

Facing the future

Online sociality and emerging forms of play among children in Norway

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Abstract

Young people in Norway have never experienced a world without the internet. This thesis explores uses of digital technology in children's lives, and draws on fieldwork among eight- and nine-year olds in Kristiansand to identify emerging forms of sociality and play in online and offline literacy practices. In Norway, where internet access is near universal, children's immersion into digital environments raises new questions concerning central theoretical concepts in anthropology. What conceptual tools are required for making sense of the ongoing merging of online and offline sociality? How can we deal analytically with the rapidly shifting contexts of children's play? The thesis addresses these questions through an ethnographic investigation of how children employ avatars—or digital bodies—as they playfully inhabit online worlds with their friends.

Play is an elusive phenomenon; easily recognizable, yet highly resistant to definitional attempts. This thesis employs a phenomenological approach to play, and draws on children's engagement with masks, avatars, and toys to develop a concept of play understood as an attitude of openness to the new and unexpected. Far from being limited to non-serious activities, play has the capacity to bring people face to face with fundamental paradoxes of human existence. Taking children's engagement with cosplay—or costume play—as a point of departure, the ethnographic data presented here shows how playful masking offers paradoxical viewpoints situated between human and non-human perspectives. Expanding on the anthropological literature on animism, the thesis argues that children's contemporary play in Norway involves an oscillation between techno-animist and techno-naturalist perspectives. The thesis also suggests that the most relevant sites for understanding people's engagement with the internet are not necessarily found online.

The recent proliferation of online worlds has had a significant impact on children's literacy practices in Norway. Alphabetic text suffuses online sociality, and familiarity with alphabetic literacy is frequently a prerequisite for participation online. Digital literacy practices often take place outside the adult gaze, where creativity and artful expression are valued above grammar and spelling conventions. The thesis explores the central role of alphabetic text in children's online filmmaking. Through playful juxtapositions of images and text, filmmakers conjure up future images that emerge not as abstract horizons, but as fully real and with palpable effects. Starting from the premise that literacy, far from being a neutral set of skills, is an inherently social technology, this thesis contributes to our understanding of how children in Norway become literate during a period of rapid technological change.

As young people increasingly surpass older generations with regards to digital competence, acknowledging children's active part in shaping sociality appears more important than ever. Numerous scholars of childhood have pointed out that children, rather than being considered passive adults-in-the-making, should be taken seriously as social beings in their own right. While acknowledging the importance of viewing children as social beings, this thesis also suggests that the analytical shift in childhood studies from becoming to being has tended to ignore the multiple becomings in children's lives that are not directly related to their imagined future adulthood. Facing the future, children grow outwards as well as up as they employ digital technologies to playfully create new worlds. As digital literacy practices accommodate new forms of sociality and play, young people in contemporary Norway experience a world where there is far more to the future than becoming adult.

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Bergen, August 2016

Introduction

Online sociality and play in Norway

I had already spotted Tariq from a distance when he shouted my name across the school yard. It was a sunny morning in early June 2013, with only a few weeks left before the summer holiday for Tariq and his friends. As a crowd of familiar faces approached me, they immediately started questioning me about “the book”. More than five months had passed since I left the neighbourhood, and the children wanted to know whether the book I was writing about them was finished. I told them I still had more writing left to do, and that I had returned to have a chance to talk more with them. The school bell rang before I had a chance to elaborate, and as we walked towards the classroom Tariq caught up with me and said, “You haven’t changed at all!” Feeling a bit flattered, I thanked him for the compliment, and as we entered the classroom I found myself still smiling at Tariq’s kind remark.

It was only later in the day I realized that Tariq’s comment was not intended as a compliment, and that he was, in fact, not talking about me at all. After school, he and a friend sat down in front of my laptop computer to give me a briefing on what they had been up to since we last met. After logging onto his MovieStarPlanet account, Tariq showed me the look of his new avatar, whose baggy trousers and white t-shirt was clearly influenced by one of his idols, Canadian pop singer Justin Bieber. He turned to me, this time with a slightly accusatory tone in his voice, and asked me why I had not made any changes to my user. I hesitated, and he continued. Everyone else in class, he said, had made numerous changes to their avatars, yet mine looked exactly like it did when I left Kristiansand five months earlier. A bit perplexed, I explained that I had simply been too busy writing the book, and that I did not have as much time to be on MovieStarPlanet now as I used to. Seemingly content with the answer, Tariq changed

the subject and asked me if I wanted to see his new film. I complied. I knew Tariq as a skilled filmmaker, and I had been looking forward to discussing his latest film projects.

During my initial stay in Kristiansand, I had spent much time with Tariq and his friends crafting avatars and creating animated films online. As I again returned to Bergen to continue writing, Tariq's comment lingered in the back of my mind. Why had I assumed that he was talking about my actual body, and not about my avatar? And, conversely, how come Tariq did not find it necessary to specify from the outset that he was referring to my avatar? These questions are central to this thesis, as they indicate an ongoing and fundamental shift in how online sociality is perceived and performed in contemporary Norway. Initially, I thought of the incident primarily as a methodological issue; was it at all possible for an adult researcher such as myself to understand and convey children's worlds, without relapsing into an adultcentric view due to the existence of insurmountable generational gaps? On a more fundamental level, the misunderstanding led me to realize that for Tariq and his friends, the pronoun "you", far from mapping unproblematically onto particular individuals, sometimes denoted complex assemblages of human and non-human bodies. Written in a time characterized by accumulative technological shifts of a historically unprecedented pace and magnitude, this thesis explores how Tariq and his friends were immersed in technologies that significantly shaped their sociality and play. This introduction provides a theoretical and ethnographic backdrop for the articles which follow, and suggests that children's contemporary play occurs in the paradoxical tension between techno-naturalist and techno-animist worlds, where the human body is only one of many possible subject positions.

Inhabiting online worlds

Tariq was one of twenty children who attended the school class I followed during my fieldwork in 2012 and 2013 in Kristiansand, a city of 82 000 people on the southern coast of Norway. Like most of his friends, who were also born in Norway from immigrant parents, Tariq lived in one of the numerous apartment blocks in a neighbourhood situated a short bus ride outside the city centre. Although socioeconomically marginalized by Norwegian standards, most households in the neighbourhood had access to the internet at home. A majority of the children in Tariq's class owned—or had access to—high-tech gadgets that, in other parts of the world, are usually reserved for the economic middle class and elites.¹ Accordingly, most of the children in Kristiansand spent time on laptop computers, smartphones, handheld video game consoles, and tablets on a near daily basis.² As the first cohort of children in Norway to experience a world where online access is largely taken for granted, Tariq and his friends found the internet to be tightly integrated into their everyday lives.

Norway ranks among the countries in the world with the highest internet coverage, and Norwegians spend on average two hours online on a regular day (Vaage 2014: 10). Starting in the late 1990s, the rapid expansion of internet infrastructure in Norway was the result of a broad political agreement, leading to near universal internet coverage among Norwegian households.³ According to one estimate, an average

¹ See for example Almeida (et al. 2012: 221).

² See Appendix 2 and 3 for more specific figures on the children's access to, and use of, digital gadgets at home.

³ The small number of households in Norway without internet access largely consists of older people, not families with children. See Vaage (2014) for details on changes in internet use over time in Norway.

Norwegian child begins using the internet at an age between 12 and 18 months (Staksrud 2013: 26–27). One study found that 95 % of Norwegian children aged between 9 and 16 have access to computers at home, and that 93 % spend time online more than once every week (Liestøl 2014: 8–9). For the most part the families in Kristiansand paid a flat monthly rate for their internet use at home, and for the children, restrictions on internet access was therefore predominantly a matter of negotiating access with their parents rather than an economic or infrastructural issue.

Online environments designed for children have existed since before the millennial turn. Over the last decade, online environments have reached a level of technical sophistication and aesthetic elegance that can justify calling them “worlds”. Imaginary worlds have been part of people’s lives for centuries through theatre and literature, yet recent innovations have enabled participants to inhabit these worlds for extended periods of time (Saler 2012: 50). William Bainbridge (2007: 472) identifies what he terms “a major historical transition” following the millennial shift, where “video games and computer games are in the process of evolving into something much richer, namely virtual worlds”. The term online world is used here to denote what Bainbridge terms virtual world, namely “an electronic environment that visually mimics complex physical spaces, where people can interact with each other and with virtual objects, and where people are represented by animated characters”. This definition usefully excludes many social networking sites, such as Facebook,⁴ where users usually do not move around in a graphical environment. It also excludes most video games and online games, where, although users can communicate with each other, interaction is mainly instrumentally centred on the game activity rather than being a goal in itself. Online worlds are part games, part social networking sites, and part workshops for collective creations, and the children in Kristiansand used online

⁴ <http://www.facebook.com/> (Accessed 31 July 2016)

worlds for a wide array of purposes, including watching videos and listening to music, creating posters and animated films, and hanging out with friends and strangers in chatrooms. What goes on in these worlds, this thesis argues, should not be considered merely representations of the real world, but decidedly real.

Crafting a digital body in the form of an avatar is often the necessary first step for users who want to inhabit online worlds. Regardless of whether users employ a first-person or a third-person perspective, Tom Boellstorff (2011: 507) argues, the avatar is typically “the locus of perception and sociality” in online worlds. Avatars do not simply represent human bodies, but are themselves important sites of “self-making” (Boellstorff 2008: 149). As Henrietta Moore (2013: 134) puts it, the avatar can be understood as both “a creation and an object of desire”, and human-avatar interaction is a process through which bodies come into being. Although masks and costumes have been used for millennia to “prosthethically extend the reach of the human body”, digital technologies “massively enhance this cultural capacity for ‘extension’” (Moore 2011: 131).

As avatars are simultaneously part of and not part of the human body, it is often difficult to determine exactly where each body begins and ends. Tariq and his friends often created avatars that resembled themselves, sometimes amplifying or enhancing certain features by giving them a “cool” name and equipping them with appropriate clothes and accessories. Tariq ignored the advice from adults never to use his actual name online when he named one of his avatars “Tariq”. Among the many avatars he created, Tariq considered this particular avatar to be his main user. The close bonds that developed between the children and their digital bodies surfaced on occasions when they mourned the loss of their avatars, typically after having their user taken over

by others through “hacking”.⁵ In addition to his main avatar, Tariq also crafted a number of alternative avatars, or “alts”, that he could control simultaneously.⁶ Conversely, he would sometimes share a single user with a friend, either by taking turns controlling the avatar, or with one person controlling the mouse and the other controlling the keyboard. The polyvocality of avatars, whereby a “single person and single body can be transgressed in either direction” (Boellstorff 2011: 506), indicates that avatars are not merely extensions of pre-existing bodies, but in themselves productive of an array of possible subject positions. The issue at stake in this thesis is not so much what an avatar *is*, but rather what it can *do*, and more specifically how digital bodies contribute to the shaping of new forms of sociality and play between online and offline worlds.

Avatars do not grow old like humans do, yet are far from stable entities. A characteristic feature of the children’s avatars was their propensity towards change. As Tariq indicated when he pointed out that my avatar had not “changed at all”, there was an explicit expectation that avatars should not remain unchanged over time. Whereas my original assumption was that Tariq was talking about “change” in the sense of old age and bodily decay, his later elaboration made it clear to me that the kind of change he referred to involved an expansive, outwards growth rather than a linear process of gradual decay. Accordingly, the body was not understood as a pre-existing and fixed substance, but as an ongoing process of body-in-the-making. The ephemerality of avatar appearances has been pointed out by Caroline Humphrey (2009: 47), in a study where she shows how users of avatars have ample opportunities for quickly changing

⁵ More than half of the twenty children reported that they had experienced being “hacked” (see Appendix 2).

⁶ See Boellstorff (2008: 150) for an account of the use of multiple avatars in the online world Second Life.

the looks of their digital bodies. For the children in Kristiansand, rapid shape-shifting was not just an option, but a defining feature of online sociality.

In popular usage, the term virtuality has often been used synonymously with simulation, to refer to how digital environments represent the real world (Grosz 2001: 41). The idea of virtual reality as a disembodied cyberspace has been central both in science fiction literature and in academia, and has been shaped by—and in turn contributed to—the naturalist idea that humans and technology can be understood as clearly distinguishable entities. As an alternative, the term virtual has been used to encompass “objects and states that exist but are not tangible” (Shields 2006: 284). According to this latter, broader conception of virtuality, the term virtual reality is an oxymoron. The virtual is no less real than the actual, and has real effects on the social, even if we cannot observe the virtual directly. Additionally, the virtual is not limited to digital technology, but a dimension of all technology use, including “writing, reading, drawing, or even thinking” (Grosz 2001: 78). In the following, I stay close to Elizabeth Grosz’s understanding of virtuality, as I argue that online worlds should not be seen as representations of the real, but as fully real. In this sense, online worlds do not primarily mimic physical reality, but rather constitute “a distinctive material and social reality” (Moore 2011: 132).

