The tensions between empowerment and exploitation are especially heightened when discussing the activities of children and youth online. Discourse in the mainstream press around youth participation in online spaces wavers between anxiety and hope, and corporate frameworks and dataveillance practices structure many of these sites. Yet little attention has been paid to the underlying architecture of social norms that work with stereotyped visions of gendered play to provide the foundation for the interactions of young technology users. This paper investigates how domestic practices constrain and enable particular forms of user participation, focusing in particular on gendered access to digital play and notions of technology use. Using data from interviews with 25 young people aged 8–15 and their parents, this paper examines how social norms work in tandem with essentializing design to mutually constitute gendered expectations around technology use. It then considers how these young users and their parents in turn challenge and reaffirm these constraining and enabling norms through their practices.

**Keywords**  youth; digital games; gender; access; design; norms

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**Introduction**

Ninety-three per cent of North American youth aged 12–17 were active online in 2009 (Pew Internet & American Life Project 2009). The number of accounts in children’s virtual worlds has increased to a commensurate degree; virtual worlds consultancy K Zero (2008) indicates that 209 million accounts were registered to 10–15-year olds. Children’s virtual worlds market themselves to parents with the promise of offering youth safe and bounded online play in an
engaging digital setting. They claim to enable children to explore large virtual spaces and share their creative content with other users, but through strictly delimited means. From penguin avatars to colourful marketplaces, through game design, mechanics, and aesthetics, the code of these digital playgrounds works to attract children of both genders. The focus on attracting players of both genders does not translate to androgynous design (Fullerton et al. 2007), however; rather, the focus is on incorporating design elements that are understood as essentially attractive to both boys and girls, including nurturing pets for girls and competition for boys (Jenkins 1999). This segmentation of content in online worlds works in tandem with the enactment of technological practices as gendered in the domestic sphere to create very real constraints around online access and participation for boys and girls.

Video games, like the Internet, have their origins in the military project of ARPANET (Turkle 1984) and are built on computers and programming languages that require the hard mastery skills traditionally associated with masculinity, such as planning, logic, technical ability, and abstract thinking. The development of video games from these masculinist technologies, practices, and discourses serves to imbue these technologies with a patriarchal history that resonates in their design and use (Edwards 2003). However, this origin in the military–industrial complex (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter 2009) does not determine a culture of hegemonic masculinity in digital play. Rather, it is through a network of factors, including marketing, design, production, labour, and preferences (Carr 2006), that a notion of gendered technological play is constituted. If we understand code as law in the sense of the systems of the Internet regulating and providing boundaries around online participation (Lessig 2006), design becomes central to better understanding the constraints that children face in their online play. Code has been shown to work in tandem with social norms in virtual spaces, creating very real architectures of control and surveillance (Taylor 2006b). Using data from 25 semi-structured interviews with youth and their parents, I analyse how gendered notions of digital play are reified and challenged in the practices of young people and their parents around technological objects generally and digital play in particular.

**Code and gendered access to play**

Early Internet research focused on adult users and their behaviours, experiences, and practices, neglecting young users (Livingstone 2003). In recent years, however, academic and policy work in both North America and the UK have considered how new media used by youth, from digital play to the Internet to ICTs, have reshaped and fuelled new social networks, a sense of global citizenship, creativity, civic engagement, and identity performance (Buckingham 2007;
Salen 2007; Ito 2008; Kafai & Fields 2009; Livingstone & Haddon 2009a, 2009b). The possibilities of these new online realms are tempered by the observation that the Internet is a highly regulated space. As Lessig (2006) notes, code is law online. This is a significant consideration when examining the structuring of activities of young users in the design of digital playgrounds. Understanding code as an architecture of control highlights the ways design is not neutral. Code works to control by embodying values both substantively and structurally, in both software and hardware. In digital games, the way values are intrinsically embodied is in the rules that orient play. To be a successful player of Neopets, for example, you have to act like a good citizen in a capitalist world – participating in the activities of acquisition, exchange, and sale (Grimes & Shade 2005). Beyond the valuation of capitalist logic in its design, this site and others like it successfully differentiate and segment unique target demographics, particularly along gendered lines. This occurs through the melding of genres aimed at boys and girls within the code of the game but also beyond the virtual realm, with the licensing of different types of Neopian toys for girls (charms, stickers, and teddies) and boys (collectable cards).

