playable, animated Lego minifigurines creates also a distinctive parodic style that pervades Lego games. Rather than focusing on realistic simulated violence, these games provide opportunities for playfully anarchistic smashing of animated Lego toy characters and surroundings.

In the original Star Wars movies, despite their "Universal" rating, there are several elements that are not necessarily meant for small children; as the storylines developed, there were tragic and violent turns of events such as the death of Obi-Wan Kenobi and Luke Skywalker losing his hand while fighting Darth Vader. Taking the latter event as an example, it is interesting to have a look at the gameplay in LSW "Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back" mission "Cloud City Trap", which is based on the Star Wars storyline where Luke battles with Darth Vader, and after losing, is told by Vader that he is Luke's father. A moment of high drama in the film, the experience of game version is obviously very different. The Cloud City mission consists of navigating through several platform levels, solving the jumping, door opening and bridge building challenges, while simultaneously fighting with Darth Vader and many storm trooper enemies. Successful single-player gameplay requires simultaneous coordination of two playable characters, Luke and the droid R2-D2, and skilful use of their special abilities: while Luke can fight with the lightsaber and use the Force to assemble Lego bricks into bridges, tools and weapons, R2-D2 can fly short distances and use access panels to open doors. In the heat of the action, the player needs to manoeuvre her characters next to each other repeatedly to switch the control from one to another, and then back, in order to proceed using another set of abilities. In LSW, Luke losing his hand is not a gameplay event, but part of an animated cutscene, where the hand pops off at the

touch of Vader's lightsaber, and then the mumbling Vader character produces a family photograph to convey the message of him being Luke's father – the Lego figurines do not use intelligible speech in this game.

The death of a player character in LSW does not lead to game over, as the "death" of a Lego figurine results just them breaking apart, and then being regenerated, or automatically put back together again. In difficult situations the chaos of Lego figurines stumbling against each other, hitting and fighting and breaking apart is likely to produce comic or frustrating effects, rather than the lofty drama or tragedy, which the original Star Wars movies aspired towards. The excitement of mastering complex gameplay challenges is clearly different from the character and storyline immersed mode dominating the movie experience (Ermi & Mäyrä 2007). Yet, the presence of "evil" characters such as Darth Vader is decidedly having an effect on the LSW gameplay experience. Furthermore, after solving an episode in the Story Mode, it is possible to replay the levels using other playable characters, which also includes evil Sith Lords such as Darth Maul and Darth Vader. From a gameplay perspective, both Sith and Jedi can use lightsabers and similarly command Force to move objects; their differences relate more to the character design, aesthetics and the undertones that characters carry in the Star Wars mythology. The moral or ethical issues involved in playing an evil character are not actively promoted in LSW, and there are only few unique abilities in Sith characters that make them special, such as Darth Maul using a double-bladed lightsaber that improves his defense a bit. When interpreting the player reactions, it is worth noticing that the discussions about the "Cloud City Trap" mission in gamer forums do not focus on Luke's hand or Vader's father revelation – instead, the common player questions relate to solving particularly complex puzzles or finding the power brick of this mission. The "dark" potential of playing evil characters or even the anarchic pleasures of breaking and smashing become subordinate to the goals of gameplay achievements.

Laughter and Darkness in Lego The Lord of the Rings

Moving to the analysis of our second example, it is first important to note at first that J.R.R. Tolkien, the creator of Middle-earth and author of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) had personally experienced the First World War and these experiences, as well as his religious and philosophical views have been considered to have had an influence on his writing. The fundamental struggle