Among the dozens of online worlds that competed for the children’s attention in Kristiansand in 2012, one website stood out. MovieStarPlanet, usually referred to by the children simply as “Movie”, was originally launched in Denmark in 2009. Its initial success was followed up by versions of the website in different languages, including the Norwegian version⁷ which was launched in 2010. With the website at present accessible in eleven different languages, the company behind MovieStarPlanet has

⁷ <http://moviestarplanet.no> (Accessed 31 July 2016)

expanded over the years to employ more than 130 people.⁸ Along with YouTube⁹ and Google,¹⁰ MovieStarPlanet was the most popular website among the children in Kristiansand during my fieldwork. Marketing campaigns on popular children's television channels contributed to its popularity, yet it was mainly through informal conversations and word of mouth that MovieStarPlanet gained the momentum that led all twenty children in Tariq's class to create at least one user account on the website. Many of the children spent time on MovieStarPlanet almost every day, and numerous offline spin-off products such as clothes and a printed magazine contributed to maintaining their interest in the website over time. Most online worlds kept the children's attention only for a few days or weeks before they moved on to something new. What, then, was it about MovieStarPlanet that made them return, again and again, to this particular website?

From predominantly offering meeting places for people based on their interests, the internet has transformed over the last decade into a central arena for communication between friends, family, and colleagues.¹¹ As Alex Golub (2010: 39) has shown, inhabitants of online worlds are often motivated not primarily by the idea of total immersion into alternative worlds, but rather by the opportunities these worlds provide for engaging with other users. Similarly, Bonnie Nardi (2010: 93) has pointed out that participation in online worlds is not so much a matter of "simulation" as of "performance". As Daniel Miller (2014: 248) argues, social networking sites have made relationships "more visible", thus making manifest "the anthropological idea that a person is constituted by relationships". Against the assumption that social networking

⁸ <http://corporate.moviestarplanet.com/about> (Accessed 27 July 2016)

⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/> (Accessed 31 July 2016)

¹⁰ <http://www.google.com> (Accessed 31 July 2016)

¹¹ See Miller (2012: 147) and Burley (2010) for more details on this historical shift.

sites lead to more superficial relationships (see for example Turkle 2011), Miller (2011: 167) argues that Facebook, by allowing people to maintain friendships “with less expenditure of time or dependency upon transport”, can lead users to be “even more intensely in touch” than before.

Much of human sociality, Moore (2013: 238) argues, “is and always has been virtual”, as it depends on aspects of our world that have no identifiable materiality. Digital technologies, however, have the capacity to “enhance our capacities for virtuality”, as they “make new ways of seeing possible” (Moore 2011: 127). By allowing users to develop new spaces for sociality, digital technologies can “enhance familiar cultural capacities and competences” (Moore 2011: 8). With a global estimate of more than a hundred million people participating in online worlds (Boellstorff 2011: 516), online sociality plays an increasingly important role in people’s lives.

The term “3D online communities” (Wolfendale 2007: 114) has also been used to describe what I call online worlds. However, the assumption that online worlds constitute communities is far from unproblematic. Online sociality, as the term is used in this thesis, follows Nicholas Long and Henrietta Moore’s (2013) caution against conflating sociality with community. Whereas the latter presumes some kind of pre-existing collectivity, the former refers to how entities and subjectivities continuously come into being through processes of mutual engagement and entanglement. Long (2013: 104) points out that although inhabitants of online worlds have a wide range of means for communication with other users, they also tend to enjoy “fractious and atomized virtual lives” where they spend time on their own, sometimes actively avoiding contact with other users as they engage in individual projects. This distinction between sociality and community is helpful for understanding phenomena such as “hacking”, or identity theft. Usually considered a form of cheating that disrupts any sense of community (see Meyers 2009 for an example), the perspective taken here makes it possible to see hacking and other apparently anti-social behaviours as part

of—and even constitutive of—online sociality rather than as social problems (see Consalvo 2007).

Countering the common assumption that spending time online substitutes for social interaction, this thesis is concerned with how engagement with digital technology entails an elaboration of already existing social relations. For example, Tariq and his friends regularly used services such as Facebook and Skype¹² to stay in touch with relatives abroad, often together with their parents. Their main motivation for going online, however, was the opportunity to hang out with peers. After creating their avatar on MovieStarPlanet, users could furnish their own houses and invite other users to visit them. The term “friend” has taken on new connotations among Norwegian children, now referring to people who have established a mutual connection on social media platforms. The children in Kristiansand employed a distinction between “friends you know” and “friends you don’t know” to distinguish between peers from the neighbourhood and people they met exclusively online.¹³ Rather than seeking anonymity, Tariq and his friends were mainly motivated to go online by the opportunity to share and engage in collaborative projects with their peers. Even after logging off the website, user-generated content such as their furnished houses and artwork remained available for other users to engage with and comment on. As such, MovieStarPlanet was a persistent world, and suitable for long-term collaborative projects.

On MovieStarPlanet, users created posters and animated films by combining images, text, and video clips, allowing them to share their dreams, hopes, and memories

¹² <http://www.skype.com> (Accessed 31 July 2016)

¹³ See Appendix 4 for a visualization of friendship relations among the children in Kristiansand.

with friends. In their artwork, the children in Kristiansand shared not only episodes of joy, but also instances of grief, fear, and suffering.¹⁴ Many of the children's posters and films dealt with sensitive issues that they preferred to share with friends rather than with parents and teachers.¹⁵ For example, when a 16-year old girl from Oslo named Sigrid was reported missing, Tariq and his friends followed the news coverage closely. They created posters on MovieStarPlanet where they expressed their concerns, such as by writing "Poor Sigrid" next to a picture of her. When the girl was later found dead, they created more artwork with messages such as "It's sad". These posters were shared primarily with friends, yet several of the messages directly addressed the girl with texts such as "I miss you". Commenting on the Utøya massacre¹⁶ that took place one year earlier, one boy created a poster for his friends where he presented different viewpoints on whether the perpetrator should be considered mentally ill or not. A study by Beate Jørgensen (et al. 2015: 53) found that Norwegian children still had many unanswered questions about the Utøya massacre long after they stopped discussing the event with parents and teachers. For the children in Kristiansand, MovieStarPlanet offered spaces where they could share their experiences, dreams, and fears with friends, with little or no adult interference.

¹⁴ See Miller (2014: 256) for an account of how Facebook users in Trinidad engage in what he terms "the public sharing of suffering".

¹⁵ See Bluebond-Langner (1978) for an account of how children share sensitive subjects such as illness and death with friends rather than parents.

¹⁶ On July 22nd 2011, a right-wing extremist detonated a bomb in downtown Oslo before shooting participants at a summer camp for politically active youth, leaving 77 people dead. The event took place six months before I started fieldwork, and was still heavily covered on national news media due to the trial that took place between April and June 2012.

Play beyond techno-naturalism

Children's play has been of long-lasting interest to anthropologists. Margaret Mead's (1973) groundbreaking work in Samoa in the 1920s, where she criticized theoretical models in developmental psychology for assuming a universal unilinear developmental path, influenced numerous ethnographic studies of children's lives. These studies offered important correctives to scholarship that did not take cultural variations in children's lives into account. Often, however, they tended to see children's play primarily as an imitation of, or a rehearsal for, adult life (see Schwartzman 1978: 115).

Play theorist Johan Huizinga (1955) cautioned against the functionalist assumption that play can be understood as a derivative mirror image of the real world, arguing instead that play should be understood as existing absolutely independently from the flow of ordinary life. Play, Huizinga (1955: 10) argues, has its own spatiotemporal logic, and occurs within a "magic circle" with a disposition of its own. Huizinga's insistence on taking play seriously in its own right has been highly influential across the social sciences. His play concept seems, however, to be of relevance primarily when dealing with situations where participants agree that what is going on is, in fact, play. This would be the case with many games, but not necessarily with online worlds, where participants may have different understandings of whether what is going on is play or not.

Eugen Fink (1968) offers an alternative, phenomenologically oriented theory of play, which is more attuned to its transgressive and subversive dimensions. Although agreeing with Huizinga that play cannot be reduced to a preparation for adult life, for Fink, play is not secluded from ordinary life, but a fundamental experiential phenomenon that is integral to the flow of everyday life. Play neither obscures nor hides the real world, and may involve high stakes for its participants. Following Fink,

this thesis departs from approaches that have attempted to categorize play according to types of *activity*, and instead analyses play as a particular *attitude* to what is going on.

In addition to Fink, an important influence on the concept of play developed here comes from Gregory Bateson (2000), whose definition of play includes diverse phenomena such as ritual, humour, and metaphor. Arguing that human communication occurs on several simultaneous levels, Bateson suggests that play can be identified by paying attention to how behaviours and utterances are framed. Any organism that can engage in framing by distinguishing between messages of differing logic types, according to Bateson, is capable of playing. As Don Handelman (1992: 4–5) points out, it is not the *content* of the play frame that is of primary interest to Bateson, but rather the *passage* between play and non-play. A playful attitude produces images of the world, while also being of the world, and this simultaneous equation and discrimination of map and territory produces paradoxes. In Fink's (1968: 23) words, in play there is a “double existence” whereby humans exist “in two spheres simultaneously”. Play entails the juxtaposition of apparently contradictory signals, where the ensuing paradoxes are not logical errors, but productive entanglements that oscillate between multiple levels of communication. Departing from the idea, inherited from formal logic, that paradoxes are inherently contradictory, this thesis considers paradoxes not to be problems for the analyst to resolve, but in themselves productive of sociality and play.

This thesis investigates cosplay, or costume play, a phenomenon that has become increasingly popular among Norwegian youth over the last decade. Cosplayers dress up as characters from video games, films, TV-series, and comics, and immerse themselves in fictional worlds as they craft and wear their costumes. My first encounter with cosplay occurred during a school costume party in Kristiansand, where 8-year old Matilde dressed up as the fictional pop star Hatsune Miku. The character, originally designed by the Japanese company Crypton Future Media as a mascot for the vocal

engineering software Vocaloid, provided an entry point for me to explore cosplay as an expression of emerging forms of play in children's lives.

Cosplayers meet offline at conventions, or "cons", where they socialize with others who share their interests (Winge 2006). At cons, cosplayers step in and out of character, in the process varying the degree of attachment to and detachment from their characters. Often emphasizing the aesthetic dimension above role-playing, many cosplayers perform by posing for photographs and videos that are posted online. According to Malin Sveningsson (2012: 105–106), many cosplayers are motivated not just by the idea of becoming part of the fictional world of their characters, but also by the desire to expand on these worlds through "fanfiction". The parallel rise in popularity of cosplay and YouTube over the last decade is no coincidence. Since 2005, when the website was first launched, YouTube has become one of the most popular websites for children in Norway (Liestøl 2014: 10). A search for "cosplay" on YouTube brings viewers into endless streams of strange and fantastic aspects of popular culture. Previous boundaries between producers and consumers of video content have largely diminished, due to the low cost of video equipment coupled with the ease of online sharing. As cosplayers shift effortlessly between online and offline contexts in their costume practices, their play exemplifies the mutual constitutive force of online and offline sociality. Cosplay illustrates how the most relevant sites for understanding people's engagement with the internet are not necessarily found online.

Fink's theory of play draws attention to a main feature of both cosplay and MovieStarPlanet, namely that they are highly dependent upon playthings, in this case props such as costumes and avatars. Not unlike inhabitants of MovieStarPlanet who playfully create and navigate their avatars, cosplayers spend much time and effort on crafting their characters, making sure that make-up, wigs, and tattoos are all in their right place. Whether juggling multiple avatars or masking in cosplay, the children in Kristiansand entered into playful paradoxical spaces between human and non-human

bodies. In both cases, wearing a mask was not primarily a matter of disguising or hiding themselves from the other's gaze, but a technology that allowed entry into perspectives that were otherwise inaccessible. Through the playful reconfiguration of bodies, practices such as cosplay and avatar creation provide crucial entry points into understanding children's contemporary play with digital technologies.

Bateson's ideas about play as paradoxical communication have been highly influential on the work of Victor Turner (1986). Findings from his studies of cultural performances such as carnival can in turn greatly enhance our understanding of cosplay:

What we are seeing is society in its subjunctive mood—to borrow a term from grammar—its mood of feeling, willing and desiring, its mood of fantasizing, its playful mood; not its indicative mood, where it tries to apply reason to human action and systematize the relationship between ends and means in industry and bureaucracy. (Turner 1986: 123)

Turner (1986: 101) listed “ritual, carnival, festival, theatre, film, and similar performative genres” as examples of cultural performances characterized by subjunctivity. Working closely with Turner, Richard Schechner (1985) suggested that all theatrical performance involves a subjunctive as-if dimension that is characterized by paradoxical communication:

All effective performances share this “not-not not” quality: Olivier is not Hamlet, but also he is not not Hamlet: his performance is between a denial of being another (= I am me) and a denial of not being another (= I am Hamlet). Performer training focuses its techniques not on

making one person into another but on permitting the performer to act in between identities; in this sense performing is a paradigm of liminality. (Schechner 1985: 123)

Through what Schechner (1985: 111) calls “double negativity”, whereby events are perceived as simultaneously real and not-real, theatrical performance produces particular effects both on performer and audience. Along with Fink, Bateson, and Turner, Schechner’s attention to the ambiguous and paradoxical character of play can be highly useful in the analysis of children’s play with digital technologies.

Cosplay as a phenomenon in popular culture can be traced historically to Star Trek fan conventions in the United States in the late 1960s. Today, many Norwegian cosplayers primarily look to Japan, where the term cosplay was first coined in the early 1980s, for their main inspiration. Japanese popular culture has been highly influential among young people in Norway for the last thirty years, boosted in large part by Nintendo’s success with video game series such as Super Mario, The Legend of Zelda, and, from the mid-1990s, Pokémon. Among the children in Kristiansand, dressing up in costumes based on Japanese fictional characters was one of many examples of a more general interest in Japanese cultural expressions. From origami and ninjas to Nintendo video games and robots, the children spent much of their time engaging with—and discussing—Japanese toys and artifacts.