The trend towards tailoring content to youth along gendered lines is not new; in constructions of children and youth, actual children are always implicated in classed, racialized, socially stratified, and gendered ways (Sefton-Green 1998). Youth make meaning in their interactions and engagements with texts, technologies, and social environments. These exchanges and activities are in turn subject to the scrutiny of parents, educators, and youth researchers, as youth is a constructed life phase loaded with the expectations, anxieties, and assumptions of adults. This is extended in various ways within the coded design for co-gender play in online realms, as code can be understood as embodying values, setting particular logics and asserting certain relationships. In terms of gendered design, the coding of preferences with a mind towards certain notions of what girls like and what boys like works in tandem with normative notions of intelligible gender performance (Butler 1990) to reinscribe particular visions of ‘correct’ play.

Lessig (2006) notes that it was the pathologies of cyberspace, including viruses, spam, and identity theft, that led to a public understanding of regulation as necessary. Youth gameplay has similarly been pathologized and thus has elicited the design of safely bounded digital playgrounds. Digital play has in the past few decades been the object of a moral panic in the media, following in a long tradition of panics around the texts and spaces of youth (McRobbie & Thornton 1995). This issue grows more complex as the technological context of Western youth encompasses variously convergent devices and media, including televisions, mobile phones, mp3 players, and personal computers, particularly as all of these can be platforms for both online and offline digital play. These artefacts and their uses can be unfamiliar territory to adults (Kjørstad 2009), and this unfamiliarity has resulted in a historical pattern of anxiety over emergent forms
and their cultures. Indeed, the question of maximizing opportunities while minimizing risk around kids online has become a central question:

Balancing empowerment and protection is crucial, since increasing online access and use tends to increased online risks; conversely, strategies to decrease risks can restrict children’s online opportunities, possibly undermining children’s rights or restricting their learning to cope with a degree of risk.

(Livingstone & Haddon 2009b, p. 4)

Digital play has been the object of sustained focus in both the popular media and academic research since the release of the 1992 fighting game *Mortal Kombat*. Despite the lack of empirical evidence linking youth aggression to video games, discursively masculine play in particular is framed as a risky activity, as digital games are seen as propagating and teaching hyperviolent and hypersexual masculinities in their representations of men and women (Alloway & Gilbert 1998). This moral panic, with its strong media effects message, circulates anxieties about gender, youth, and technologies, particularly about the state of young masculinity. The anxiety over deviant boys and their digital toys aligns with the discourse of ‘the death of childhood’ that Buckingham (2000) identified when examining mass media and popular press coverage of contemporary childhood. Here, fears revolve around a perceived weakening of boundaries between childhood and adulthood and a perceived too-early move into maturity. New media, according to this discourse, immerse children in symbolic environments wherein they are passive rather than active, leading to dehumanization, weakened morals, and violent, destructive behaviour.

The other vision of childhood around digital technologies, according to Buckingham (2000), is that of the ‘Electronic Generation’, where new media are seen as having a utopian potential for children, allowing them endless access to information, educational tools, and opportunities for creativity. These constructions tend to be gendered, with fears and anxieties around violence, deviance, and desensitization revolving around boys and hopes of a better digital future oriented towards girls. Both constructions highlight and connect the mythologies of childhood and technology and operate through a technologically determinist approach to new media and a media effects understanding of the agency of children. They also tend to frame boyhood as a particularly troubled and problematic zone while positioning new media as utopian for the creative, social and educational possibilities they offer for girls.

In many ways, virtual worlds provide a salve to these adult anxieties, with sites such as *Club Penguin, Whyville, Neopets*, and *Webkinz* responding to the furor over video games with safely bounded hybrid media spaces. These digital playgrounds allow youth digital play, along with text-based communications, content creation, and social networking. These activities occur with all the assurances of strictly delimited chat, content carefully designed to be appropriate for
everybody, and the familiarity of branding provided by the likes of The Walt Disney Company.

