

Children's perspectives and attitudes towards Fortnite 'addiction'

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Abstract

Playing digital games is increasingly pathologized as an addiction or a disorder, but there is limited research into the impact of game addiction discourse on children who play digital games. In this article, we present results from a study into the digital play of twenty-four 9–14-year-olds, attending to our participants' perspectives and attitudes towards 'game addiction' and how it interacts with their play and identity. Focused primarily on the online multiplayer first-person shooter game Fortnite, we examine how children encounter and attempt to negotiate game addiction discourse and demonstrate how the discourse in and of itself produces challenges for young people whose interests and passions revolve around games. This article subsequently discusses how the discursive frameworks that are perpetuated in the media around 'problematic play' need to incorporate and be inclusive of the child's right to play, and the relevance of our findings to the study of media panic and children's critical media literacies.

Keywords

Fortnite, game addiction, gaming disorder, online games, youth cultures

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Introduction

Playing digital games is increasingly pathologized as an addiction or a disorder. In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association included 'Internet Gaming Disorder' as a 'condition for further study' in the fifth edition of the *Diagnosis and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*. More recently, in 2019, the World Health Organization included 'Gaming Disorder' in the *International Classification of Diseases*. These efforts are controversial, and scholars are opposed to attributing problematic gaming behaviour to a new disorder, citing the low quality of existing research (Aarseth et al., 2017; Przybylski, 2016); the tendency among some research to directly compare gaming behaviour and substance abuse disorders (Van Rooij et al., 2017); and the lack of consensus among researchers (Ferguson and Colwell, 2017). Critics also argue that problematic gaming behaviour is not an independent disorder (requiring diagnosis) but 'symptomatic of underlying issues, that are being miscategorized and misinterpreted as a separate disorder' (Bean et al., 2017: 391; see also Haslam, 2016), with clear consequences of misdiagnosis and harm, especially among children and adolescents (Aarseth et al., 2017; Ferguson, 2017).

Efforts to formalize 'gaming disorder' feed into contemporary media panics (Cohen, 1972; Drotner, 1999; Karlsen, 2013, 2015) about digital play, debates which scholars note have the potential to 'cause unintended harms to children' (Bean et al., 2017). Aarseth et al. (2017: 269) note that 'raising concerns around the dangers of video gaming is known to add tension to the parent-child relationship', and that the identification of a diagnosis may mobilize support for problematic 'gaming addiction camps' (Koo et al., 2011). Bean et al. (2017) have also argued that the various potential benefits of videogaming are at risk if play is misconstrued as addictive or problematic (p. 386). Nielsen and Kardefelt-Winther (2018) argue that the stigma applied to games and individual gamers do 'far more damage' to the psychological development of young people than videogames themselves do, since games form such an important part of children's lives. This perspective is upheld by game studies and media studies research into children's digital play, which has consistently found that gaming plays an important role in adolescent social relationships, family functioning, learning and cultures of childhood (Gee, 2007; Ito, 2009a; Ito et al., 2019).

While the concern of parents (see Aarsand, 2011; Mavoa, 2017, 2019) and voices of researchers have been highly prominent in these ongoing debates, it is important to understand young people's perspectives (Brus, 2013). There is limited research into the impact of the videogame addiction media discourse on children who play digital games. Cernikova et al. (2017) briefly note children's perspectives towards game addiction and excessive play in their study of European 9–16-year-olds' perspectives towards technology and health. They found some children were afraid of the impact of games, but others were critical of these perspectives based on their own experiences. Pål Aarsand (2012) has presented studies of teens (16–17 year old), in which he discusses how his participants work to avoid description as a 'problematic' player, as part of how they negotiate an identity as a 'hardcore' player. The most relevant work is by Brus (2013), who presented the results of interviews (conducted in 2010/2011) with three Danish boys (14–15 year old) who were categorized as 'addicted to games' (p. 368), but also described themselves as being or having been 'addicted' (p. 369). Drawing on Ian Hacking's (2006) concept of the 'looping effect' of classifications, Brus' work highlights how children interact with the designation of 'game addict' to negotiate their relationships, stigma, deviancy and past experiences.