Since 2005, the video sharing website YouTube has become a central hub for Norwegian children’s exploration of Japanese popular culture. Among the children in Kristiansand, YouTube was the preferred website for finding tutorials, such as when one boy watched a series of videos on origami to learn how to create paper-folded

shuriken ninja stars.¹⁷ According to Moore (2011: 163), YouTube has laid the foundation for a “participatory culture” of “emergent socialities”, and has become an important hub for creative production. The website has developed in parallel with other video sharing websites, such as the Japanese Nico Nico Douga.¹⁸ For example, when the latter allowed users to add comments directly onto the video frame, YouTube soon implemented a similar feature. The Japanese influence on YouTube is thus not limited to providing content, but has also had an impact on the format through which content is shared.

As an ethnographic region, Japan has typically been associated with ambiguity, and Japanese ideas about the relationship between humans and non-humans have often been described in contrast to western ideas (Napier 2007: 2). For example, automata, or machines that mimic living beings, have been central to the western imagination for centuries (Kang 2011). Often met with ambivalence due to the unclear boundaries between the mechanical and the magical, the power of the automaton to both fascinate and horrify has positioned it as the “ultimate categorical anomaly” (Kang 2011: 36) within the western, naturalist worldview. In Japan, Casper Bruun Jensen and Anders Blok (2013: 105) argue, the ambiguity of humanlike automata is met with less scepticism, exemplified by the “integration of robots into society in a manner void of the alienation and fear with which mechanical beings have been greeted in the West”.

A useful way to approach children’s engagement with Japanese popular culture is through what Anne Allison (2006: 21) calls “techno-animism”, understood as an “intermixture of the old (spirituality) with the new (digital/virtual media)” which involves “animating contemporary technology and commodities with spirits”. Japanese

¹⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r49V-J6lkt4> (Accessed 27 July 2016)

¹⁸ <http://www.nicovideo.jp/> (Accessed 27 July 2016)

toys tend to cater to “a delight taken in things being constantly in flux, transforming from one state into another” (Allison 2006: 185), through processes whereby similarities between humans and non-humans are emphasized over that which distinguishes them. Moore (2011: 127), too, identifies in Japanese popular culture examples of “how objects, technologies and selves become involved in extending emergent forms of the social across space and time, providing opportunities for enhancing cultural capacities”. According to Moore (2011: 129), an “animist sensibility” involves the breaking down and recombining of familiar forms, which can be “reassembled into new hybridities and possibilities” by “using human, machine and organic parts”. In their engagement with Japanese toys, the children in Kristiansand formed affective ties with their surroundings that provided access to a wide range of imaginary spaces and subject positions.

Kathleen Richardson (2016: 112–113) identifies techno-animist practices outside Japan, drawing on research on “Euro-American imaginings of robots” to argue that people tend to respond to robots as if they were humans. Drawing on Allison’s concept of techno-animism, Jensen and Blok (2013: 105) argue that the term conveys a “continued capacity for enchantment in non-modern, techno-scientific life”. Unlike traditional perspectives on animism in anthropology, where animism is considered a particular worldview which imparts a soul onto non-human entities, the term is used in this thesis to refer to the children’s propensity towards acknowledging the unclear boundaries between humans and non-humans. With the spread of Japanese popular culture to Norway and elsewhere, the naturalist idea that humans and non-humans are substantially different finds its counterpart in children’s intense engagement with toys and fictional characters.

Techno-naturalism, as the term is used here, draws on Philippe Descola’s (2013) distinction between animist and naturalist worldviews. In the variety of ways people categorize humans and non-humans, Descola (2013: 134) identifies a universal

distinction between the interiority and the exteriority of bodies. Whereas exteriority refers to the material dimension of bodies and processes, interiority refers to their intentionality or capacity. The ways the relationship between interiority and exteriority is variously understood can be approached through what Descola (2013: 121) calls “four major types of ontology”. Whereas totemism involves identical physicality and interiority, and analogism involves distinct physicality and interiority, animism involves similar interiorities and different physicalities, and naturalism involves different interiorities and analogous physicalities. In Descola’s (2013: 125) words, the four ontologies “become elementary components of a kind of syntax for the composition of the world, from which the various institutional regimes of human existence all stem”.

Descola’s categorization goes beyond merely labelling cosmologies, and questions the universality of the western, anthropocentric model of human and non-human relations. Naturalism, according to Descola (2013: 173), “can be defined by the continuity of the physicality of the entities of the world and the discontinuity of their respective interiorities”, and thereby posits humans as exceptional among living beings. In contrast, according to the animist cosmology, the category of “person” includes not only humans, but also spirits, plants, and animals that, like humans, are considered to be “endowed with a soul” (Descola 2013: 4). Whereas naturalism tends to categorize entities according to their assumed essence, entities in the animist worldview are understood in terms of their relative positions (Descola 2013: 10). The contrast between animist and naturalist worldviews is described in the following way:

the naturalist formula turns out to be a total inversion of the animist formula: in animism, the universality of the condition of a moral subject and the relations between humans and nonhumans that this authorizes override the physical heterogeneity of the various classes of

existing beings; in contrast, in naturalism, human society and its cultural contingencies are subordinated to the universality of the laws of nature. (Descola 2013: 199)

Descola (2013: 233) points out that the four ontologies are not mutually exclusive, and that “we may suppose that they coexist potentially in all human beings”. Still, he goes on to argue that such leakage is mainly a matter of “episodic slippages into other schemas”, and that one of the four modes of identification tends to be dominant (Descola 2013: 234). The literature on techno-animism, and the ethnographic data presented here, however, suggests otherwise. In the accounts by Allison, Jensen and Blok, and Richardson, animist and naturalist worldviews appear to coexist and feed off each other. The use of digital technologies entails a movement away from the clear-cut dichotomies of Descola’s account, and towards a more flexible and playful coexistence of animist and naturalist perspectives. In the following, I will exemplify the coexistence of techno-animist and techno-naturalist perspectives by drawing on how the children in Kristiansand engaged with Pokémon trading cards, in the process opening themselves up to ambiguities and paradoxes that allowed them to become closely attached to non-human others.

Among the children in Kristiansand, Pokémon trading cards and portable video games were immensely popular in the school yard.¹⁹ Many of them had inherited most of their trading cards from older siblings and cousins. Packs of cards also had a privileged position on the counter in the local toy store, where I bought two packs in order to participate with the children as they competed against each other in the school

¹⁹ As of writing this in July 2016, Pokémon is again emerging on the global scene following the launch of Pokémon Go for smartphones.

yard. I had originally intended to buy only one pack, but soon found myself returning to the toy store after losing most of my cards to the children in the process of learning how to play the game.

A pack of Pokémon cards contains ten cards, including special bonus cards as well as regular character cards. Each regular card features the image of a fictional creature, a Pokémon,²⁰ with a list of its particular attributes and skills. Whereas the official rules of the game involve complex calculations of the battling creatures' relative strength and special powers, the children had created their own version of the game. During game play, two or more participants would throw one card each into the air, attempting to make them land face up, with each round eliminating those whose cards had landed face down until one remaining winner collected all the cards. The simplicity of the rules made it possible also for younger children to participate.²¹ A highly ritualized process, techniques of card flipping were shared among friends, such as when one boy taught others how they could climb benches and other school yard structures in order to throw their cards from the highest possible point.

On the launch of Pokémon as a video game for the handheld Nintendo Game Boy in 1996, the game was marketed as part of a wide range of multimedial fiction and merchandise catering to different age groups (Allison 2008). Whereas plush toys appealed to the very young, anime TV series, video games, and trading cards were marketed towards older children and teens. As Nintendo has continued issuing new characters, the total number of creatures has increased to several hundreds. Some of the children in Kristiansand exhibited encyclopedic knowledge about each Pokémon

²⁰ Pokémon is a portmanteau for pocket monster.

²¹ See Horton (2012: 8) for another example of how children develop their own rules rather than adhering to the the official Pokémon rules.

character's traits, including their potential for evolving into stronger creatures, indicating an immense involvement in the fictional universe.

Although most Norwegian children who grew up during the global Pokémon craze in the late 1990s and early 2000s are familiar with the phenomenon, the topic has received little scholarly attention in Norway. Much has been written, however, on the reception of Pokémon in the United States. David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green (2003: 380) explain the global success with reference to how Pokémon speaks to “shared aspects of childhood experience”, while simultaneously being easily “integrated within the routines of children’s everyday lives”. The interplay between different economic logics such as gift exchange and capitalist acquisition means that Pokémon toys constitute “a form of both capital and companionship”, and have “affective as well as ‘market’ value” (Allison 2006: 231).

Similar affective ties that have been identified in cosplay practices can be found in the children’s engagement with Pokémon. The Pokémon universe, Allison (2006: 21) argues, illustrates “a more general aptitude in daily Japan for animating, spiritualizing, or altering the material world that is at once playful and deadly serious”. For example, Pikachu, the best known of the many Pokémon characters, appears at first sight to be small and helpless, yet turns out to have immense powers (Kelts 2006: 39). By bringing attention to the combination of frailty and might, Pikachu’s “huggable look” combined with its “fierce powers” tends to appeal to children (Allison 2008: 189). Consider Matilde’s response when I asked her what she liked about Pikachu:

The powers. I think they are a bit cool, that Pikachu has lightning and stuff. I’ve never heard of any Pokémon that have that at all. He looks very cute, but still he is very powerful.

Some scholars claim that digital technologies have led multi-national companies to create “a globally normalised type of play for children” (Silcock et al. 2016: 87), where children play “in exactly the same way” (Silcock et al. 2016: 92). Arguing against the position that children are reduced to “consumers” or “audience” in their engagement with Pokémon, Buckingham and Sefton-Green (2003: 386) claim that the requirement for active participation goes beyond mere consumption. Part animal, part human, part robot, and part spirit, Pokémon characters provided the children in Kristiansand with opportunities to playfully challenge naturalist boundaries separating humans and non-humans. As with cosplay, where participants produce characters and props, it seems that the children not so much consume the characters as they are consumed *by* them.

The idea that Pokémon encourages active participation rather than passive consumption counters common assumptions about the decline of children’s play. For example, in the 1990s Marianne Gullestad (1997: 32) raised concerns about Norwegian children’s widespread use of video games and television, arguing that “children are now increasingly losing their self-governed play in the local community”. Similar anxieties about the disappearance of play have amplified with the rise of the internet (see for example Turkle 2011). Against such claims, this thesis argues that concerns about the disintegrative effects of digital technologies on children’s play tend to rely on what I term a techno-naturalist perspective. Descola’s concept of naturalism, which denotes the widespread assumption that humans can be distinguished from non-humans with reference to their differently constituted interiors, guides attention to how both Gullestad and Turkle appear to rely on a human exceptionalism that posits digital technologies as exterior to individual selves. Japanese toys such as Pokémon do not fit into this scheme, as they tend to “generate intense engagements” that are not reducible to individual consumption (Ruckenstein 2013: 6).

Futures in digital literacy practices

Familiarity with alphabetic literacy is a prerequisite for participation in a wide range of social activities in contemporary Norway. As pointed out by Buckingham (2004: 114) more than a decade ago, and arguably even more relevant today, the internet “is heavily reliant on print, and on conventional verbal literacy”. An assumption still prevails in much public discourse, however, that children spend less time reading and writing now than before, and that images and video have largely replaced earlier uses of text. In scholarly literature as well, it is sometimes assumed that literacy is in decline, and that the time Norwegian children spend in front of computers goes “at the expense not only of physical activity, but also at the expense of reading” (Nilsen et al. 2012: 72, my translation). The data presented in this thesis on cosplay, MovieStarPlanet, and Pokémon points in a different direction, and provides support for the argument that the virtuality of text is a crucial component in emerging forms of sociality and play.

The acquisition of literacy is often seen as the internalization of a set of predefined skills. Policy makers commonly rely on what Anne Haas Dyson (2010: 9) calls a notion of “basic” literacy skills, which purportedly can be measured using standardized tests. The idea that literacy exists in and of itself, distinct from its actual use, is based on a technological determinism that has been common both in developmental psychology and in anthropology. For example, Jack Goody’s (1994) influential work on the historical emergence of alphabetic literacy in Europe is primarily concerned with the social consequences of standardized forms of literacy, and pays less attention to how people throughout history have put text to use in non-standard and subversive ways. The assumption that literacy has particular effects on social and cognitive processes tends to ignore the immense variety of actual literacy practices, a position that has been criticized by Brian Street (1995, 2009) among others.

In order to avoid the determinist assumption that technology in itself has particular social effects, this thesis employs a concept of literacy that is primarily attuned to its performative dimension. Technology is a matter of doing, not knowing, and a phenomenological approach usefully guides attention to this performative dimension of literacy in use. A similar non-determinist concept of technology underpins the term internet as used in this thesis, aiming to overcome the tendency to view the internet in terms of the effects it has on the social (Coleman 2012: 5). Following David Sneath's (et al. 2009: 20) suggestion, technology, far from being "just a system of material tools", constitutes "a wider repertoire of objects and practices that bring about imaginative effects". A similar concept of technology can be found in Moore's (2011: 160) argument that "technology has provided novel spaces for building, narrating and regulating particular futures based on new forms of relationality and technologies of self". In this sense, technology can be understood as an aspect of the social, rather than as opposed to it (Sneath et al. 2009: 16). Children's uses of text do not entail a mechanical reproduction of predefined skills, but rather a range of inherently social practices that can actualize virtual potentialities.