The response of these websites to the concerns over video games as technologies of masculinity, and the reasons for this response, have their origins in a particular paradigm of childhood play. In this vision, the play of children needs to serve a higher purpose, with its value located in creative, personal, or educational development (Narine & Grimes 2009). Play is not simply for leisure but purposeful, intended to lay the groundwork for the proper development of a productive adult. This is evinced not only in the channelization of funding towards digital games with educational content, but also in the correlation of more men than women playing games with low numbers of females in higher education and careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Hughes 2008). This understanding of games as inherently masculine and of girls needing to be cultivated in the unlikely activity of gaming has contributed to the push for the design of girl-friendly games. These games are designed to appeal to female players, focusing on what is understood as attractive to feminine tastes, such as slow-paced, gentle, nurturing, collaborative play and aesthetics characterized by shades of blush and violet, known as Pink and Purple games (Kafai et al. 2008). Jenkins and Cassell (2008) note that by trying to attract girls to games with design focusing on cute aesthetics, slow-paced storytelling, nurturing, and games themed on dolls, babies, fashion, and pets, designers potentially ghettoize young girls into delimited spaces of identification with traditional values. This in turn essentializes both boys and girls in how their preferences are determined in game code.

This vision of digital play as a masculine activity in the media and in academic research runs contrary to the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2008) report that digital play is an activity shared across 99 per cent of boys and 94 per cent of girls. Yet discursively the video game player is most commonly framed as a white, middle-class, technologically proficient, socially isolated, and violently inclined masculine subject. Conceptualizations of gender thus are central to discussions of youth and digital play, particularly in how the culture and production of digital games construct, produce, and exclude or include certain participants, particularly via game content and mechanics. But focusing on changing content is quite simply textual determinism, and Taylor (2006a) argues that rather than changing content, we need to understand gendered gaming as about power asymmetries enacted in digital play. What needs to be considered is the masculine cultural capital of digital gaming, and how heterosexual masculinity is invested in the performance of technological mastery, resulting in the exclusion of female players (Taylor 2005). One way of doing this is to move away from examinations of content and gendered preferences in isolation from the spaces in which games are played and gender is enacted through bodily performances. In this way, digital games can be more fruitfully understood not as texts but as technologies.
Dovey and Kennedy (2006) posit that notions of digital play as the domain of boys produce a privileged set of play preferences and practices that are shaped by understandings of common game mechanics as inherently masculine, such as competition, aggression, and speed. This division is reflected not only in the dominant forms of gaming versus those generated in the pursuit of girl games, but also in the implicitly gendered division of hardcore and casual gaming, where new categories are established for old patterns (Carr 2005). While it would be fallacious to assume that all hardcore gamers are male and all casual gamers are female, there is certainly derision, particularly in gaming paratexts such as game magazines, websites, and advertising (Consalvo 2007), of casual gaming as an inferior form of gaming. This disdain is very important when we consider burgeoning terrains of play, not only virtual worlds but also the Nintendo Wii, rhythm games, iPhone apps, Facebook mini-games, and puzzle games, which have opened access to gaming to more diverse audiences but are still disparaged in the hierarchy of gaming. This is why the deriding of casual games versus hardcore games can be seen as another way of ghettoizing feminine gameplay. The structure of casual games such as those on Pogo, from PopCap Games, in online communities for kids, or in the quickplay of console games, attracts more female players because they are quick to pick up and learn, they do not require hundreds of hours of assiduous play, they often can be played on the move, and they allow players to log off quickly if work, childcare, or household tasks interfere. These gameplay features make these kinds of play, with their novel types of engagement, more attractive to the demographics that cannot sustain seeking a save point in 50+ hour games or learning the intricacies of successful World of Warcraft end gaming. Thus, hierarchies of play can reinforce the understanding of video games as predominantly masculine tools and threaten the cultural intelligibility of femininity when women and girls attempt to play. Indeed, we can see criticism particularly surrounding the Wii console games, with the meme of the Wii Fit girl, a young woman hula hooping in her underwear filmed from behind for the viewing pleasure of the voyeuristic male gaze. This extends the trend of framing the females that do partake in gaming and gaming culture in public spaces as exotic and/or sexualized, as exemplified by booth babes, professional gaming leagues, and hypersexualized female avatars.

Lessig (2006) notes that ‘too many miss how different architectures embed different values, and that only by selecting these different architectures – these different codes – can we establish and promote our values’ (p. 77). But what gender and game scholars have noted is that these values stem from a complex network of factors – including but not limited to a focus on protecting youth, promoting rationalistic values in play, and re-embedding essentialist feminine and masculine preferences into the design of technological playgrounds. In what follows, I will showcase a study where I focused on the ways these values
and norms are located within an assemblage of technology and gender, significantly informed by access and experience within the domestic sphere.