This article critically frames debates around game addiction by examining how the concept of addiction impacts children more broadly, and not just those categorized as addicts by others. Drawing on a study into the broader digital play of 9–14-year-olds in Australia (conducted in late 2018 and early 2019), we examine their perspectives and attitudes towards 'game addiction' and how it interacts with their play and identity. Like Brus (2013), we see 'game addiction' as 'a social

norm that is created and maintained through social interactions in people's everyday lives' (p. 368). Focused primarily on the online multiplayer first-person shooter game Fortnite due to the timing of the study, we examine how children encounter and attempt to negotiate videogame addiction discourse and demonstrate how the discourse in and of itself produces challenges for young people whose interests and passions revolve around games. We highlight how these discursive frameworks may be having the effect of playing-up to the wider concerns about gaming and maximizing the unintentional harms that scholars have forewarned. In the discussion, we connect these consequences with children's 'right to play' (Apperley, 2015, 2017), arguing that discursive frameworks around 'problematic play' need to incorporate and be inclusive of this right. We also note how the appropriation and adoption of the term in children's digital gaming discourse highlights specific points of concern for research into media panics and children's media literacy.

Fortnite

Fortnite is a first-person shooter massively multiplayer online 'battle royale' game in which 100 players compete in a shrinking playable area to be the sole survivor, employing a range of weapons and strategies to overcome their opponents. Playable alone, in pairs and in teams of four, players scavenge weapons, traps, ammunition and medical supplies when they land, which are randomly placed in buildings and loot chests, introducing chance and variability to each game. Players can collect building supplies by destroying parts of the environment, which they can store and later use in different strategic ways to build structures to hide in, gain a height advantage or to lay traps. Various other modes of play, including offline single-player modes and a creative 'playground' mode, support a variety of ways to engage with the game.

As is increasingly common in the gaming industry, Fortnite is a freemium game. It can be downloaded and played for free, but players can make various in-game purchases to add-on to their playing experience. The most popular microtransaction is the 'battle pass', which is tied into the game's 'season-driven' release schedule. During each 10-week season, various events occur affecting the gameworld, and players with a battlepass are able to complete challenges to unlock rewards such as costumes for their avatar ('skins') or dances ('emotes'). As we've argued elsewhere (see Carter et al. 2020), understanding what Fortnite 'is' means also engaging with the abundance of Fortnite-focused content on YouTube and Twitch, which keep players up to date on this changing game world and overviews the best ways to complete challenges and the different ways of playing the game.

Due to the lack of blood and gore, the cartoony style of the game, and its status as free-to-play, Fortnite has been highly popular with younger players. It rapidly grew in 2018 to become one of the most popular digital games in the world, with a reported peak of 10.8 million concurrent players and 250 million registered players in March 2019 (Conditt, 2019). Industry research firm SuperData (2018) estimated that the game drew US\$2.4 billion in revenue in 2018, 'the most annual revenue of any game in history'. As Keith Stuart (2018) has argued, 'Fortnite isn't a game – it's a place [children] go with friends and not with Mom and Dad', likened to skateparks and Facebook (Hassan, 2018). Duos, Squads and playground modes offer players the opportunity not just to play cooperatively and for shared experience, but also for informal sociability.

This popularity also corresponded with a widespread focus in the media on Fortnite as a violent, addictive and problematic game. Various stories reported on attempted suicides (Petkar, 2018), incontinence (Barbour, 2018) and divorce due to compulsive and obsessive Fortnite play (Burton, 2018). Indeed, in June 2019 representatives from Epic Games (the creator of Fortnite) were asked to present at an inquiry into 'immersive and addictive technologies' held by the UK House of Commons Digital, Culture Media and Sport Committee. At the inquiry, Epic Games received combative questioning regarding key concerns such as extreme

cases of high-microtransaction spending and queries regarding time spent playing (House of Commons, 2019).¹ In the context of the controversial formal designation of ‘videogame addiction’ and contemporary media panic, this article provides an account of how 9–14-year-olds encounter negative media coverage of Fortnite, what they make of the concept of ‘addiction to Fortnite’ and how might this impacts on their experience of play.