The term "digital literacy practices", as employed throughout this thesis, goes beyond viewing literacy as a set of individual skills to emphasize the social dimension of literacy acquisition (Davidson 2011: 38). The term digital is commonly used to denote all electronically mediated communication. Here, I draw instead on Bateson's (2000: 291) distinction between digital communication, occurring as the succession of separate signals, and analogue communication, occurring as a flow of inseparable signals. A recorded piece of music is not either analogue (such as when played on a gramophone) or digital (such as when played on an MP3 player), but rather entails a combination of analogue and digital signals that together constitute what we call music. Similarly, literacy practices have both digital and analogue aspects, regardless of whether we are using a computer or pen and paper. Letters and words are digital in the

sense that they are clearly distinguishable from other letters and words. As Stephen Nachmanovitch (2009: 4) puts it, each letter is “either a or b, not halfway between”. Still, we cannot reduce uses of text to their digital dimension. With the increasing use of computers we are not faced with a transition from analogue to digital communication, but with new constellations of the relationship between them.

Dyson (2010) usefully distinguishes “official”, adult-sanctioned literacy practices from “unofficial”, child-governed ones. In unofficial literacy practices, according to Dyson (1993: 4), children are not primarily concerned with grammar and spelling conventions, but with using print “to represent ideas and to interact with other people”. For example, whereas “copying” is often considered to be “interfering with, not promoting, writing” in official school worlds, children tend to see copying others as a way to connect and show interest in their peers (Dyson 2010: 15). The distinction between official and unofficial literacy practices is not primarily a matter of whether activities take place within or outside classrooms; often, playful child-initiated literacy practices run parallel to official literacy practices.

For example, during each recess at the school in Kristiansand, two students were assigned responsibility for writing down children’s names in a notebook every time they brought a toy out of the toy shed. When read from the first page, the notebook consisted of ordered columns of names and toys. The second half of the notebook, however, was filled with crude drawings, swear words, and children’s names with hearts around them, some of them scribbled over to the extent that several pages were literally torn asunder. In the notebook, subversive uses of text thus co-existed with officially sanctioned literacy practices. Like the graffiti found on concrete walls in the neighbourhood, unofficial literacy practices at school differed both in form and content from text use in official school worlds. Among adults, such non-standard forms of literacy were usually either ignored, or considered deviations and sources of bullying that took attention away from authorized uses of text.

Although online worlds for children at first sight appear to privilege bright and colourful images, alphabetic text played a central role for how online sociality was enacted among the children in Kristiansand. On MovieStarPlanet, the children created and maintained text-based spaces with their friends, often outside adult supervision. Whereas the children primarily used YouTube as a source for finding videos shared by others, MovieStarPlanet featured a filmmaking tool where they could create and share their own animated films. In both cases, text featured prominently in how they navigated online. For example, finding music videos on YouTube required users to spell the first letters of the name of the artist or the song, until the autocomplete function suggested the correct choice. On MovieStarPlanet, alphabetic text was integral to the content of the children's animated films. Most of the children I came to know in Kristiansand created one or more films starring their own and their friends' avatars. Five of the children, including Tariq, were particularly productive filmmakers, and their skills were held in awe by peers who used the comment sections to compliment them on their accomplishments. These children spent much time crafting films, where they put their avatars in the role of main characters in fictional accounts involving issues that were important to them, such as friendship, love, and death. Tariq stated that this opportunity to create and share films with friends was an important reason for him to choose MovieStarPlanet over competing alternatives. Although the children themselves usually did not explicitly describe these activities in terms of "reading" or "writing", familiarity with alphabetic text was crucial for participation as literacy practices surfaced in new and unexpected ways online.

At first glance, filmmaking on MovieStarPlanet appears to be strictly limited by the availability of props and backgrounds. Non-paying users, in particular, had access only to a restricted choice of accessories. However, the opportunity to use alphabetic text in speech bubbles made it possible to create films that were not dependent on the availability of particular props. Against backgrounds such as a living room, a school

hallway, or a beach, filmmakers made use of text to create a wide range of imaginative stories. Text was also used to bridge online and offline worlds. The day before his ninth birthday, Tariq shared a film where one of the characters stated “Tariq’s birthday is tomorrow”, as a subtle reminder to his friends. The virtuality of text, like the virtuality of other playthings and props, played an important role in turning fiction into make-believe (see Walton 1990). Text was also prevalent in the comment fields that accompanied each film, where users discussed topics such as the film’s plot and the choice of actors, and sometimes suggested possible improvements.

A recurring motif in the children’s animated films was a concern with the future. In some films they placed their avatars in imagined future scenarios, such as going on dates, getting married, or dressing up as high school graduates throwing parties in the school hallway. These plots were apparently grounded in a conventional, linear view of time, where they portrayed themselves as having “grown up”. On closer inspection, however, filmmaking entailed not only a one-directional projection into the future, but also a multidirectional expansion of the future in the present. Online filmmaking facilitated idiosyncratic and sometimes subversive uses of text, images, and bodies in the paradoxical spaces that were not-present yet simultaneously not not-present.

In anthropology, the future has usually been subject to less attention than the past. Emile Durkheim’s (1954) influential concept of social time, which emphasizes continuities and ruptures between past and present, has contributed to the prevailing idea that the future is an analytically inaccessible—and even unreal—domain. Edmund Leach (1961), for example, draws a conceptual distinction between repetitive and linear time, where the former is characteristic of non-western societies, and the latter can be found in modern societies. In non-western societies, Leach (1961: 125) argues, the emphasis on repetition offers consolation for the unavoidable irreversibility of objective time. Similarly, Edward E. Evans-Pritchard (1939: 208) found among the Nuer a “different perception of time to ours”, characterized by the lack of any abstract,

objective idea of time. The influence from Durkheim led both Leach and Evans-Pritchard to draw a distinction between real and objective time on the one hand, and cultural constructions of time on the other hand. Similarly, Huizinga's conception of play as self-contained, although correctly pointing out that play does not involve attempts to predict the future or accomplish future goals, has contributed to a concept of play that puts little emphasis on the role of the future in the present.

A more useful analytical path has been opened up in recent years by new phenomenological approaches to time, where the future is considered not in terms of ambitions and hope, but in terms of a virtual multiplicity. Virtuality allows moving back and forth in time, enabling access to "universes that might have been", as Grosz (2001: 130) puts it. Images are not primarily representations of a real world. They do not simply depict reality, but invoke "what could be as much as what is" (Gammeltoft 2013: S163). For example, filmic montage, defined by Christian Suhr and Rane Willerslev (2012: 285) as the "cinematic rearrangement of lived time and space", can offer "visual experiences that differ from normal perception". By disturbing the subject/object-distinction that dominates much western, naturalist thinking, cinematic images allow us to rethink our relationship to technology through encounters between the brain-eye-body machine and the camera-screen (Deleuze 1986). Filmmaking on MovieStarPlanet constituted not merely a series of representations of actual life, but rather interfered with temporality itself and established the future as already existing in the present moment. Following Steffen Dalsgaard and Morten Nielsen's (2013: 7) approach, where the future can be conceptualized as a range of "perspectives from which to imagine the present", we can understand the future not as an abstract horizon, but as a significant—and fully real—dimension of how children navigate their daily lives. Through the juxtaposition of apparently contradictory images in filmic montage, the future actually emerges. As such, filmmaking offered the children opportunities to

take a perspective not just *on* the future, but *from* the future (see Nielsen 2014, Austdal and Helgesen 2015).

The future surfaced in myriad ways in the children's activities in and out of school. When dealing with Japanese techno-toys, the children explicitly held Japan to be developmentally ahead of Norway. Watching YouTube videos of robot factories and the Tokyo skyline provided them with access to a future that, as several children put it, would at some point materialize in Norway as well. Several children explicitly expressed a strong desire to visit and live in Japan. The idea that Japan was a land of the future was a recurrent topic in the children's conversations about the world outside Norway. During a classroom discussion about hygiene around the world, several children shared their experiences from visiting grandparents in Africa and Asia:

Boy: "They have toilets like us, but they are dirty and stuff. And when I went to the bathroom there was no water. They had to take a kind of water thing and throw it into the toilet".

Girl: "My grandmother doesn't have a toilet. They have a hole in the ground, and then they have to pour water into it".

The children's statements about what these toilet facilities lacked drew on their expectations about what a Norwegian toilet should look like. Japanese toilets, with their electronic screens and advanced functions, were considered to be more sophisticated than Norwegian ones. Apparently operating according to a linear scale moving from their parents' home countries (past), through Norway (present), and towards Japan (future), a closer examination reveals a more complex time orientation. As a land of the future, Japan was not simply a socially constructed representation overlaid on an objective, linear model of time. As cosplay practices exemplify, play involves a

complex interweaving of past, present, and future that defies everyday notions of linear time in favour of the coexistence of past, present, and future in each moment. The children were not primarily concerned with the future in terms of becoming adult, but in terms of exploring the paradoxes that emerged as they playfully explored digital technologies.

Raising cyberkids

In Norway, where until the 1980s most households had access to only one, state-controlled TV channel, the introduction of cable TV and the internet have had a significant impact on young children's access to the world outside their immediate neighbourhood. The now near universal access to digital technologies in Norway has been accompanied by a generational shift, as children now often know more about how new technologies work than their parents do. This development is part of an international trend, as found in Tom Boonaert and Nicole Vettenburg's (2011: 60) account of how children sometimes operate "as experts themselves when explaining a program or game to their parents". In Spain, Ferran Casas (2008: 73) found that parents and teachers were the least popular choices when children were asked who they preferred to talk to about digital technology.

Some parents in Kristiansand restricted their own internet use to what they considered necessities such as banking, and preferred to talk to relatives on the phone rather than using email, Skype, or Facebook. One mother told me, "I don't like that Facebook stuff. To me that's not so important". Other parents edited photos and videos, played games, and followed the news online. In a survey I conducted among the twenty children, where I asked how they had learnt to use a computer, more than one third of the respondents mentioned their fathers, and more than one fourth mentioned their

mothers.²² Many of them had far surpassed their parents in computer skills, however, and often assisted them in setting up Skype video chats and sharing photos with relatives abroad on Facebook.²³

The parents had different views on the value of their children's online activities, and several parents said they had mixed feelings about how the internet impacted their children's lives. Ambiguity towards technological change has been widespread throughout the twentieth century, and these ambiguities have been further intensified after the introduction of the internet. As Grosz (2001: 75) puts it, the "nascent incompleteness" of the internet makes it "ripe" for "various imaginary schemas, projected futures, dreams, hopes, and fears". A small minority of parents told me they saw no educational value in computers, and considered them mainly a waste of time. When I asked one mother about her son's reading and writing habits online, she responded, "He tries to avoid reading. He doesn't read that much on the computer". Like many of the parents, she described MovieStarPlanet as a "game", and was primarily concerned with limiting how much time her children spent on the website. Many parents in Kristiansand had rules restricting their children's internet access during the evening and night, yet, as this mother lamented, these rules could be difficult to enforce: "The kids are sitting up all night. They should have a system where everything shuts down at night".

Many parents saw computers as vital for their children's educational success, yet, they told me, often found themselves unable to assist them due to their own lack

²² See Appendix 2 for more details.

²³ Hornberger's (2007) study among immigrant families in the United States also found that children's familiarity with digital technologies put them in charge of sustaining networks of family and friends across the world online.

of relevant skills. Most of the children were born in Norway, from parents who had come to Norway either as immigrants or refugees.²⁴ Many of these parents were highly educated in their home countries, and had arrived in Norway with ambitions to pursue their original careers. At first believing that the language barrier would be the main hindrance for doing so, several parents reported that they had realized over time that there were other barriers besides language keeping them from following their career ambitions. In particular, the difficulty of attaining certification for education completed in their home countries constituted a significant obstacle.²⁵ Having settled for relatively low-paying jobs such as taxi drivers, custodians, and restaurant workers for the fathers, and child care and health care for the mothers, several parents told me they had found it necessary to recalibrate their ambitions since first arriving in Norway. Rather than focusing on their own careers, they now put their main effort into making sure that their children did well in school, to ensure that they got the opportunities they themselves did not have.

Previous research has identified a minority “drive” (Grindland 2009: 64, my translation) as children of immigrants in Norway tend to spend more time on homework and have higher educational ambitions than their peers. Recent findings also suggest that children born in Norway to non-western immigrants perform better in school than average (Lauglo 2010: 6). Immigrant and refugee families who have experienced downward social mobility operate with forms of capital that often cut across traditional categories of class, taste, and education. In Kristiansand, for example, highly educated

²⁴ An overview of where the children’s parents were born shows that out of the 40 parents, 11 were born in Europe outside Scandinavia, 10 in the Middle East, 6 in Africa, 5 in Asia, 5 in Scandinavia, and 3 in South America

²⁵ In Norway, NOKUT (The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education) is responsible for the certification of foreign education.

parents tended to view digital technologies in a more positive light than those with less education, and saw the internet as a resource for their children's future success in school. This can partly explain why families with low income chose to spend their money on laptop computers and tablets they could barely afford, as they saw familiarity with digital technologies as a necessary means for their children's performance in school.²⁶ Here, a crucial difference can be identified between how parents and children conceptualized the future. Whereas parents subscribed to what Allison (2013: 118) calls "reproductive futurism", seeing their own future reflected in the image of their children, the children themselves saw the future as a playful and open-ended space that was not necessarily actualized as the end point of linear, causal processes.