**Method**

The study consisted of semi-structured interviews with fourteen children aged between 8 and 15 and one or both of their parents, with a total of 25 participants. A breakdown of participating subjects can be found in Table 1. Subjects were elicited through a snowball sample in the central and suburban areas of Toronto and Montreal, two major cities in Canada. These interviews were conducted in their

| Family            | Pseudonym | Family position | Age |
|-------------------|------------|-----------------|-----|
| The Kalifa family | William    | Father          | 58  |
|                   | Catherine  | Mother          | 52  |
|                   | Benjamin   | Son             | 14  |
| The Purcell family| Olivia     | Mother          | 42  |
|                   | Tyler      | Son             | 9   |
| The McKinney family| Adrienne   | Mother          | 40  |
|                   | Kelsey     | Daughter        | 13  |
| The Nowicki family| Lise       | Mother          | 33  |
|                   | Marc       | Son             | 8   |
| The Jones family  | Dean       | Father          | 41  |
|                   | Mackenzie  | Daughter        | 8   |
|                   | Quinn      | Son             | 12  |
| The Francis family| Clare      | Mother          | 45  |
|                   | Katie      | Daughter        | 8   |
|                   | Mason      | Son             | 14  |
| The Swain family  | Regina     | Mother          | 45  |
|                   | Chloe      | Daughter        | 13  |
|                   | Naomi      | Daughter        | 15  |
| The Parks family  | Marjorie   | Mother          | Not given |
|                   | Noah       | Son             | 15  |
| The Cochrane family| Miles     | Father          | Not given |
|                   | Cody       | Son             | 8   |
|                   | Jeremy     | Son             | 15  |
| The Eddisford family| Sebastien  | Father          | 39  |
|                   | Marcel     | Son             | 13  |
homes to allow for observations of play and the location of technologies in the
domestic realm. Questions revolved around practices of broader technology
use in the home as well as around practices related to online and offline
digital play in particular.

Due to the snowball method of recruitment, the profile of subjects was
skewed towards the middle-class and urban and suburban dwellers, with few
working class and no rural families included. The object of the interviews was
to gain an understanding of how youth and their parents negotiate their technol-
ygy use in the domestic realm. Kjørstad (2009) undertook a similar study on
Norwegian youth, positing that an ethnographically informed study of the con-
textual factors around youth technology use, particularly video games, allows for
the study of children that emphasizes their experiences. Conducting research with
rather than on children allows for an understanding of them as social beings
rather than as social becomings, which is necessary in light of the cyberutopian
and cybercritical perspectives that flatten their experiences and viewpoints.

The interview questions focused on the perspectives of parents on the
hopeful and fearful rhetoric around youth play and understandings of technologi-
cal play as inherently masculine. Parents were thus questioned on their kids’ uses
of technologies, their own general sentiments about youth, technology, and
gender, and about their thoughts on the moral panics and societal anxieties
around youth technology use. They were also questioned on their own under-
standing of their child’s preferred technologies and their cultures, as well as
on the regulatory practices enacted in their home.

In the interviews with young people, the first part of the interview consisted
of a few basic questions on the interviewees’ preferred websites and regular
Internet habits. The second part of the interview involved participants’ obser-
vation as they engaged with the technologies, sites, and communities they men-
tioned. The third part of the interview consisted of more specific questions
oriented towards the observed digital play, focusing on practices, interactions,
avatars, and representations, particularly related to gender.

Interviews and participants’ observation typically took between 45 and 60
minutes per participant and were recorded with a notepad and a digital recorder.
The audio files were then transcribed and coded according to emerging themes
for the purposes of comparison. Data analysis occurred concurrently with data
collection, which allowed the researcher to refine the interview questions,
which at first focused on gender performance within game spaces and developed
to include broader questions on gender performances in the family around tech-
nologies more broadly.