Methodology

This article discusses the results from a study of children’s digital play, involving semi-structured interviews with young people aged between 9 and 14 ($n=24$, 17 boys, 7 girls) about their digital play practices and the appeal of the different digital games and related digital practices they engaged in, such as YouTube or live streaming. Due to the timing of the study (interviews were conducted between December 2018 and February 2019), Fortnite was the overwhelming focus for our participants, with 14 regularly playing the game and 6 playing it occasionally and/or with friends; only 4 participants reported never playing the game. Interest in Fortnite was also highly gendered: none of the girls we interviewed regularly played the game, and four of seven girls noted that they did not play Fortnite at all. The timing of the study also coincided with a peak in public concern about the game, which was discussed in 22 of 24 interviews.

Families were recruited from a diverse range of socioeconomic, education and racial backgrounds and geographical locations, including a mix of inner city and suburban children in Sydney ($n=9$) and Melbourne ($n=8$), Australia and children in semi-rural Australia in the regions surrounding Byron Bay ($n=7$). Participants were recruited for their waning interest in popular digital game *Minecraft* to gain perspectives of how children within this developmental stage start to enter larger ‘gaming cultures’, following on from survey research conducted by Mavoia et al. (2018). The intention was not to recruit participants who felt they were in danger of, or had indications of, addiction. None of our participants indicated their game play was problematic or described behaviours around Fortnite that could reasonably be categorized as ‘addiction’, although digital gaming was for some of the children we spoke to a source of tension between them and their parents or teachers. Transcribed interview data were analysed according to constructivist grounded theory techniques (Charmaz, 2014) with a focus on understanding the appeal of Fortnite to our participants, and their perspectives towards various elements of the game.

This present article focuses on a major theme that arose around addiction and the negative characterizations of Fortnite that our participants expressed or encountered. In a separate article (Carter, 2020), we have separately presented a broader overview of these participant’s experiences with Fortnite, where we provide an account of the appeal and experience of the game for younger players and situate this appeal within children’s changing play cultures. All names used in this article for research participants are pseudonyms. Human research ethics committee approval was granted prior to the commencement of data collection, and all relevant protocols and procedures were followed. We note here that while parents were not the focus of this study, as we were interested in children’s perspectives of growing up within and surrounding digital gaming, they were present for interviews as per our ethics approval. While some commented during interviews, they were not directly asked to participate.

Results

This section provides an overview of the ways in which the children we interviewed used the term addiction, and their attitudes towards the categorization of Fortnite as ‘addictive’. We want to reiterate that while they often described various games as ‘addictive’, or the play of other children as

'addiction', their use of the term was overwhelmingly not describing practices or behaviours that would meet a definition of addiction.² In fact, digital play held an important and positive position in most of our participants' lives as an enjoyable pastime and a key part of their social lives (see Carter et al., 2020). As we demonstrate, our participants were both aware of and engaged in addiction discourse resulting from media panic, but used the term in different ways.

Using and abusing (the term) addiction

The term 'addiction' was used in three divergent ways: to describe a favourite or preferred game, in reference to time spent playing and a way of describing a compulsion to play. The first use was a synonym for simply enjoying or preferring one game over others. When speaking with Harry (boy aged 11) about Fortnite, Marcus asked if it was his favourite game. 'No', he replied, 'I'm not addicted! It's my third favourite game!' In this use, the term addiction is synonymous with a game being appealing or fun. Participants regularly described Fortnite as being addictive simply 'because it's a fun game' (Travis, boy aged 11). Similarly, describing his previous interest in Minecraft, Rick (boy aged 12) described himself as being 'really addicted', because he was 'playing every night' and was 'amazed' by the game and learning about what he could do in the game world. Rose (girl aged 11), for whom gaming (and the digital in general) was not a big deal, summarized her lack of interest in digital games as, 'So, I'm not addicted, or anything', and Lucas (boy aged 9) described himself as 'not too much addicted' (he felt he played a 'good amount'), because he 'likes trying to do challenges and getting a victory'. When we asked Becky (girl aged 11) to explain why she thought that Fortnite was addictive, she explained that 'everyone wants to play it with their friends'. For these participants, addiction was a way of describing the appeal of a digital game.