Whether children's media culture is considered in terms of "a corruption of childhood" or "a means of cultural liberation for children" (Buckingham 2004: 115) depends on how childhood is conceptualized in the first place. The idea that children are particularly vulnerable has a long history, and in European history the term "child" itself connotes not just physiological immaturity, but "dependency, powerlessness and inferiority" (Gittins 2004: 27). In recent decades, Jens Qvortrup (2002: 44) argues, a benevolent form of paternalism has led children's lives to become increasingly regulated, based on ideas about vulnerability and protection. In urban areas in Norway, unaccompanied young children in shopping malls or city streets will quickly cause attention and alarm, even though these spaces have no explicit age restrictions. With the emergence of online worlds for children, much media attention has been on the potential threat from strangers online, such as the possibility of child abduction and

²⁶ In Portugal, Almeida (et al. 2012: 221) found that parents "celebrate the educational potential of the internet" by investing in computer equipment.

abuse.²⁷ In addition, concerns have been raised that children's use of digital technologies can lead to obesity, language delay, and social alienation (see Manning 2009, Marsh 2010).

Both childhood and new technologies are sites of moral contention, and issues involving a combination of the two often produce a strong drive towards increasing surveillance and control. For example, Neil Postman (1982) raised concerns about the impact of television on young children's lives, arguing that not only did it encourage passivity, but also led to a breakdown of the boundaries separating childhood from adulthood through its distribution of adult content and values. After a 5-year old girl in Norway died at the hands of playmates who were "supposedly mimicking a Ranger warrior stance" (Allison 2006: 125), the Japanese TV-series Power Rangers was banned in several countries in the early 1990s. Video games, according to Rob Gallagher (2012: 403), marked an intensification of moral panics surrounding children's media use, as "the extra control afforded the viewer is thought to increase the potential for corruption or harm".

The tendency to portray children as potential victims online has led web developers to prioritize safety over freedom of expression on many websites targeting children. When the online world Superbia²⁸ was launched in Norway during my fieldwork in 2012, it was initially met with high expectations by the children, who looked forward to more opportunities for hanging out with their friends online. Five of

²⁷ A recent example is from Aftenposten.no 18.04.2015, where the websites MovieStarPlanet and Momoio are described as "preferred places for predators who are hunting for vulnerable children" (my translation). <http://www.aftenposten.no/nyheter/iriks/Redd-Barna-mener-nettstedene-ma-ta-ansvar-7985456.html> (Accessed 31 July 2016)

²⁸ <http://disney.no/superbia> (Accessed 31 July 2016)

the children signed up for an account during its first week of existence. However, they soon lost interest in Superbia. At first glance, the online world appeared similar in many ways to MovieStarPlanet, yet with one crucial difference. Users of Superbia were not allowed to write using alphabetic text. All communication between users took place by exchanging emoji,²⁹ in effect dramatically reducing the range of ideas the children could express. Compared to MovieStarPlanet, Superbia had very few rules concerning behaviour towards other users, simply because there was no way for users to write anything inappropriate or mean. This limitation on the use of alphabetic text was the main reason why the five children quickly returned to MovieStarPlanet, where they could chat with their friends, create dialogues in their animated films, and in the process playfully bend the rules of the website to their advantage.

Although online sociality offers children new opportunities for creative projects, online spaces also allow for new forms of adult control. Some of the parents in Kristiansand made use of surveillance software on their computers, making it possible for them to monitor the children's internet use by blocking particular websites and software, and reading through the activity log after their children had been online. At the height of MovieStarPlanet's popularity, some schools in Norway banned the use of the website on school computers.³⁰ Likewise, many schools, including where I did my fieldwork, introduced a rule against bringing Pokémon trading cards to school to prevent quarrels and fights during game play. Although parents and teachers on the one

²⁹ Emoji are "small images, symbols, or icons used in text fields in electronic communication (as in text messages, e-mail, and social media) to express the emotional attitude of the writer, convey information succinctly, communicate a message playfully without using words, etc." <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/emoji> (Accessed 31 July 2016)

³⁰ <http://nrksuper.no/super/supernytt/2011/01/11/blokkerer-moviestarplanet/> (Accessed 31 July 2016)

hand lamented children's lack of interest in reading and writing, they sometimes opposed and even banned activities where children actually did read and write.

In the 1970s, when postcolonialist and feminist movements in social theory turned their attention to marginalized populations, children were among the groups put under scrutiny (see James 2009: 38). Charlotte Hardman (2001: 502), for example, argued in 1973 that "both women and children might perhaps be called 'muted groups' i.e. unperceived or elusive groups". Not only had children, like women, seldom been given a voice in published research, but their activities had also often been considered irrational when compared to those of adults. In cases where children's practices were taken into account, they were often considered merely "a poor copy of adult behavior" (Schwartzman 2001: 19). Instead, Hardman (2001: 503) suggested that children should be understood as inhabiting a "self-regulating, autonomous world which does not necessarily reflect early development of adult culture".

Almost thirty years later, Lawrence Hirschfeld (2002) lamented the general lack of attention to childhood and children's culture in anthropology. In the meantime, however, a number of sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, philosophers, and media scholars working from a social constructivist perspective had taken up Hardman's call for understanding children's lives on their own terms, and not as a minor aspect of the adult world. Since the early 1990s, a multi-disciplinary collective of childhood scholars worked to establish a counter-paradigm to the emphasis on children's development, and to conceptualize socialization without reducing it to a process of becoming adult (Prout and James 1990, see also Tisdall and Punch 2012: 251). According to the emergent childhood studies, children were not merely reproducing their parents' values, but actively engaging with, and influencing, the world around them. As such, childhood studies also prompted a challenge to the view that children are primarily vulnerable and in need of adult protection.

Undoubtedly, childhood studies have introduced a number of useful perspectives on children's active part in social life. Claims of a paradigm shift seem, however, to be exaggerated (see Ryan 2008: 554). Anthropologists did take children's lives seriously long before admonitions against ignoring them surfaced in the 1990s. Myra Bluebond-Langner's (1978) work is an obvious example, as is Norwegian anthropologist Sigurd Berentzen's (1990) study of children's culture in Norway, where children were taken seriously as informants in their own right without reducing their activities to preparations for an imagined future adulthood. The critique from childhood studies in the 1990s was not so much a critique *of* anthropology, where ethnographic fieldwork yielded exactly the kind of data these theorists found lacking in sociology and developmental psychology, but rather a critique *from* anthropology, aimed at disciplines that tended to ignore children's actual lives. The shift in emphasis from "becoming" to "being" has in large part occurred within a social constructivist paradigm. While acknowledging the shift in childhood studies from viewing children as adults-in-making to viewing them as beings in their own right, this thesis argues that the analytical shift has tended to ignore the multiple becomings in children's lives that are not related to a linear movement towards becoming adult. In other words, becoming should not be understood in a narrow sense in terms of becoming adult, but in terms of multiple becomings (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Children in Norway are without doubt concerned with the future, but not necessarily in terms of growing up.

Research design and methodology

Fieldwork was primarily carried out in Breines, a neighbourhood of approximately 5 000 people in Kristiansand.³¹ Following an increase in population of more than 13 % in the previous decade, Kristiansand was the fifth largest city in Norway in 2011 with around 82 000 inhabitants (Nilsen et al. 2012: 28). Children in Kristiansand, like elsewhere in Norway, enrol in kindergarten at an early age, and in 2010 more than 90 % of children aged between one and five in the region attended kindergarten (Nilsen et al. 2012: 25).

Breines primary school, where I first started my fieldwork, is one of 24 public primary schools in Kristiansand. On my arrival, the children in the school class I was going to follow had already been informed by their teacher that a researcher was going to spend time with them in the coming year. I introduced myself by giving a fifteen minute presentation in front of the class, where I told them about myself and my research project. As a researcher, I told them, my job was to talk to children about reading and writing. I explained that I was going to write a book about them, and that I was going to take notes of what people said and did so I would not forget. I emphasized that they could choose whether they wanted to participate in the research project, and that they could retract their permission at any time. I also told them I would not use their real names in the book, to ensure that no one could identify them.

A school is in many ways an obvious location for studying literacy practices. For the purposes of this project, my intention was to begin fieldwork in the school, and then expand my attention outwards as I got to know people in the neighbourhood. Having been introduced to the children and their families by the school principal and

³¹ Breines is not the actual name of the neighbourhood. Some literature sources have been omitted in this section for anonymization purposes.

teachers, I tried to be alert to the possible methodical problem pointed to by Julie Tammivaara and D. Scott Enright (1986: 231), that classroom ethnographers risk being considered “another teacher”, in which case, they argue, “the information elicited from child informants will be very limited and very suspect”. In the classroom, children usually expect adults to assist them, and, drawing on previous fieldwork experiences (Helgesen 2008), I attempted to outline a role for myself that differed from other adults in school. For example, I generally refrained from trying to settle disputes between the children, and I did not carry keys to any of the classrooms or to the toy shed. Although I could not erase the obvious age difference between the children and me, I put much effort into diminishing status differences by encouraging the children to take the role of experts who could teach me new things.

Research on children’s literacy acquisition has often been done from the perspective of what adults decide is important and appropriate. I deliberately aimed my ethnographic attention at child-initiated activities that they themselves appeared to find meaningful. During the first weeks of fieldwork I joined the children throughout their school day, including classroom instruction, recess, and the after school program. I also participated regularly in school-related activities such as lunch meals, library visits, school parties, and walking to and from school. Gradually, I expanded my attention to activities taking place outside school, including in the neighbourhood as well as in the children’s homes. When observing the children at home, I took notes on homework, drawings, conversations with parents and siblings, birthday parties, book reading, and their uses of TV, newspapers, phones, and the internet. I also joined the families for trips to the local shopping centre, as well as day trips to theme parks and errands downtown. The primary aim of my research was to explore children’s literacy practices outside adult supervision.

I also joined one of the families during out-of-town weekend trips, twice in 2013 and once in 2016, to partake in cosplay conventions other places in Norway. During

the last of these events, in Lillestrøm, I also put on a costume. Joining hundreds of cosplayers, I wore a Japanese-style *kigurumi* inspired by the Cookie Monster from Jim Henson's TV series *Sesame Street*. The series has existed in Norway since 1991, and the Cookie Monster, notorious for its uncontrollable urge for cookies, is also known for teaching millions of children in the United States that "C is for cookie".³² In addition to participant observation at cosplay conventions, I have interviewed cosplayers about their practices on several occasions both face to face and via social media.

During previous research (see Helgesen 2008, 2010), I explored the acquisition of literacy among children aged five and six in a San Francisco kindergarten. I expected the children in Kristiansand to have a larger textual repertoire to draw on, both due to their age and to the prevalence of computers and smart phones. The children in Kristiansand all turned nine in 2012, and were old enough to express themselves both verbally and in text, yet considered too young by adults around them to make many decisions on their own. Soon after beginning fieldwork, I realized that a large share of the children's literacy practices outside the classroom took place online. As their computer and internet practices grabbed more and more of my attention, it became clear that I needed to rethink my methodological approaches.

As I had no previous experience with the online worlds used by the children, I soon entered into an apprenticeship where the children were the experts who showed me how things worked. Several children embraced this expert role, and introduced me to many of the nuances that distinguished them from novice users such as myself. For example, one boy showed me how he would use multiple "tabs" in his web browser to run several *MovieStarPlanet* accounts simultaneously, thus embodying two or more avatars at the same time. Not content with observing their online activities as a

³² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BovQyphS8kA> (Accessed 31 July 2016)

spectator, and following David Myers' (2010: 10) suggestion that "to understand computer game play, it is necessary to fully experience that play", I asked the children if they could assist me in creating a profile on the most popular websites. By making user profiles on MovieStarPlanet and other popular online worlds, I gained access to their artwork, such as posters and animated films. With their permission, I created a digital archive consisting of 150 of the approximately 260 films the children created in 2012.

Online worlds are ephemeral by default, making it a priority for me to document in detail not only what users told me about their interactions, but also taking screenshots and doing video recordings of on-screen events. Bainbridge points to the ephemerality of online spaces compared to earlier video games, many of which can still be played as long as one has access to the necessary hardware. In contrast, online worlds "depend on the extensive social infrastructure of the companies that support them and on the current population of people who inhabit them" (Bainbridge 2007: 473). While trying to capture the specific features of each online world the children engaged with, I also paid attention to features that were common across these worlds, such as the requirement for users to register accounts by applying usernames and passwords. In the rapidly changing technological landscape, usernames and passwords have remained a surprisingly resilient feature of online worlds.

Numerous anthropologists have suggested participant observation as a particularly useful method for studying online worlds (see Boellstorff 2006: 30, Manning 2009: 311). My approach differed from that of Boellstorff (2008), who in his study of the online world Second Life³³ chose to recruit informants exclusively online. Boellstorff's deliberate decision to avoid meeting people offline illustrated how online

³³ <http://secondlife.com/> (Accessed 31 July 2016)

worlds could be studied on their own terms, rather than being seen as a secondary phenomenon to the offline world. In the case of MovieStarPlanet, however, I have doubts as to whether an exclusively online approach would be as useful. In addition to the ethical issues that arise because most users are children, a central finding in this thesis is that there is much overlap and few clear boundaries between online and offline sociality. Most interaction I observed took place between users who knew each other from before. The idea that research can be performed as purely internet-based is quickly becoming obsolete, as digital technologies increasingly become integrated into everyday life (see Hallett and Barber 2014: 308).