All interview subjects have been anonymized, with coded documents used to
protect all identifying information. All participants have been attributed a per-
sonal pseudonym as well as a familial pseudonym to highlight the relations
within the family, and all identifying features have been excluded.
Findings and discussion

The family acts as a significant node in the network of technological competence. As the domestic realm is an important space in which access to games and other technologies is enabled or constrained, it is vitally important that parents as well as youth speak of gendered differences in uses of not only games but also technologies more broadly, including social networking sites, the Internet, cell phones, and portable music devices. Adult participants enacted gender in the household through a range of practices that often constructed mothers as technologically incompetent and fathers as the experts in this domain. These enactments of gender and technology fell in line with stereotypical visions of masculine proficiency and feminine ineptitude and characterized technology use as in line with essentialized interests, such as a feminine proclivity for socializing and communicating and a masculine fascination with digital play. The ability to go beyond the screen via activities such as hacking, illegal downloading, and creating content tended to be understood as something to be cultivated in sons and/or admired in fathers, and not as the domain of daughters or mothers.

The gendering of technological practices happened in a variety of complex ways. With only one exception, all of the young people interviewed, both male and female, participated in forms of digital play, on mobile devices, computers, and consoles. Many of the boys and girls participated in a wide range of genres from virtual worlds such as *Club Penguin* to networked first-person shooters such as *Halo*. This was partly because many participants were introduced to their favourite games by siblings and extended family members, and thus played many of the same games. Kelsey, for instance, played *The Sims* and *Wii Sports* at home, but whenever she went to visit her male cousins she played *Halo* with them. She also played console shooters with her parents, and her mother Adrienne related her pleasure in the play: ‘We play some of her games together on there. I like the race cars, nobody else in my house likes the race cars except me!’ Mackenzie and her older brother Quinn were both fans of *Club Penguin* as well as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, which they played together and with their father Dean. This runs contrary to the vision of the teenage boy playing first-person shooters alone in the basement; in many homes there was a much more diverse terrain of play practiced by participants.

However, despite the fact that within the domestic sphere both girls and boys, as well as fathers and mothers, were often game players, descriptions of technological competence often fell in line with discursively constituted stereotypes of masculine proficiency and feminine ineptitude. Girls who played these fast-paced, violent games such as *Halo* and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* had their technological competence and non-normative gameplay described as exceptional (‘she’s the only one’), inferior (‘she still needs my help’, ‘I still pwn’ Mackenzie’), and abnormal (‘Chloe has a boy brain’, ‘Kelsey’s a tomboy’,...
‘she’s not like other girls’). Furthermore, female participants would often have to be prompted to include stereotypically feminine gameplay such as the play of Farmville and Wii Fit within the terrain of gaming in their domestic spaces. Lise, for instance, denied being a game player, and was embarrassed when her son Marc referred to her high score in Wii ski jumping and her morning Wii Fit sessions. Marc spoke of the impossibility of defeating his mother’s expertise in the jumping, but she brushed it off with a laugh and the comment that ‘Oh, that’s saying too much’. For Lise, the play of games was trivial and simply for entertainment, and she did not have enough time to devote to these activities as a busy mother. This speaks of the gendering of leisure time, wherein mothers are constituted as non-gaming subjects partly because of the difficulties they experience in carving out moments for leisure in the home (Madden 2009). Lise’s own denigration of this speaks of the ways in which women participate in the gendering of leisure time around their subjectivity as a good mother. Olivia similarly spoke of losing interest in family play of the Wii, partly because of her commitments as a graduate student ‘Homework, I have too much homework’. In this way, we can see that the play of female family members could be rendered less visible both by the players themselves and by external feedback problematizing this play.

Participants also enacted a hierarchy of technological competence. When competence was related to sociality, consumer activities, or word processing, such as texting, chatting, downloading via iTunes, and working in the Microsoft Office suite, it was ranked a lower status than other kinds of activities, such as knowledge of network administration, bypassing system blocks, and being able to physically modify computer parts. Naomi, for instance, spoke of the technological expertise of her sister around video games, and had to be prompted about her own. Only when I mentioned the cell phone did she note ‘I love my cell phone. My cell phone is my baby’. Regina divided the interests of her daughters quite explicitly in gendered ways, noting Chloe’s interest in video games as the byproduct of her ‘boy brain’ and Naomi’s focus on communication, social status, and makeup as the consequence of her ‘girl brain’. This description was not necessarily echoed by her daughters. Chloe, for instance, enacted a lack of proficiency around the Xbox and the PlayStation, noting that she found their controllers overwhelming: ‘there’s too many buttons’. Naomi, who was described a non-gamer by her mother, noted she enjoyed playing the Wii: ‘It’s a fun way to kind of work out’.