between light and darkness, good and evil is apparent in the manners and appearance of races such as orcs or trolls, versus elves and men. Like Sauron most notably, some of the evil beings in Tolkien's mythos appear almost Satanic by their supernatural origin, and never-ending pursuit of power, destruction and suffering. Some adversaries are marked by clearly demonic traits like the shadow-winged, fire-wielding Balrog who takes wizard Gandalf down on the Bridge of Khazad-Dûm. In my earlier research, I have pointed out how demonic monsters allow us to exhibit behaviours that we deny from ourselves, but which we find at the same time ambiguously attractive or tempting (Mäyrä 1999; 2011). *Lego The Lord of the Rings* (2012; LLoTR) is not directly based on the novel trilogy of Tolkien, but rather makes use of the dual franchise licences including director Peter Jackson's movie series as well as the Lego toys and brand. Tolkien himself resisted the conventional association of fantasy and fairy stories with children, and argued that when "adapted" for children, works of fantasy will be likely ruined as works of art (Tolkien 1982, 39). It is interesting to consider what effect the adaptation into a Lego game has had on the dark fantasy elements in Tolkien's mythos.

Also *Lego The Lord of the Rings* has been developed by Traveller's Tales and keeps to the similar basic game design principles as the earlier Lego video games. There are few important design and gameplay changes in LLoTR, though. The most noticeable is the extensive use of cut scenes with the original voice acting from *Lord of the Rings* movies. This changes the tone of the game considerably, and it makes it also less interesting to small children, particularly in non-English speaking countries – there is no Finnish language soundtrack available, for example, and the ability to read subtitles is required instead from the player. The PEGI age rating for this game is 7 as compared to 3+ of LSW. The puzzle and battle oriented platformer style play still is at the heart of LLoTR as well, but with a character item inventories there are also elements that are familiar from role-playing games. Tolkien's world is one the favourites of fantasy role-players, so the game design of LLoTR appears aiming to cater to two audiences: the young players of Lego games, as well as to the mostly older Tolkien and role-playing game fans.

Also here, the player is rewarded with explosive bursts of Lego studs for going around hitting and breaking the surroundings and the enemy characters in similar manner to LSW, but this time attacking and breaking the friendly minifigurine characters is disabled. This was one of the key sources of improvised, slapstick style fun in the multiplayer mode of LSW, as also documented in

some earlier research (Giddings & Kennedy 2008; Giddings 2009). The hybrid gameplay design and a very close link with the movie narrative does not allow similar degrees of anarchistic, or “childish” freedom in play that was the case in earlier Lego digital games, such as LSW. But there are still some minor elements of humour in the game design, as is evident when for example the gameplay interpretation of the Mines of Moria episode is taken into closer scrutiny.

The game sequence that leads to the fall of Gandalf starts from the tomb of Balin, the Lord of Moria, a sombre sight of which prods Gandalf to take off his wizard’s hat in a cutscene. Unfortunately he places the large hat on top of poor Pippin, who then walks around blindly, and then accidentally falls down to a well, producing loud noises, which eventually alarm orcs, trolls and the Balrog to their presence. This episode plays up the slapstick comedy aspect from the original story version, as in the novel and in the movie Pippin only drops a stone to the old Dwarven well – though to the same, unfortunate effect. It is the first gameplay challenge after this cutscene then to go around breaking objects to retrieve Lego bricks that can next be used to construct the cranking mechanism that is needed to lift Pippin out of the well. In the ensuing battle the game design follows the movie versions quite faithfully, requiring the player for example to use a small hobbit figurine-character to climb on top of a huge cave troll, and then switch over to Legolas the elf, and shoot the cave troll to the mouth with an arrow. This feat has to be accomplished successfully three times in the game, before the cave troll finally dies. Apart from small touches of humour, the overall tone in LLoTR is sombre and violent. The almost ritualistic repetition of game challenges in LLoTR converts the epic events from the *Lord of the Rings* storyline into prolonged play episodes. The fall of Gandalf at the climax of the Mines of Moria sequence is a good example of this. Gandalf will fall to the almost infinitely deep chasm beneath Moria, and the player is required to dive with a sword in hand to attack the falling Balrog in mid-air, and repeatedly keep on hacking at the demonic enemy while dodging its fiery breath attacks – then lose his grip, dive again, and repeat the attack and dodge manoeuvres until finally victorious. Apart from the toy-like Lego character design and few comic scripted elements, there are few clear markers that would signal this game to be designed primarily for children.