An ethnographic approach has several advantages over surveys and formal interviews. For example, whereas one survey indicates that, in Norway, MovieStarPlanet is mainly popular among girls (Liestøl 2014), I found that the website was immensely popular among both girls and boys. Surveys, especially where children are assisted by their parents when answering, can produce unreliable data because respondents may be influenced by what they consider to be socially approved. As a consequence, boys might undercommunicate their use of websites that can be considered girls' domain. In addition, the lack of a standardised terminology means that surveys seldom provide reliable comparative data if we want to know how people actually engage with online worlds. For example, Elisabeth Staksrud (2013: 27, my translation) refers to a 2010 survey among Norwegian children, where approximately a quarter of the respondents reported that they have "visited a virtual world". The immense popularity of websites such as Club Penguin³⁴ and Habbo³⁵ at the time indicates that these figures do not necessarily reflect the actual proportion of children who have visited such worlds. If we take into consideration that many of the children

³⁴ <http://www.clubpenguin.com> (Accessed 31 July 2016)

³⁵ <http://www.habbo.com> (Accessed 31 July 2016)

in Kristiansand, as well as their parents and teachers, referred to online worlds as “games” rather than “virtual worlds”, it seems safe to assume that children’s actual engagement with online worlds has been underreported in some surveys.

In addition to taking screenshots and recording video and audio, I collected more than a hundred drawings and handwritten texts. Having learnt from previous fieldwork experience in San Francisco that children might want to borrow my notebook to draw and write in, I introduced two notebooks from the start. One, I told them, was for me to take notes in. The other was for all the children to draw and write in, and was marked with a green sticker to distinguish the two notebooks. As the second notebook circulated in the school yard, I could still take notes in my first notebook, making it possible for me to take notes on the writing process as well as collecting the finished products, and later to compare these to audio recorded conversations. The second notebook also appeared to make interview situations less stressful, by allowing interviewees to use drawings to explain things to me and create a shared focus of our conversation. In this way, drawing exercises allowed us to maintain focus for long stretches of time on relatively abstract issues such as the future.

Giving the children unrestricted access to the green notebook also had some unintended consequences. Some of the children would take the opportunity to write mean things about other children, hidden in the latter half of the book. When two girls complained to me about this, I found it necessary to tear these pages out to keep the comments out of circulation. Some of the children also found it convenient to have someone around who was carrying a pen and paper at all times. One boy increasingly used me as his personal secretary during the school day, asking me to write down figures from his math exercises, or appointments he needed to remember for later. At one point I went to the step of fetching him a sheet of paper and a pen, and asked him to write it down himself. In general, though, I usually complied with the children’s requests for assistance.

During early stages of fieldwork I followed Berentzen's (1990) suggestion to focus on a new child every day, to ensure that I did not only pay attention to those who were the most outspoken. Based on initial observations, I eventually focused on a smaller number of children. A total of eight focal children, including Tariq and Matilde, are presented by pseudonym in the thesis. As a precaution to ensure their anonymity, I have changed some minor details about their family constellations, and I have also made slight changes to the time and place of some events in cases where these details were not considered important for the argument (see also Miller 2011: xi, Boellstorff et al. 2012: 139). Unless explicitly stated, all quotations from informants have been translated from Norwegian to English. Direct quotations from informants are marked with double quotation marks. Three dots indicate interrupted speech, and three dots within a parenthesis signifies that something has been left out.

The project has been conducted in accordance with guidelines from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) and the Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH). I informed all relevant parties, including the children, their parents, and school employees, about my research methods at the outset of my fieldwork. An Arabic-speaking interpreter was present at a parents' meeting where I presented my project. I provided information to the parents about the possibility of withdrawing from the research project, about routines for dealing with potential conflicts of interests, who they could contact for inquiries, and other ethical issues that could surface due to carrying out research with minors. I asked one parent of each child to sign a consent form, which is included as Appendix 5, and later asked for their permission to store recordings of interviews in a consent form included as Appendix 6.

During fieldwork I repeatedly reminded the children what I was doing, for example by commenting that I would like to include things they said or did in my book. Rather than taking the children's initial consent to be conclusive, I tried to ensure that

they knew about the possibility of withdrawing from the study, and that they could ask me to leave out particular things they said or did. I asked for permission in each instance when I wanted to make photocopies of their drawings and texts, and also showed them printouts of the screenshots from MovieStarPlanet that I wanted to use. On a few occasions I put down the notebook to clearly signal that I was not taking notes during episodes when I found it inappropriate to do so.

Online, I made a decision not to actively send friend requests to anyone, but instead to accept friend requests sent by the children's accounts, and to ignore friend requests from people I did not know. This way, I tried not to put pressure on anyone to befriend me, and ensured that I had the right permissions both from the children and their parents to include them in the study. One month after I initially created my MovieStarPlanet account, fifteen of the twenty children had sent me friend requests, and I had accepted all of them. When I returned to the neighbourhood in 2013, and later in 2016, I brought printed copies of screenshot images I wanted to use, and showed them to the children. These measures were taken to ensure that the initial informed consent made by the children and their parents was valid.

I tried to keep my promise to the children that I would not tell their parents or teachers about the things they did and told me, unless they explicitly agreed to do so. Yet, my emphasis on not revealing secrets to adults occasionally made me more careless when it came to the information flow among the children. For example, in the early days of my MovieStarPlanet career, when eight of the children had sent me invitations to be friends on the website, I was sitting with two of the boys in the class, who showed a particular interest in my friend list. One of the boys asked me if I wanted to befriend a random stranger we met in a chat room:

Boy 1: "Should we ask to be friends?"

E: "No, I only want to be friends with people I know".

Boy 1: "Oh hey do you want to ask Amina to be friends? What's her name?"

Boy 2: "Her name is Sandra23".

E: "If she wants to be friends with me she will have to ask me".

Boy 1: "I have to see how many friends you have. Do you know her?"
[points at an avatar]

E: "Mm".

Boy 2: "Oh yes, that's her, that's Matilde".

Boy 1: "And who is this?" [points at another avatar]

Boy 2: "That's a user I made once".

Boy 1: "And this?" [points at another avatar]

Boy 2: "Eh, Amina's sister".

Boy 1: "And who is this?" [points at another avatar]

Boy 2: "David".

Boy 1: "And this?" [points at another avatar]

Boy 2: "I don't know".

Boy 1: "Who is this?" [turns to me and points at another avatar]

E: "I can't say who everybody is, because not everybody wants to..."

Boy 1: "Okay, but do you know her?" [points at the same avatar]

E: "I promised not to tell".

Boy 2: "But we can look her up".

Boy 1: "Yes but do you know her for real?"

E: "Mm. I know everyone here for real, but not everybody is in your class".

Boy 1: "Do you know him too?" [points to another avatar]

E: "Mm".

Boy 2: "That's William [laughs]".

Boy 1: "No".

Boy 2: “Yes, he’s got a new user”.

Boy 1: “Level two already? I want to see how much fame he’s got. Just look at the high scores”.

Boy 2: “Okay [laughs]”.

The audio recording shows how the two boys eagerly investigated my friend list to find people they knew. Unbeknownst to me at the time, several of the children tried hard to keep their usernames hidden from others. Without realizing it, I had assisted the two boys in identifying the user names of several children in their class. After this incident, I decided not to show my friend list to anyone, to avoid similar gaffes.

The articles

The four articles that follow draw on ethnographic data to explore how recent developments in digital technologies have facilitated new forms of sociality and play in Norway. Covering a range of social practices related to cosplay, online filmmaking, avatar creation, and neighbourhood play, taken together the articles all deal with how alphabetic literacy plays a crucial role for children in contemporary Norway. Knowing how to read and write, far from becoming less important, is indispensable whether children want to search for Japanese YouTube videos, create animated films, or hang out with friends in a MovieStarPlanet chatroom.

The first article, “Miku’s Mask: Fictional Encounters in Children’s Costume Play”, explores the significance of Japanese popular culture in Norway through an analysis of cosplay practices. By showing how cosplay entails ongoing shifts between online and offline contexts as participants develop their costumes and characters, the article suggests that digital technologies accommodate new forms of play among

human and non-human bodies. The article argues that YouTube provides a platform for children's playful experimentation with posthuman subjectivities, where they orient themselves toward the future not in terms of becoming adult but in terms of multiple becomings. Drawing on the concept of techno-animism, the article suggests that masking in cosplay is not primarily a matter of covering up, but of opening up the person to the world.

The second article, "Crafting Future Selves: Time-Tricking and the Limits of Temporal Play in Children's Online Filmmaking", picks up the theme of how human and non-human bodies coexist in online sociality. Turning to the online world MovieStarPlanet, the article investigates children's online filmmaking as a tool for creativity and expression. More specifically, the article argues that filmic montage allows filmmakers to experiment with the boundaries of what it is possible to become, such as by taking perspectives not just on the future, but from the future. By showing how avatars constitute on-screen extensions of selves, the article suggests that inhabitants of online worlds explore and experiment with otherwise inaccessible viewpoints and perspectives.

In the third article, titled "Fragile Avatars: Playful Betrayal in Children's Online Hacking Practices", I turn attention to what happens when inhabitants of online worlds lose control of their digital bodies. The article discusses the uncertainties that arise when it is not clear who is behind the various avatars encountered in chatrooms. By expanding on Bateson's concept of framing to illuminate the paradoxical nature of online play, the article argues that hacking involves the simultaneous conjuring of apparently contradictory frames. Hacking, understood as a form of play, takes advantage of the fluid boundaries between play and non-play. By making subversive use of egalitarian values of inclusion to exploit the trust of their friends, users gain the power to selectively mute and exclude other users.

The fourth and final article, “Uncertain Times: The Safety of Home in Children’s Future Projections”, also addresses uncertainty, and turns the ethnographic attention to the children’s activities in the neighbourhood rather than online. The article discusses how distinctions between safe and unsafe spaces are established, maintained, and challenged through a discussion of a group of children’s attempt to build a treehouse in the local forest. The analysis presents a series of events where the safety of home is challenged, and shows how fear contributes to limiting children’s geographical mobility. The article argues that fear does not depend on an actually existing threat, but, on the contrary, can be intensified in situations where the object of fear is invisible.

Taken together, the four articles suggest that children’s engagement with digital technologies accommodate new forms of sociality and play. Props, whether in the form of toys, costumes, or avatars, afford particular viewpoints that allow participants to take on entirely new perspectives in the paradoxical space between human and non-human bodies. Throughout the articles, I argue that the most relevant sites for understanding people’s engagement with the internet are not necessarily found online. Identifying a productive tension between techno-naturalist and techno-animist perspectives in children’s activities, the thesis brings us one step closer to understanding the phenomenon we call play.

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Articles



Miku's mask: Fictional encounters in children's costume play



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Abstract

Children's engagement with Japanese toys and fictional characters has taken on new significance in the age of YouTube. Drawing on ethnographic research on technology-mediated play among 8- and 9-year-olds in Norway, this article shows how boundaries between "real" humans and "fake" non-humans are blurred and undermined when children take on the perspective of a fictional pop star known as Miku. I argue that YouTube provides a platform for children's playful experimentation with posthuman subjectivities, where they orient themselves toward the future not in terms of becoming adult but in terms of multiple becomings.

Keywords

Animism, becoming, cosplay, play, YouTube

Quietly seated in front of a laptop computer, 9-year-old Matilde and two of her friends are watching a Japanese YouTube video.¹ On the screen, hundreds of people have gathered in front of a concert stage, waving green glow sticks in the air in anticipation of the upcoming show. Miku suddenly appears from a cloud of smoke on the stage, and the audience cheers enthusiastically as the pop star smiles and waves back at them. The camera zooms in on Miku as she starts singing, and the crowd can be heard singing along to the familiar lyrics. Soon, however, Miku's impressive vocal range and pace make it impossible for the audience to keep up with her singing.

Dressed in cyan blue to match the color of her characteristic pigtails, Miku, like most of the audience, appears to be in her mid-teens. She stands out from the crowd in front of her, however, not only because she is a pop star but also because she is not human. Projected on a large transparent screen on stage, Miku's performance was digitally

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Figure 1. Vocaloid vocal synthesizer software, featuring Hatsune Miku.

Source: http://www.crypton.co.jp/miku_eng, reproduced with permission from Crypton Future Media.

created ahead of the actual concert. For Matilde and her friends, as for the spectators on the screen, Miku's cartoonish rather than realistic appearance leaves no doubt that she is not human. In addition to her sudden appearance and disappearance in clouds of smoke, the spectators are again reminded of the pop star's non-human characteristics when, near the end of the show, a pair of wings emerge from Miku's shoulders, lifting her high above the stage.