'Addiction' was also used to refer to spending lots of time playing a game, in the absence of compulsion or harm. Discussing the Steam Shared Library feature, James (boy aged 13) described how his 'friends managed to get me addicted to' *Stardew Valley*, and similarly referred to his friend as being 'addicted to' *Hello Neighbour*, the language he used to describe the game they were playing most, at the time. Travis also initially described Fortnite as 'very addictive' because it was the game he mostly played when he was allowed to play games, and Sammy said it was addictive because he had heard of people 'staying up 'til midnight' to play the game ('because it's really fun and addictive'). Several of our participants drew specific links between the concept of addiction and time spent playing, with explanations of why Fortnite is addictive. For example, Todd (boy aged 10), Narrah (boy age 11) and Jake (boy aged 11) focused heavily on their attitudes towards screen-time limits and how they negotiated the hours they played.

Conversely, addiction to digital games was also used in reference to a compulsion to play or keep playing. Referencing Fortnite specifically, our participants principally pointed towards its monetization and time-limited challenges as being a key driver of its 'addictiveness'.³ As previously noted, Fortnite is arranged into 10-week 'seasons', during which things happen in the game world. Sammy suggested Fortnite was addictive because people 'get excited' about what new stuff is coming out, or happening in the game. This is monetized by a US\$10 'battlepass' that unlocks challenges that players can complete to unlock different skins and dances, with the rarest and most desired rewards requiring the player to complete many different challenges. Andrew (boy aged 9), Charles (boy aged 11), Ben (boy aged 10) and Carlos (boy aged 10) all pointed towards the desire to complete all the challenges in a given timeframe as being 'addictive' challenges: 'makes you kind of addicted to it 'cause you wanna finish it' (Carlos). The monetization of Fortnite was also linked closely to this for Charles, as he felt this desire to be seen to have the best skins was why other kids are 'stealing their parent's credit cards and buying V-Bucks'. It is worth noting that

completing every challenge can be hard for children, as they can often be difficult (requiring game skill) and time-consuming (requiring many hours to complete every challenge). Thus, addiction described as compulsion in these cases may also mean simply a desire to play beyond prescribed limits, but not necessarily to an unhealthy degree.

To illustrate, James described his 10-year-old brother Todd as ‘absolutely addicted’ to Fortnite, despite not actually being allowed to play it at home. James qualified his assessment of Todd as addicted because ‘he spends all of his time watching Fortnite videos and begs to go to his friend’s house so he can play it’. Rick believed that Fortnite was more addictive than the similar battle-royale game Player Unknown’s Battlegrounds (PUBG) which he played, feeling that unlike with Fortnite, he is ‘not going to be like, “I have to do another round”’ to complete time-limited challenges. Mike (boy aged 12) felt that ‘most of the people in our class aren’t addicted’ because, he explained, they would always stop after an ‘hour or two’ of playing. Liam (boy aged 13) also described Fortnite as a ‘very addictive game’ because he would play it when his parents were not home, when he ‘wasn’t supposed to play it’. In these examples, we see how addiction is conflated with a desire to play, and how this (normal and reasonable) desire to play is constructed by this discourse as forbidden or deviant. As Bean et al. (2017: 382) note, one of the issues with the formal designation of ‘gaming disorder’ is the lack of clarity around when something is a hobby enthusiastically engaged in, versus a problematic behaviour (see also Cover, 2006). It would be very unusual to use ‘addiction’ to refer to a compulsion to read another chapter of a *Harry Potter* book, or to want to play in the park for several hours. In these examples then, we see how children use the discourse of addiction to describe normal play, and so on, rather than as pathology. This reflects, in part, children’s agency in appropriating language and terms in the wider culture into their own culture (Corsaro, 2012).