Good and Evil in Childhood Play

The exploration into the intersections of children's games and dark play reveals a field that is energized and torn by tensions. The problematic dualism of childhood as either a period of danger, ruled by destructive or amoral impulses, or as a time of innocence and spirituality, uncorrupted by the adult world can be traced back to the Romantic period (McGavran 1998, 12). The scholarly discourse of play research is partly participating in upholding this split image of child: on the other end are those who are involved in the projects of protecting or educating the child, in order to steer her away from the dangers of aggressive or otherwise questionable play. From the opposing corner herald those who may subscribe to the words of Bruno Bettelheim, for example:

Although these feelings toward violence are most understandable, when a parent prohibits or severely criticizes his child's gun play, whatever his conscious reasons for doing so, he is acting not for his child's benefit but solely out of adult concerns or anxieties. Some parents even fear that such play may make a future killer of the child who thoroughly enjoys it, but the pitfalls of such thinking are many and serious. (Bettelheim 1987.)

There is an obvious need for observational studies into the culture and social uses surrounding the actual dark play practices of today's children, inhabiting the powerfully commercialized and (trans)mediated world of digital play and franchise toys. This chapter has aimed to open up certain lines of inquiry for such further work. The observations made from Lego videos created by children and the commercially produced Lego video games point towards two alternative directions that such inquiry could adopt. Firstly, it appears clear that children are indeed quite capable of exaggerated and violent uses of toys, characters and story elements adopted from commercial media and products; some of their YouTube creations display the classic features of "carnavalesque form", with their emphasis on laughter, violence and hyperbole (Bakhtin 1984). The commercial Lego video game products on the other hand display much muted approach to such opportunities for transgression, most clearly in their evident desire to remove overt or realistic violence from products targeting children. There remains, nevertheless, traces and opportunities of free or anarchistic play within the polished game designs implemented into the *Lego Star Wars* and *Lego the Lord of the Rings*: the emphasis on playful destruction of surroundings, humorous disregard for the life or safety of toy-like characters and the combination of (play) violence with slapstick comedy are primary such opportunities. Seth Giddings has in his recent work emphasised how observation-based, microethnographic studies into children's play do not only open up new perspectives into what he calls "bad play", but also for setting up the

“protopolitics of play”: demonstrating how the ambiguities of power and transgression in play are intertwined in complex renegotiations of (‘active’ or ‘passive’) agency, and of new realities, generated in play (Giddings 2014, 139, 157).

There are obvious alternative directions the design of a digital game version of Lego bricks could have taken, most notably the one provided by the popular indie game *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011). Described by Sean Duncan (2011) as successfully striking a balance between two play modes, construction and survival, *Minecraft* originally gained popularity as an open-world, sandbox style construction game. Duncan, as well as many others have commented on the obvious similarities to Lego, as the world of *Minecraft* consists of bricks or blocks of various materials that can be mined and recombined freely into new, player-created constructions. As such, *Minecraft* has invited the attention of parents and educators as a digital toy suitable for children, with much educational potential. The contrast with the pre-scripted, violent and conflict oriented gameplay of Lego video games is clear. However, the freedom of user-created content is a double edged sword, as it will allow children to use the game for their own fantasies, in morally questionable ways as well as in those “do-good” ways that most parents would prefer. Like one anonymous parent wrote in “The Parents’ Guide to the Video Games” web site comment section to the *Minecraft* review:

There is violence. My son played it for a short while and there is 'killing' and the person comes back. There is violence, vandalizm [sic], they kill animals, steal from each other. There were some good things to it but perpahs [sic] it is just now more popular and the innocence has been taken out of it. There are instructional videos that are extremely vulgar. This needs to be updated. I am not sure if I would recommend this.
(Safevideogames 2012.)

The tensions and conflicts surrounding children’s behaviours, their toys and games and the directions where children’s more generally culture is heading, are not going to vanish any time soon. Most likely, the adult concern for the moral character of children’s play is eternal, as it is fundamentally based on our distrust and concern over our own character.

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