Originally designed by the Japanese company Crypton Future Media, Miku was created as a mascot to illustrate the cover of their "Hatsune Miku" vocal synthesizer software released in 2007 (see Figure 1). Created using Yamaha's Vocaloid technology, the software allows users to create their own music through vocal synthesis by typing Japanese lyrics and adjusting features like pitch trajectory and vibrato. On Miku's

official Facebook page, the software is described as capable of singing “any song that anybody composes.”² The company allowed fans to use images of Miku freely, and soon a plethora of fan-created music videos appeared on video-sharing websites such as NicoNicoDouga and YouTube (Condry, 2013). Miku’s growing fan base guided the company’s decision to design an animated version of the pop star, who could perform user-created songs on stage. Accordingly, Miku’s fans play a key role in her actualization on stage, not only as spectators but also as creators of the songs she performs.

Throughout the 20th century, new technologies have been widely used by artists and performers to enhance, distort, or otherwise alter their products and performances. In the 1950s, American pop artists such as Alvin and the Chipmunks revolutionized the use of analogue recording techniques by manipulating the pitch and tempo of recorded voices to create inhuman vocal harmonies. The use of visual effects to create the illusion of sudden appearance and disappearance was a defining feature of the early 20th century science fiction films by French director George Méliès. When Miku moves around on stage, apparently with no outside manipulation, she can be seen as the latest in a long tradition of technology-mediated attempts to highlight and explore the possibilities and limitations of the human body.

Since videos from her live shows appeared online in 2009, Miku has become increasingly popular among children and youth worldwide, with several videos reaching millions of views on YouTube. Performances outside Japan, such as the 2014 tour of North America as the opening act for Lady Gaga, also indicate a growing interest in the phenomenon. Described by fans as an open-source artist who represents “an image of thousands of artists,”³ Miku provides a platform allowing fans to expand on the character rather than just watching her perform. The fictional pop star is therefore best understood not as an *object* in the sense of a complete form, but as a sample of *material*, providing a potential for further transformation (Ingold, 2012). Miku’s ambiguous materiality provides a starting point for understanding how children, in their playful engagement with toys and fictional characters, become “creators of their own worlds” (Ruckenstein, 2013: 17).

In the 1990s, the emerging field of childhood studies aimed at taking children seriously as active and capable subjects, in response to the tendency in earlier research to treat children as incompetent adults-to-be. By emphasizing children’s agency, however, little attention was given to the assumption of a stable and autonomous subject underpinning the concept of agency. In a critical examination of earlier studies, Lee (2001) argues that what he calls our age of uncertainty is characterized by a fluidity that requires us to consider both adults and children as incomplete and unfinished. Rather than assuming that children are simply becoming adults, we need to account for “many different states of becoming” in children’s lives (Lee, 2001: 114). Elaborating on Lee’s approach, Prout (2005) suggests that children’s multiple becomings emerge through “hybridization,” when human and non-human entities merge to “create something new” (p. 113).

Lee and Prout’s influential attempt to dethrone the human subject in favor of multiple becomings resonates with contemporary feminist philosophy such as Braidotti’s (2013) posthumanist approach. Like them, she criticizes social constructivist perspectives for assuming a categorical distinction between nature and culture, which she suggests replacing with a monist, non-dualistic understanding of material flows across human and non-human domains. Rather than assuming that subjectivity pre-exists in individual

subjects, the analysis is a matter of understanding how action produces subjectivity. Opposing the inherent techno-pessimism and moral panic in much contemporary social theory, Braidotti celebrates the nomadic, non-unitary posthuman subjects that are currently emerging. Although she does not address children specifically, Braidotti's posthumanism suggests a constructive addition to Lee and Prout's approach to contemporary childhoods in terms of multiple becomings. New technologies provide crucial components for experimentation with heterogeneous subjectivities and are thus central to the emergence of what Prout (2005) terms "new forms of childhood" (p. 114).

Ethnographic context and research design

This article investigates children's YouTube-mediated play in contemporary Norway. The ethnographic material was collected during fieldwork in 2012–2013 among 20 children (10 girls, 10 boys) in Kristiansand, a city of 85,000 inhabitants in the south of Norway. Aiming to improve our understanding of literacy practices among immigrant families, the research project was designed to investigate children's engagement with new technologies in their everyday lives. I initially spent time in the local primary school in order to get to know the children and their families. Gradually expanding the scope of inquiry to include arenas outside school, I joined the children as they hung out in the local neighborhood, played video games, and watched YouTube videos. Over time, I was invited to join activities at the local youth club, family gatherings, and weekend trips out of town, allowing me to include the children's siblings, friends, and parents in the study. In this article, I focus on play activities initiated by the children themselves, rather than activities organized by adults.

During the first month of fieldwork, I wrote down fieldnotes while joining the children in their everyday activities in and out of school. By showing interest in the activities they found meaningful, I gradually modified my research questions based on the children's interests. Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) refer to this approach as methodological immaturity, where they understand immaturity not as a lack, but as an openness to the new and unexpected that allows researchers access to otherwise inaccessible topics and activities. Although not an explicit part of my original research design, the children's engagement with Japanese popular culture soon caught my interest. Pokémon cards, hand-held Nintendo video games, and Japanese YouTube videos were prevalent features of the children's peer culture. For example, one boy taught himself origami after watching a YouTube tutorial⁴ and later taught other kids how to fold paper ninja stars. Early on, I found that my notes on these topics were heavily biased toward the boys' activities. Over time, however, Matilde and her friends introduced me to a world of YouTube-mediated play that had been near invisible to me during the early stage of fieldwork.

I supplemented observational data with tape-recorded conversations with the kids as they watched YouTube videos, played computer games, and navigated online worlds. For practical reasons, most of these sessions took place during school hours, and many of the children enthusiastically welcomed the opportunity to partake in activities that were usually out of bounds in school. Children organize their lives in ways that are often independent of, and sometimes in opposition to, researchers' aims and objectives (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). When the children encouraged each other to write

swear words in front of me, or sent insulting online messages to classmates, these subversive practices should not be seen as non-compliance, but as potential data. Researching children's lives requires openness to the often unexpected ways in which children appropriate and manipulate research techniques for their own means (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). A crucial dimension of this openness involves acknowledging that ethnographers, like our informants, are experimenting with an emergent world.

The widespread use of computers among the children in Kristiansand is indicative of a general trend in contemporary Norway. With an estimated 85% of the population spending time online every day, Internet access can be considered near universal in Norway (Statistics Norway, 2014). Most of the children in my study came from relatively low-income households, but still had access to at least one Internet-connected computer at home. Many of the families also owned tablets and smartphones, providing the children with a wide assortment of gadgets for playing games and watching videos online.

Since its launch in 2005, the Google-owned web service YouTube has quickly become one of the primary online destinations for millions of youth worldwide. The children in Kristiansand were no exception, and many of them spent time on YouTube daily. The website allows anyone with an Internet connection to watch or upload videos free of charge, in exchange for watching advertisements between and during video clips. Some of the children told me that they spent far more time on YouTube than their parents knew about, as tablets and smartphones made it possible for them to stay online long after bedtime. Some kids would seek out videos of other people playing video games, allowing them access to games they could not afford or that their parents would not let them play. As such, YouTube practices took place in a largely unofficial world, partly hidden from adults' gaze.

Fakeness and paradox

According to the children in Kristiansand, Miku's defining feature was her fakeness. Matilde elaborated,

She sings and she dances, but she's actually fake ... She can do whatever she wants because she's fake. In one video she started singing, and when she was done she just disappeared. If anyone can get up on that stage and touch her, it will go right through ... It's just like at the cinema. There's a machine inside that box, just like with movies, that's how they get sound. But there's nobody *saying* it. It's just fake. It's not real.⁵

The term "fake" usually carried negative connotations among the children. Concerns about fake Pokémon cards, for example, implied that the owner had been hoaxed or possibly tried to hoax others. Some kids claimed they could tell fake Pokémon cards from authentic ones by closely examining their texture and color, a skill that was treated with awe as well as suspicion by their peers. In discussions about whether such cards were "real" or "fake," fakeness was considered synonymous with inauthenticity. Although the kids sometimes found it difficult to determine whether specific cards were authentic or not, all Pokémon cards were in principle considered either "real" or "fake."

The children's descriptions of Miku's fakeness did not fit into this equation of fakeness with inauthenticity. Instead, as Matilde's statement suggests, the fictional pop star was considered simultaneously fake and real. As such, Miku directs our attention to the centrality of paradox in human communication. Paradoxes present us with two or more seemingly contradictory communicative frames, but this incommensurability is only apparent. According to Bateson (2000), paradoxes are not logical errors, but crucial guiding principles in human activities such as play, ritual, metaphor, and humor. Rather than indicating a lack of authenticity, Miku's fakeness was a crucial component of her capacity to "do whatever she wants." This is why Miku's sudden disappearance in a cloud of smoke did not break with the illusion of the show, but rather contributed to the spectacle by bringing Miku's ambiguous materiality into view.

A fascination with bodily transcendence was evident in the children's many accounts of how cartoon characters and superheroes had attained their special powers. They expressed detailed knowledge not only about the particular skills exhibited by these fictional characters but also about the origins of their special powers. For example, one girl told her friends about the dog Jake from the animated TV-series *Adventure Time*. At first, she said, he was just a normal dog, but after rolling in some magical mud he was granted special powers that allowed him to change his shape and size at will. On another occasion, a girl recounted in detail how Spiderman got his special powers. In this regard, Miku was somewhat anomalous, as she did not have an explicit myth of origin. When I asked Matilde about Miku's life, she told me, "I don't know the names of her friends and stuff. I just know Miku." According to fans, the fact that she only has "a name and a picture" means that "Miku is what you make her."⁶

Matilde's engagement with Miku was not limited to watching videos on YouTube. With her mother's approval, she had bought a Miku costume online, making it possible for her to dress up and perform as the fictional pop star. During a visit to her home, Matilde showed me a video of herself dressed as Miku, rehearsing dance moves while watching the original performance on YouTube (see Figure 2). Having spent numerous hours practicing the dance, Matilde told me that some of Miku's moves were impossible to perform: "It's possible in one song or another, but not when she moves really fast. That was too difficult."

As pointed out by Schwartzman (1976), studies of children's play have often been content with categorizing play activities, in the process reducing play to an imitation of, or a preparation for, adult life. Although imitation is often a key component of children's play, Matilde's engagement with Miku illustrates how children draw on a wide variety of resources in play that cannot be reduced to an imitation of adult activities. Her costumed performance can be understood as a "socio-technical assemblage" (Prout, 2005: 125), composed of the costume, the fictional pop star, and Matilde's own body. What appears to be an imitation of the fictional pop star exemplifies a playful experimentation with alternative, rhizomatic directions of growth.

Children's bodies are constantly undergoing growth and change, yet in everyday life, these changes are largely imperceptible. By dressing and acting like Miku, however, Matilde explicitly addressed the capabilities and limitations of her body. As such, the event provides support for Prout's (2005) argument that "assemblages supplement and extend human capacities in ways that open up new powers and possibilities" (p. 118).



Figure 2. Matilde dressed up as Miku, dancing while watching YouTube. Images reprinted with permission from Matilde and her mother.

The appearance of disorder in children's play does not indicate a lack of order, but arises "because their activities contain a profusion of different orders which they can move between very rapidly" (Lee, 2001: 141). This analytic path allows us to understand paradoxes in children's play in conjunction with recent anthropological studies of animism.

Early anthropologists applied the term animism to cosmologies characterized by a projection of human characteristics onto the environment. During the 20th century, many scholars rejected the distinction between primitive, animist societies and modern, naturalistic societies, considering it a remnant of the discipline's early reliance on social evolutionism. In the last decade, however, a number of anthropologists have attempted to reformulate and revitalize the animism concept. Willerslev (2007), for example, addresses animism among the Siberian Yukaghirs not in terms of an overarching cosmology, but as a particular, context-dependent way of perceiving the environment. In this perspective, animism and naturalism can co-exist as alternative frameworks of perception rather than corresponding to different kinds of societies.

Although usually characterized as non-human, the children sometimes described Miku as if she were human. For example, when comparing Miku to the popular Pokémon character Pikachu, Matilde told her friends "She's not an animal, she's actually human." Like Pikachu, as described by Allison (2006), Miku appears to be small, cute, and fragile, yet also exhibits great powers. By referring to Miku as "human," Matilde did not necessarily attribute Miku with human intentionality, but with a certain kind of potentiality characteristic of animistic practices (Willerslev et al., 2013). According to proponents of the new animism, as for Lee, Prout, and Braidotti, subjectivity is best understood not as an inherent property of the person, but as a potential that is actualized in particular contexts.

Allison (2006) describes a particular Japanese form of Shinto-infused techno-animism, characterized by a hybridization of humans, animals, spirits, and technology. Japanese video game characters such as the dogs in *Nintendogs* are on the one hand "digital and non-human," yet paradoxically also "living-like beings" (Ruckenstein, 2013: 15). Jensen and Blok (2013) contrast Japanese techno-animism to the "alienation

and fear” characteristic of Western encounters with technology-mediated non-humans (p. 105). Approaching children’s technology-mediated play through the lens of animism can shed useful light on the mechanisms involved when children attribute human characteristics to non-human entities and vice versa.

Play is ubiquitous and easily recognizable in children’s lives, yet ideological underpinnings tend to shape attempts at defining the concept (Sutton-Smith, 2001). One recent study found that children themselves tend to describe play in terms of “fun” (Glenn et al., 2012: 191). As the authors point out, however, discursive conventions and adult expectations often shape children’s descriptions of play, and their verbal accounts are therefore of limited value for developing an analytical concept of play. By considering play instead, like animistic practices, to be primarily characterized by paradox, it becomes clear that play is not necessarily about “fun,” but can be a highly serious matter with much at stake for its participants. Matilde’s engagement with Miku offers an opportunity to understand how new childhoods emerge through playful experimentation with “what we are actually capable of becoming” (Braidotti, 2013: 92).