When parents were questioned about monitoring and surveillance of technology in the home, their answers reflected how the regulation of technology use in the household was a site for reasserting masculine dominion over what Olivia called ‘all that stuff’ – anti-virus software, consoles, computer system administration, cables and wires, etc. – what Edwards (2003) terms hard mastery. Olivia noted that her husband ‘has got things hooked up in a very complex way that I can barely figure out, so Tyler seems to be able to, to manage those really well. And he gets it set up for his sister and, and he’s
really good about doing that’. Here both the father and the son are seen as masters of the technology, taking responsibility in setup and assisting the less-knowledgeable female users. When asked about the use of surveillance software to regulate online play, Lise expressed an interest but a lack of proficiency in mobilizing the programme: ‘I think I would [like to have it] but I don’t really understand how they work well. I think my husband is the one that deals with that stuff more’. Despite this lack of comfort with certain technologies, mothers determined and enforced a great deal of the rule-setting around video game, TV, and computer time. Olivia, for example, determined how much time her children could spend on ‘screen-time’ but when asked about how the family determined which games to purchase, she deferred to her husband’s expertise on the appropriate media for the children – ‘I trust [my husband] too, cuz he’s more familiar with how the games work and how to play them, I trust that he’s monitoring in that way’. In this way, we see a division of familial media regulation along the lines of content (the terrain of the father) and structure (the domain of the mother). The relegation of gaming and computing technology in the household to masculine expertise, either husband or son, whether self- or externally imposed, speaks of the ways female participants enacted normative gender roles around technologies.

Mothers also often spoke of the discourses of fear around games and online interactions more broadly, evoking the figures of the paedophile and the bully, and justifying the uses of ‘Nanny’ programmes, surveillance of play, and a variety of other practices as an extension of their maternal protectiveness against dangers to the home. Adrienne was particularly concerned with bullying, noting ‘there’s been a few issues around girls especially being really nasty to one another and it all being written down . . . with MSN. So I deleted it from the computer’. The violent content of video games, as constantly discussed in the media, was also a common concern, as Catherine notes ‘anything that I pass by that, that something is getting blown up or shot . . . . All those bother me, all of them’. The most frequently cited concern was that over the threatening stranger, a figure that often limits female access to online technologies (Cassell & Cramer 2008). As Lise noted, ‘On Facebook or those chat systems . . . you never know exactly who’s typing.’

No matter how technologically proficient, mothers without exception implemented policies in the household in response to an idea of technology as inherently dangerous. This included ‘helicoptering’ around the computer to keep an eye on what sites children were visiting, checking the web history, reading MSN conversation logs, joining Facebook to keep an eye on their kids’ Walls, and scrolling through text message records. Fathers tended to speak of the role of upbringing in rendering these practices unnecessary, and also the impossibility of truly blocking content they did not want their kids to see. William, for instance, said ‘It’s impossible to regulate. You can get anything you want. And so what you have to do is work on the kid’.
Dean similarly noted ‘I feel that I’ve told them what is appropriate and what isn’t and they should be respectful of that. I’ll give them the opportunity. Basically, I trust you guys and until you prove me otherwise, I’m going to keep trusting you’. He, however, did admit to wanting to have all the computers in the rec room so that he could see what they were doing, ‘with Quinn and especially with Mackenzie, too, being a girl and whatever she’s getting into on there’.

Thus, technological proficiency and comfort is not just a discursive construct; it is perpetuated in concrete, situated ways through the local practices of participants, which in turn reaffirm and circulate particular subject positions around gendered technological use. Mothers in the study not only had to grapple with their own multiple realities as ‘good mothers’ and ‘feminists’ (among many others), but also had to operate through the practices that were intelligible in and thus constitutive of their subjectivities, and turn away from those that were unintelligible. This is very well demonstrated by the overwhelming popularity of the Wii console among those I interviewed, with mothers often speaking of the images of families playing together and a vision of their own participation in play, which was never described around the other leading consoles. For instance, Olivia said ‘I bought the Wii because it looked like it had really fun games. It looked way cooler because I had seen the tennis and those sorts of things’. Catherine, who spoke dismissively of video games generally, was enthusiastic about this system: ‘The Wii’s physical. You get physical . . . . It’s the only one you could really take part in’. Though the actual play of mothers did not always coincide with their hopeful dreams of family bonding when purchasing the system, as Olivia demonstrated when she spoke of losing interest in the system, what was interesting about the purchase of the Wii console was how the marketing around this device allowed for the position of mother as a player to become intelligible, and how this led the boys and men in the family to denigrate the system to a lesser status than their PS3s and Xbox 360s. As Dean said when asked about why he only had the two generations of Xbox in his home, ‘The Nintendo has always been more of a kid’s oriented system’. Nintendo historically has differentiated itself from competitors by targeting other demographics rather than the ‘ideal gamer’, the 18–35-year-old male from a middle class background (Kline et al. 2003), thus deviating from the conventions of the industry to perhaps accrue a viable market in girls, women, and families. In response, it seems video game players have responded by reifying a particular vision of ‘real’ gaming, the hardcore gaming and casual gaming divide, where new categories are established for the older patterns of dividing girl games from boy games (Carr 2005). Thus, hierarchies of play often reinforce the understanding of digital play as a predominantly masculine activity and threaten the cultural intelligibility of female players.