Encountering game addiction discourses

Our participants expressed a variety of attitudes towards the idea that digital games are ‘addictive’, and the popular media discourse around ‘Fortnite addiction’ that they had encountered. They variously described seeing articles about Fortnite in the media on their own, on YouTube where it was discussed by content-creators, being forced by a parent to read articles about Fortnite ‘addiction’, and teachers negatively discussing Fortnite in school and in the classroom. For instance, Liam, who liked playing Fortnite more than any other game, described how his teacher told the students in his class that ‘we shouldn’t be playing Fortnite . . . it’s like bad for our education’. In some cases, the children we spoke to perpetuate this belief that Fortnite is problematic or addictive, particularly the children who did not play the game. Toni (girl aged 9), who thinks Fortnite is ‘stupid’ ‘for sure. Definitely. 10/10’ thought it was addictive, and that ‘it’s sad’; however, Toni did not actually know anyone who played the game extensively. Amber (girl aged 10), who played Fortnite occasionally, felt that it was addictive because she had heard from YouTube videos and a news article that ‘people keep playing it . . . [even when they don’t] . . . really want to play anymore’ and Rick thought that it is ‘obviously very addictive’ since children are ‘pooping themselves’ while they play, reflecting the most widely reported-on stories about Fortnite addiction (e.g. Barbour, 2018). Irrespective of whether game addiction should be formally designated as a disorder, these examples show how the mainstream discourse of game addiction permeates and spreads a stigma about digital play, even among children. However, children also drew on their own experiences. When asked if she had heard negative stories about Fortnite, Rajavi (girl aged 14) said she was ‘pretty sure it [addiction] is a thing’ because she felt like she had ‘struggled’ with it too, describing times when she played games (but not necessarily Fortnite) for long periods of time (3–4 hours) at once, and how other kids at school would keep playing even when told to stop by a teacher.

While such debates about addiction are clearly filtering down to children as young as 9 years in this study, other participants held different opinions of the game and gaming practices and many were extremely critical of the negative perspectives expressed in the media. For instance, Andrew (boy aged 9), whose mum makes him read articles in the news about Fortnite, said, 'you can find easy holes in them', and that 'it's not like ruining people's lives' as the articles suggest. Several pointed towards how rare problematic gaming is. Mike, whose teacher had spoken about Fortnite addiction in class, felt 'but that's the people that's addictive' not the game, since he and his friends did not play the game too much. Narrah, who had heard a story about someone who 'played heaps and they got sick because they didn't get up to eat or anything for a really long time', similarly felt that 'that was only one person out of the millions of people who play Fortnite'. When we asked our participants if they had seen these stories, a number generalized their negative attitude towards false or exaggerated articles about Fortnite to the media generally. For instance, Becky (girl aged 11) said 'that doesn't really happen . . . I don't really believe it, and the media'. Similarly, James said,

[A] lot of that media stuff is bullcrap they just came up with on the spot . . . the media is just bashing any other form of entertainment 'cause they want the attention on them, and so I just can't believe them that much anymore.

In the discussion, we will return to this finding, which we argue has significant implications for media-trust and teaching media literacy. We do note that the children who were most critical of the media reports on Fortnite addiction were all highly embedded within children's digital gaming culture on sites like YouTube. In these spaces, content creators often discuss (and mock) extreme and poor examples of Fortnite media reports, providing alternate viewpoints towards the controversy that adults and teachers might not be encountering.

In reflecting on the stories about Fortnite in the media, and the claims about Fortnite being addictive, time was mobilized as a key concept in understanding whether Fortnite play was problematic or not. Since our participants, and their friends, did not see themselves as playing that much (none more than 20 hours a week, most around 10 hours of game time), they did not hold the belief that the game was something they or their peers were addicted to. 'If you have a good schedule', Narrah felt, 'and not too much time on it, and you still go outside and play and be healthy, then its fine I think'. It was also common for the children we spoke to about the more extreme stories they had heard place responsibility with parents, like Rick who said 'parents should police more' and Shaun (boy aged 12) who argued, 'it's mainly up to the parents . . . I reckon you should be limiting how much they play on the thing'. As much as there was clearly a desire to play more, and there was a tension for some around completing all the challenges within the 10-week season, there was a positive attitude in this way towards the common practice of having clear limits on the number of hours they were allowed to play games or 'use screens'. We speculate that the extreme cases reported in the media, or the pervasiveness of 'screen-time limits' in the communities of our participants, mean children are more comfortable working within the limits that are placed with them.

Addiction discourse in children's lives: reflections and implications

The current media panic about children's digital play continues to grow, both in the context of popular discourse about 'screen-time' and children's media use and the formal clinical classification of gaming related 'disorders'. As a result of this public concern, games are being given increasing attention by regulatory bodies and lawmakers, with various efforts attempting to constrain play time and game design. In this article, we have contributed a contemporary account of children's perspectives towards, and appropriation of, the concept and discourse of videogame addiction. We have shown how the

term addiction is variously appropriated by children positively (to describe a favourite or preferred game), to make sense of their experiences (in reference to a compulsion to play) and to categorize their own play (in reference to time spent playing). We have also overviewed some of the ways that children are forming perspectives around and towards the claims that games and gameplay can be addictive.