Cosplay conventions

In June 2013, Matilde and her family invited me on a weekend trip to Desucon, Norway’s largest cosplay convention held annually in Oslo. Cosplay, or costume play, entails expressing fandom by dressing up and performing like fictional characters from anime, movies, or video games. Cosplay has become increasingly popular among Norwegian youth over the last decade, and this year’s Desucon had moved to a larger venue due to the growing number of attendants. Matilde had been introduced to cosplay by her older sister, and together they joined hundreds of others who shared their interest in costumes and popular mythology at Desucon.

Attention to detail is highly valued among cosplayers, and dedicated participants can often be recognized by subtle hints in their costumes. When Matilde first told me about her interest in cosplay, she explicitly stated one of the criteria for cosplay costumes: “You can dress up as anything you want. You can be anything, as long as it’s something someone knows what is.” As the statement suggests, visual recognition is an important dimension of cosplay. As such, it differs from other popular forms of costumed role play such as live-action role playing and historical reenactments, where the role playing aspect often dominates. Whereas some cosplayers attempt to copy a character as faithfully as possible, for example choosing to cosplay only characters that share their physical features, others create altogether new characters or make deliberate changes to existing ones to reflect their personal taste. Although Matilde had bought her costume online rather than sewing it herself, she was highly attentive to getting the details of the costume right. She had studied a YouTube video tutorial on how to put on the wig and make-up,⁷ and stressed the importance of having the right kind of pen to draw the tattoo on Miku’s shoulder. Getting the tattoo right, she said, was difficult, but crucial if she wanted other cosplayers to recognize her as a proper Miku.

Desucon offered a wide range of organized events such as stage shows, Japanese language courses, and role playing competitions. Still, many cosplayers spent much time in the convention hallways or the market place, chatting and exchanging photos with



Figure 3. Matilde cosplaying as Miku, exchanging hugs with other participants at Desucon. Photo by the author.

other cosplayers. Walking through the hallways, Matilde was repeatedly approached by other cosplayers who recognized her and wanted their photo taken with her. One teenage boy, dressed as another Vocaloid pop star known as Kaito, approached her with a loud “Miku!” and asked for a hug. As his friends photographed the two together, Kaito told Matilde, “We are from the same place. We are best friends.” Usual thresholds for approaching strangers appeared to diminish during encounters like these, where children, youth, and adults engaged in play together (see Figure 3). Similar findings have been made among cosplayers in the United States, who claim that strangers often “presume a relationship” with them because “they already have a relationship with the character” (Napier, 2007: 162). Exchanging photos and hugs offered Matilde an entry into the cosplay community by providing other cosplayers with an opportunity to engage with a human version of the fake pop star.

People have at all times been fascinated with decorating and altering the human body, and numerous ethnographic accounts describe people who take on non-human bodies and perspectives by wearing animal outfits. Among the Yukaghirs, for example, the hunter can move in and out of personhood and can take on “the appearance and viewpoint” of the prey (Willerslev, 2007: 2). Many cosplayers craft their own costumes, sometimes bringing two or more costumes to a convention so that they can vary their appearance. Others, such as Matilde, become particularly attached to specific costumes, over time developing a sensibility to the character’s movements and perception after hours of rehearsing and performing dance moves, gestures, and poses. Recounting her experience of walking around at Desucon, she explained,

It feels real, but it's not actually real ... I was wearing make-up just like Miku. I changed a little bit with the make-up and hair and costume. I thought a little about what Miku usually does, and then I thought about how I *feel* Miku ... It's kind of like splitting the brain. There are lots of small pieces that are attached. Only it's just two parts, cut through the middle. One is from the Miku-brain, even though it doesn't exist. And one is from myself ... So I thought a little bit that I was fake.

For Matilde, cosplay was not just a matter of dressing and acting like the fictional pop star, but involved an increased attentiveness to Miku's perspective. According to Schechner (1985), performing as a character is not a matter of fully transforming into another being, but of acting "in-between identities" (p. 295). Theatrical performance entails a paradox whereby participants can be "not me" and yet "not not me" (Schechner, 1985: 295). Matilde's statement suggests that she holds a "double perspective" (Willerslev, 2007: 88–89), commonly found in animistic practices, where two apparently exclusive perspectives operate simultaneously.

By taking on the perspective of fictional characters, cosplayers engage in what Walton (1990) refers to as a "deliberate daydream" as they turn fiction into embodied make-believe (pp. 67–68). In Ingold's (2000) terms, the primary purpose of costumes is not to cover the body, but to enable particular skills and dispositions by "opening up ... the person to the world" (p. 94). When Matilde dressed up as Miku at Desucon, she combined and redirected a range of materials in order to draw on the "practical effectivities" (Ingold, 2000: 129) of the fictional pop star.

Embarrassment and the non-human gaze

Despite the many hours of rehearsing and planning, Matilde was not prepared for what met her at Desucon. Here, she recounts a hallway encounter with several other Mikus:

I was just walking around to have a look. Then I saw another Miku, and she started coming towards me. Then she started taking photos. And then lots of people started taking photos ... When one took a photo, lots of other Mikus showed up. So I just had to stand still. I couldn't leave ... There were actually lots of people there, so I felt a little embarrassed. There were so many people, and I thought they stared so much. Because when there's a lot of people, it's like they don't blink at the same time. So when one blinks, another one stares. Then another one blinks, and the other one stares. And then the one who blinked stares, and then the other one begins to stare ... So I get a little confused. I'm a little afraid that they don't like me and stuff.

Like several of her friends, Matilde described herself as a shy person, and told me that she often felt embarrassed in public. At Desucon, however, she reported feeling much more confident than usual. Knowing that others were likely to share her interest in Miku, she engaged in conversations about Japanese popular culture and performed dance moves in public with little or no indication of her usually shy demeanor. Still, the event involving the other Mikus made her feel "embarrassed" and "confused." Although paradoxes usually facilitate cosplayers' management of multiple communication frames, Matilde faced a seemingly unresolvable contradiction when encountering others wearing the same costume.

Embarrassment was a recurrent topic in conversations and games among the children in Kristiansand. In one popular game of truth or dare, participants took turns sharing their most embarrassing experiences. One boy told the others how his mother had taken his photo on the beach during the summer holiday and then “just went right ahead and put it on Facebook. That made me very embarrassed, because many thousands can see it.” This emphasis on being stared at was common among the kids, who often described feeling embarrassed when people stared at them during public performances such as classroom presentations, school parades, or trips to the local shopping center.

Embarrassment and shame are intersubjective in the sense that both entail a gaze that makes a person into “an object in the project of the Other” (Mikkelsen, 2013: 237). Among the children in Kristiansand, this Other was not necessarily human. For example, one girl gave an account of her teddy bears staring at her at night:

When it's dark in my room, sometimes when I lie down to sleep I feel that someone is staring at me. And then it's just the *teddy bears* ... Sometimes my room is very messy, so they turn into lots of things. It's very dark, so I think they look a bit like something. You can only see the shadows ... So once I got very scared, and I had to sleep together with my mom. That teddy bear made me so very scared.

According to Lykke (1996: 16), creatures like Frankenstein's monster come across as monstrous in part because their uncanny gaze contradicts Western ideas about the eyes as the mirror of the soul. When, as in the case of the teddy bears and Miku, there is no identifiable soul or human essence behind the eyes, the ambiguous gaze of someone not fully human can be disconcerting. Although the children knew perfectly well that their teddy bears were unable to harm them, the gaze of the teddy bear could elicit strong feelings of fear. When entering what Willerslev (2007) refers to as the “strange place in between human and nonhuman identities,” the ambivalence that fuels play can also be a source of confusion and fear (p. 1).

When facing the gaze of the other Mikus at Desucon, Matilde encountered an Other that was not fully human, but, like herself, an assemblage composed of human and non-human materials. By partially taking the perspective of someone who can become anything, the costume on the one hand provided Matilde with an opportunity to enter a paradoxical space in-between the human and the non-human. On the other hand, entering this playful double perspective also entailed the possibility of experiencing embarrassment and fear. As she recounts, this human yet inhuman gaze made it difficult for her to maintain the carefully crafted character that was both Matilde and Miku without fully being either. The fragility of Miku's mask was also made explicit when Matilde whispered “Don't say my name” to a family member who kept referring to her as Matilde in front of other cosplayers.

A taste of the future

When the Internet entered the public domain in the late 1980s, it was soon framed as a “fully immersive cyberspace” where users could transcend the limitations of the human body (Brians, 2011: 123). Utopian and dystopian visions of the Internet shared

the often implicit premise that technological change will allow humans to overcome the limitations of the body. A sharp distinction between offline embodiment and online disembodiment is untenable, however, once we consider how the children in Kristiansand actually engaged with YouTube. In the following excerpt, Matilde describes her favorite candy:

I really like Japan. Because there they actually have a special kind of candy that I have seen on YouTube ... I have never tasted it before, but I think it actually tastes really good. Because sometimes I feel that I can know how it tastes. And usually I think it tastes good.

The synesthetic dimension of children's YouTube practices indicates how the merging of screen space and viewer space enables access to sensory experiences that go beyond the visual. According to Deleuze (1986), cinema breaks with natural perception by offering inhuman optics such as slow motion and extreme close-ups, which operate on an affective, pre-conscious level. The affective dimension of YouTube videos also surfaced in children's reports of fear, such as when one girl described her response to the Japanese horror movie *The Ring*:⁸

Samara is a ghost. She kind of comes out of the TV and takes your heart, and she made me really scared ... We were supposed to be working on a project in class, and then she came on YouTube. There was a freaky noise ... Some started crying. I wasn't among those who started crying, but when I got home, during the night, I woke up and I had dreamt about her. It was really scary. Even though I knew that it was a movie, that it wasn't for real, but still.

Japanese YouTube videos were particularly popular among the kids. Although none of them had ever been to Japan, the children described the neon-lit streets of Tokyo in detail and gave elaborate accounts of new technological innovations they had watched on YouTube. Matilde told me about how, in the darkness of her room at night, she had watched the Tokyo skyline on YouTube: "There's lots of machines and lights and stuff in Tokyo. It's very pretty, because there are lots of beautiful lights there every night."

Like Matilde, most of the kids in my study were children of immigrants. Having spent many school vacations visiting family in their parents' home country, several children described these places in terms of lack and backwardness when compared to contemporary Norway. They talked about driving on dirt roads rather than regular streets or encountering toilets that only consisted of a hole in the ground. In contrast, the children often framed their descriptions of Japan in future-oriented terms. For example, Matilde told me about a documentary film about Japanese robot factories:

I have a feeling we are becoming lots of robots everywhere. Because once I was watching TV with my dad, and there was like an *entire* room full of robots ... So I started thinking about it. There as so many new machines and stuff. So I think it's going to happen. But I don't know when. Because it takes so long to make something new. Sometimes you have to test it. And sometimes you have to find the stuff you need. And sometimes you don't even know what you need ... So there's a whole lot of stuff they need to know. But I have a feeling that it's going to happen.

By bringing alternative futures into view, the children's YouTube practices indicate how "the visual image has a legible function beyond its visible function" (Deleuze, 1986: 15). Diverging from portrayals of Japan as "the nightmare future of any industrialized country" (see Napier, 2007: 92), Matilde and her friends embraced the promise of a better future that accompanied Japanese products and aesthetics. The children's optimistic views contrast sharply with the pessimism toward the future found among contemporary Japanese youth (Allison, 2013). Several children expressed a desire to travel to Japan. One boy showed his friends handwritten notes copied from Google Translate and told them he was teaching himself Japanese in the hope of one day visiting Tokyo.

Techno-animistic encounters allowed the children to playfully explore the possibility that Japan was not just a spatial destination, but also a temporal one. Rather than thinking of the past and the future as opposite terms, both can be approached as aspects of "a dynamic field of potential relations" (Pedersen, 2012: 144). In this perspective, what occurs in "the moment" is not restricted to what occurs in "the present," because each moment "contains all pasts and all futures as virtual potentialities" (Pedersen, 2012: 143). The idea that the future in Norway will be somewhat like the present in Japan lends itself to Grosz's (2001) suggestion that technological change is often accompanied by "fantasies surrounding the eruption of new and altogether different futures" (p. 75). The temporal dimension of children's fantasies about Japan indicates how YouTube provided not only a light in the dark but also a glimpse into the future.

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Notes

1. Hatsune Miku Live Party 2013 in Kansai. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rL5YKZ9ecpg> (accessed 27 June 2014).
2. Hatsune Miku. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Hatsune-Miku/10150149727825637?sk=info> (accessed 27 June 2014).
3. Mikumentary Episode 1: Everybody's Voice/Icon. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-nJABvZIO8> (accessed 27 June 2014).
4. How to Make an Origami Ninja Star (Shuriken)—Double-Sided. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r49V-J6lkt4> (accessed 27 June 2014).
5. All quotes from the children have been translated from Norwegian by the author. Matilde's family immigrated to Norway from South America, and like many of her classmates she spoke both Norwegian and her parents' language at home.
6. See note 3.
7. Hatsune Miku Makeup. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVmtZsr8FfA> (accessed 27 June 2014).

8. Ringu awesome scene. Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_GQO1oWEwg (accessed 27 June 2014).

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