In this way, subjects constituted their practices as intelligible through a network of codes and norms, ranging from marketing to game design to discursive formations around video games. Not only do the subjects divide games along
the lines of casual and hardcore, but game players are also described along normative gender lines as expert and novice, and technological practices are described similarly as active and passive through the familiar pattern of feminine consumption and masculine production (Shade 2002).

Conclusion

What emerges from these interviews is the complexity of the terrain of technology access, use, and proficiency in the home. When sons, daughters, mothers, and fathers describe a gendered component to gameplay and technology use, it is through a dynamic and complicated set of practices and discourses, which can be clashing and contradictory. While participants did engage in essentializing descriptions of masculine and feminine preference, assuming and reifying what these categories refer to, they also troubled these subjectivities in turn, with daughters admitting to ‘loving’ Halo, mothers joining in an evening of shooting games with their husbands, and fathers encouraging the play of Call of Duty 2. Despite a corpus of research affirming a feminine distaste for masculine mechanics and content, girls and women are playing, and they are playing with willing male players. However, this project has also shown that ‘online time and use fits with and complements other aspects of an individual’s everyday life’ (Haythornthwaite 2001, p. 364). As Allen (2010) notes, Internet activities do not occur outside of everyday life, but in close interaction with unmediated human behaviour. When gameplay is seen as the domain of the non-normative female player, when mothers deride their own knowledge and defer to masculine expertise, and when daughters are understood as threatened by the corrupting stranger on the Internet, participants reaffirm historical stereotypes and gender norms not only around the game player but also around the technological subject more broadly.

As the above outline of the study results has shown, essentialized design and discourses of masculine play work in mutually constitutive ways with social norms around gender and technology. This complex topography of gendered access is enacted through domestic practices that constrain and enable particular forms of technological expertise. While it is true that any agency exhibited by players is enacted within the constraints of both game design and industry elements, which shape particular readings, ways of playing and seeing, and activities (Consalvo 2007), we must address the impact of the social relations within the domestic sphere on access as this space is a primary one for children to gain experience as well as a level of comfort and proficiency with technology. Indeed, gendered access to virtual realms is not limited to considerations of play. We must consider how young people are understood as technology users in light of all questions of empowerment or exploitation and participation or consumption online. Whether young people are engaged or disinterested in
politics online (Wells 2010), in reading commercial content in negotiated and resistant ways (Grimes & Shade 2005), or in authoring subversive or creative identities online (Thomas 2007) depends in pivotal ways on how access is negotiated in the domestic sphere and how their practices are enacted in the family, in conjunction with the coding of gendered preferences through site design. Indeed, as even a brief analysis of the lived realities of youth and parents shows, youth participation is shaped by a dynamic and heterogeneous network of norms, discourses, texts, images, and power relations (Law & Hassard 1999). Gender and digital culture needs to be examined as an assemblage of production, culture, marketing, content, mechanics, preferences as well as context, access, and milieu (Carr 2005, Jenson & de Castell 2008, Taylor 2008). Future examinations of youth participation online, ranging from digital play to political activity to creative development, should engage with this landscape of factors rather than resorting to binaristic discourses of empowerment and exploitation.

Note

1 ‘Pwn’ is a gamer variation of ‘own’, which refers to the domination of one player by another. The implication is that one player is conquered and/or embarrassed by a more skilled player.

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