Efforts to classify gaming-related disorders often focus specifically on excessive or problematic play, which none of our participants exhibited. However, since notions of ‘excessive’ or ‘problematic’ are fundamentally ambiguous, all digital play can become pathologized. As Cover (2006) has previously discussed, ‘time-spent-playing’ is a crude measurement for what constitutes ‘problematic’ play that privileges ‘real life’ over the ‘mythical “virtual”’ that rewrites passion and dedication as addiction (Cover, 2006). Nonetheless, we have also shown in this article how time becomes mobilized by children (as well as parents and teachers) to understand, denigrate and marginalize digital play practices. We argue that the results that we have presented here have three main contributions, which we discuss in turn here. First, we discuss the implications of these findings in the context of children’s ‘right to play’ (Apperley, 2015, 2017) and the consequences, seen in our participants, of play being classified as deviant. Second, we discuss the appropriation and adoption of the term ‘addiction’ in children’s digital gaming discourse to highlight specific points of concern and the implications for children’s media research. Third, we note the relevance of our research to broader scholarship and concern about media literacy in children and young adults.

On addiction, deviancy and the right to play

The widespread appropriation and adoption of the term addiction to describe children’s digital play practices – by children and by adults – impacts and has consequences for children. While previous studies of children and game addiction discourse were focused on older children, they highlighted how discourses of addictive or problematic play are taken up by children in the processes of negotiating their identity with others, and in relation to their engagement with digital games (see Ito, 2009b; Aarsand, 2012; Brus, 2013; Cernikova et al. 2017). For Aarsand (2012, interviewing 16–17-year-olds), this was noted in relation to how their participants negotiated their identity as a ‘hardcore’ player, where concepts of time spent playing and self-control were key to avoiding ‘troublesome identity positions’ (p. 970) as a ‘game addict’. In our results, we similarly see this same emphasis on time and self-control as key to how children understand and negotiate their play in relation to the possible categorization as a game addict. Furthermore, we note that our participants who were most embedded in digital gaming cultures did not rely on time spent playing as a metric for their commitment to games, but instead identified closely with specific genres, titles and YouTubers to situate their identity.

We warn that the key impact may lie in how children situate their identities as players (and as non-players) in relation to the possibility of being, or becoming, deviant. The broad and unspecific concept of ‘game addiction’ leads to all play (and thus, child players) potentially being deviant. This reflects the same ‘looping effect’ (via Hacking, 2006) that Brus (2013) identified in relation to children who were categorized as addictive by others, and how children react to the possibility of being categorized as a game addict. For children like Rose, this manifested as a strong rejection of digital games like Fortnite entirely, but for many of our participants it was a more difficult and ongoing process. Children are forced to negotiate the potential deviancy of their play, which is at the same time highly enjoyable, a key part of their social world and central to contemporary cultures of childhood. A potential negative impact of this could be that it facilitates children to identify as deviant in other ways, following the identification with their (otherwise ‘good’) play as deviant. This is further reminder for the need for parents, teachers and

policymakers to act cautiously. One of the key ways our participants escaped the classification of deviant play was in focusing on the hours played, and in their emphasis on screen-time limits, which become key resources to situating play as normal rather than deviant. This exemplifies a consequence of focusing on *time* as a metric for categorizing ‘game addiction’, where, in reality, total time is unlikely to be the most useful concept for parents, teachers and children to understand and negotiate digital play, and instead future work should focus on how children understand and negotiate the *compulsion* to play digital games in a healthy and sustainable way.

There are crucial consequences for this, in particular in regard to children’s right to play, a protected right in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), which recognizes ‘the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts’ (Article 31). This right is based on the recognition that play has clear intrinsic value to children as well as extrinsic values, such as in the development of cognitive and social abilities (Alanen, 2010; Lester and Russell, 2011). Tom Apperley has argued for the extension of this right to digital play, based upon its contribution to digital literacy, civic engagement and in association with the digital citizenship and digital rights movements more broadly (Apperley, 2015). This is not to say that children have a right to play in a general sense, but rather ‘it is a right for all children to have equal access to the same repertoire of play activities’ (Apperley, 2015: 195), and such a right can and should be extended to digital play (see also Apperley, 2017). While existing work in this area has typically focused on mobilizing such concepts to address inequalities in access to digital play, our results highlight how pervasive discourses of ‘game addiction’ – almost exclusively directed at digital games – threaten this right, establishing new forms of barriers to participating in digital environments and accessing the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits therein. We argue that discursive frameworks around ‘problematic play’ need to more prominently acknowledge and incorporate the benefits of digital play, and the important position digital play holds in modern youth culture.

This discriminatory effect of game addiction discourse towards the right to play are not felt equally, but also intersect more broadly with class, gender and racial discriminations. As Rob Cover (2006) has noted, the description of certain forms of digital play as addictive ‘operates within a nexus of other discriminations, including class’. For Cover, the stereotype of gaming as a middle- and lower class activity works to create discursive links between games and drug use, and their subsequent addictive risk. Here though, we argue that the expansive classification of digital play as problematic – exemplified in calls, for example, by members of the British Monarchy for games like Fortnite to be banned (Lanier, 2019) – exacerbate the unequal opportunities that children have for play. In general, children from low socio-economic status backgrounds have fewer opportunities to play outside and face more barriers to do so (Cronin-De-Chavez et al., 2019). Where many schools and communities have responded to Fortnite’s popularity with calls to ban the game, we argue that media panics that centre around ‘problematic play’ only seek to create further barriers of accessibility and infringe on children’s right to equal access to play.

On media panics and the appropriation of addiction

Children are typically the focus of media panics (Drotner, 1999: 596), as they negotiate unstable roles as ‘both victims and victors of the information age’ (Grimes, 2015: 127) and because ‘the notion of the “child” acts as both a nostalgic and futuristic device through which societal changes are portrayed and discussed’ (Selwyn, 2003: 351). Digital games have been a focus of different media panics for almost their entire history (Karlsen, 2015). From specific controversies surrounding games like *Death Race* (1976, which ‘encouraged players to hit pedestrians’) to *Grand Theft Auto* (1997-present, which ‘glamorizes violence’ among other concerns), children have been at the

centre of the public concern around the content of digital games. What has changed, however, is the clinical diagnoses of gaming related disorders by well-recognized organizations like the *World Health Organization* which change the nature of the media panic from speculative and specific, to grounded and broadly applicable to all digital play.

David Buckingham and Helle Strandgaard Jensen (2012) provide an excellent critical review of the use of moral panics theory, noting how the concept has ‘entered the mainstream of social debate’ (p. 413) and is in some cases used by researchers to legitimate particular theoretical approaches and agendas (p. 415). They note six issues, of which two themes become relevant in this case, and our framing of the media attention given to Fortnite as a panic. First, in describing the popular discourse about Fortnite as a media panic, we acknowledge that there is a ‘core of plausibility’ for the panic to be believed, and win support (Buckingham and Jensen, 2012: 418). Parents’ concern about their children’s Fortnite play is not just an emotional or irrational response (or ‘actually’ about the corruption of childhood innocence) but potentially reflective of genuine concerns. However, the negative media response to the game is exceptional, stoked by what Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) refer to as ‘contemporary legends’ (p. 134) – stories told as true and widely believed, and extensively reported and re-reported. For example, *The Mirror*’s June 2018 story of a girl, aged 9, with the title ‘in rehab for Fortnite addiction after becoming so hooked she WET HERSELF to keep playing’ (Barbour, 2018).

An issue arises in the broad appropriation of the term addiction, and the lack of specificity around what constitutes this ‘core of plausibility’. Where addiction is – for our participants – simultaneously a term used to describe length of play, the appeal of play and a compulsion to play, it is unlikely that children are sufficiently equipped to describe and distinguish between normal play practices and ‘problematic’ play. It is possible then, that this ‘core of plausibility’ is significantly exacerbated and distorted by the possibility that all digital play, and any desire to play digital games is indicative of an addiction. A ‘vertical expansion’, where a concept becomes applied to ‘quantitatively milder variants of the phenomenon’ that it attempts to describe (Haslam, 2016). The fault here is not solely with news media reporting, but with gaming culture more broadly too, which mobilizes the concept of addiction to advertise games to children. Many game adverts and descriptions positively describe a game as addictive or having addictive gameplay. This evolution of the term, and the ways that children wield the term, have co-opted it to be something ‘good’ which has implications for further research into both game addiction and children’s play more broadly. In the context of the ‘legitimate’ underpinning provided by organizations like the World Health Organization, such expansive and inclusive use of the term becomes increasingly problematic.

On media literacy

A further significant theme that emerged in our research related to the ways that children responded to the portrayal of Fortnite in the media, which has implications for media literacy in children and young adults. Sonia Livingstone (2004) defines media literacy as ‘the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts’ (p. 19), and notes that children are often disadvantaged in analysing and evaluating media content. While some of our participants uncritically adopted the perspective that Fortnite was an addictive game, others demonstrated critical media literacy in questioning the claims, accuracies and motivations of the media. We saw how children drew on alternate perspectives found on YouTube and other gaming sites to formulate their own perspective on the dangers associated with digital games, separate to the attitudes held by parents and teachers. This demonstrates an active and critical literacy around their own consumption of digital gaming and the broader digital media they engage with. Critical media literacy ‘is a core competency for engaged citizenship in participatory democracy’ (Mihailidis and Thevenin, 2013),

and it may be that media panics like the one surrounding Fortnite present as a rich opportunity for children to be motivated to engage with developing critical media literacy in school curricula and at-home discussions.

As we noted in the results, the children who were most critical of the media reports on Fortnite addiction were all highly embedded within children's digital gaming culture on sites like YouTube. In these spaces, content creators often discuss (and mock) extreme and poor examples of Fortnite media reports, providing alternate viewpoints towards the controversy that adults and teachers might not be encountering. With this point, we are not suggesting that these children hold a deeper critical media literacy but highlighting how they readily adopt the (often problematic, see Maloney et al., 2018) discourses of online media that connect closely to their worldviews. This emphasizes the importance of future research that should develop deeper understandings about the types of information children are being exposed to in YouTube, and how they might be encouraged and supported to develop similar critical media literacy in that new domain.

Conclusion: future work and limitations

This article has provided a contribution to contemporary debates around 'game addiction' by critically engaging with how children adopt, understand and negotiate the concept in relation to their engagement with digital games. We have shown that the term 'addiction' can have a variety of meanings and have drawn attention to how the expansive designation of digital play as problematic has the potential to have negative impacts on children. In the context of the child's right to play, we have argued that public debates and regulatory interventions around digital gaming need to more prominently acknowledge the benefits of digital play and the important place it holds in modern youth culture. In doing so, we hope to also emphasize the importance of future research on understanding how the 'legitimate' classifications of gaming disorder impact children, as well as on the important and close links between children's gaming and gaming culture online. While our study highlights the presence of issues and concerns, the explorative and semi-structured interview design with a non-representative sample of participants, all within Australia, limits the robustness of the work and capacity to make more extensive claims. This article is not intended as an exhaustive list of all of the ways in which addiction impacts children, and a more robust approach for this discussion would include – and compare between – both parent and child perspectives on this specific topic more deeply. Indeed, we would also note that these landscapes ebb and shift constantly with the ongoing development of digital gaming.

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Notes

1. This inquiry called the publishers of a wide variety of games, including EA Sports (who publish FIFA) and King (the creators of *Candy Crush*). Director of Marketing at Epic Games, Matthew Weissinger, argued that Fortnite is not addictive and that the use of the term 'addiction' 'masks the passion that our players have and the joy that they get from playing our game' (House of Commons, 2019: Q1116).

2. To clarify, here we understand addiction – according to the American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM, 2011) as

primary, chronic disease of brain reward, motivation, memory and related circuitry. Dysfunction in these circuits leads to characteristic biological, psychological, social and spiritual manifestations. This is reflected in an individual pathologically pursuing reward and/or relief by substance use and other behaviors. Addiction is characterized by inability to consistently abstain, impairment in behavioral control, craving, diminished recognition of significant problems with one's behaviors and interpersonal relationships, and a dysfunctional emotional response. Like other chronic diseases, addiction often involves cycles of relapse and remission. Without treatment or engagement in recovery activities, addiction is progressive and can result in disability or premature death.

3. Although one participant, Lucas, felt it was addictive because of the colour blue (which 'is an addictive colour'). Travis also thought it was addictive because 'its very bright . . . lots of colours'.

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