

# Making Gender Trouble

**A creative and participatory research project with neurodiverse teen gamers**

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## Thesis summary

The digital gaming practices of children and young people are often characterised by media discourses permeated with fear and anxiety. Linked to health discourses of addiction and exposure to inappropriate content (sex and violence); there is little research exploring the positive affordances of digital gaming relations. Additionally, the lives and experiences of disabled young people are often absent from research encounters where disability is not the main focus. In response, this thesis explores the cyber-social relations of neuro-diverse teen gamers.

Prioritising the affirmative aspects of gaming, an evolving research design generated multi-modal data with young people in two special schools and one mainstream school in South Wales. The case studies that feature in this thesis are drawn from a larger multi-phase project and feature 10 participants (aged 13 -18 years) across two sites. As each chapter progressively illustrates, the young people in this thesis are often positioned at the intersection of competing and contradictory discourses, with girls and trans young people, in particular, located firmly within the territory of gender trouble. Staying with this trouble, we explored the generative possibilities of creative, arts-based methods and youth activism in participatory research.

Using a feminist-new-materialist onto-epistemological approach this thesis analyses gender as a relationally produced process, rather than an identity trait or characteristic. Core concepts of wilding, affect, becoming and assemblage are explored in relation to the capacities of creative, collaborative and arts-based method-ing for telling different, wilder stories about gaming, gender and disabilities. I argue that working with generative and affirmative approaches can provide ethical ways to explore sensitive topics while opening up the possibilities for new and complex understandings of gender relations in neuro-diverse teen gamer's lives.

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# Chapter one

## An unusual Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

As the title suggests this introductory chapter does not follow a conventional format. This is reflective of the entire thesis which attempts to weave theory, empirical data and literature through each chapter. This is also an unusually lengthy introduction that includes substantive literature. The rationale for this inclusion here, rather than in its own chapter, is that it contextualises the overall design of the project and the development of the research questions.

Since 2002 people in the UK have spent more money on gaming than watching films at home or going to the cinema. Globally, videogames occupy a bigger share of the media market than music or films (Chatfield 2019; Stewart 2019; Parsons 2019). The revenue generated is astonishing, this year, 2020, it is estimated to be around 152.1 billion USD, or £3.81 billion. People who would not consider themselves gamers are doubtless aware of the moral panics and media hype. <sup>1</sup>Dances from the popular videogame Fortnite<sup>2</sup> (2017) have further propelled the game into the mainstream consciousness, and while they are often not included in considerations of video gaming, mobile phone games broaden the audience for this medium even further. Films have been inspired by games, such as: Tomb Raider (2018); Wreck it Ralph (2012); Ready Player One (2018); Super Mario Bros; (1993), Sonic The Hedgehog (2020). And films have inspired games, like Star Wars (2019), Marvel Superheroes (2017), and Harry Potter (2005). For instance, traditional children Toys such as Lego have created hybrid, digital games that integrate collectible Lego models to be built for videogame progression (Lego Dimensions 2015). In the last two years the use of virtual

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<sup>1</sup> Fortnite dances such as 'The Floss' and 'Orange Justice' are called 'emotes' in the game and are used to signal victory to other players. Their function in the game is to demonstrate your level of skill, these dances are bought, most commonly, but can also be earned (Mackrell 2018).

<sup>2</sup> 'Fortnite is a free-to-play Battle Royale game with numerous game modes for every type of game player' (EA Games 2020)

reality headsets in the home became affordable for many players (Dredge 2016). The videogame industry is a strong growth area, whereas other digital media have had to adapt to the changing landscape of cultural consumption, video games continue to attract increasing numbers of people, old and young.

In 2004 James Newman (2004, p.5) surmised that the lack of scholarly interest in studying videogames at that time was in part due to the perception of it as a 'child's activity'. I would argue that while the demographic reality of this could not be further from the truth, the largest share of the population is occupied by the 18-34 years age range (Gough 2020); Newman's contention remains largely unchallenged. Fortunately, studies of gaming have attracted increasing attention over the last two decades. Prescient as always, Walkerdine's (2007) research monograph 'Children, gender, video games' offered an in depth, psychosocial engagement with the gendered relationality of gaming and a detailed explication of the link between the production of masculinities and the social relations of young people's gaming practices. Walkerdine's book underpins much of what is to follow and was the inspiration for earlier versions of this project at undergraduate and Masters level. Initially, I aimed to draw on and extend Walkerdine's work to encompass the mainstreaming of the internet and its impact on gaming connectivity through a feminist lens. However, what follows is a different engagement with the role of gaming in young people's lives. I retain a focus on gaming and gender relations but look at the way those relations intersect with the lives of neurodiverse<sup>3</sup> young people. The stories that came to matter in this thesis are about how cyber-social relations and the culture of gaming may provide spaces of survivability for some young people, spaces with room for different stories about lives at the intersection of disability, gender, youth and teen culture.

This project was conceived as an exploration of young people's gaming cultures. The ESRC funding rubric was simply 'Digital childhoods' and my Masters dissertation looked at digital gaming and girls as an under-researched area. Within the field of childhood research one

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<sup>3</sup> 'Neurodiversity encompasses all specific learning differences (SpLD), many of which co-occur or overlap' (British Dyslexia Association 2020)

gets a sense very quickly of the demographics that tend to populate these types of projects. Some young people are characterised as 'hard to reach' and others are simply missing altogether (Priestley 1998; Foster 1999). My involvement with AGENDA (2016) a youth activist resource led me to the special school that shaped this PhD. I had not intended to conduct research with young people with neurodiversity or specific learning differences (SpLD), not for reasons of reluctance but simply because, as I suspect is innocently enough the case for many researchers, it did not occur to me. However, after one meeting with an enthusiastic headteacher in September 2017 I wondered why I had not planned it all along. There is however, in the research and this thesis an ongoing tension between making the diversity of participants analytically relevant and acknowledging the ways that the categories surrounding young people with diverse needs always, already impact the subjectivities I was researching. I am not a scholar of disabilities never mind a scholar of neurodiversity, however much I now wish I were. So, neurodiversity is not the focus of this thesis, although it does offer insights in this area. There is a wealth of excellent research and scholarship amongst the neuro-diverse community (Sinclair 1993; Baggs 2007; Dekker 2000; Grandin 2006; Blackman 2005; Prince- Hughes 2005) and scholarly experts in the field (Murray 2011; Happé 1999; Gupta and State 2007; Singh 2016; Happé and Ronald 2008; Silverman 2008; Silberman 2005; Fitzgerald 2017). This thesis is a creative engagement with neurodiverse young people that explores their digital gaming practices. From this starting place of teen gaming practices stories of gender, injustice, inclusion, exclusion, joy and sadness flowed.

This process of engaging young people who are often overlooked in research (Runswick-Cole et al.2017) is presented in detail, not as a road map for others but as a faithful, hopeful, articulation of the generative possibilities of ethical engagement with young people's everyday lives. This thesis also considers what else a research project can do, be and become, if we hold open a space for young people to craft their own stories and messages. Buried in this seemingly straightforward set of research interests are some contested and debated concepts and topics, much like any area of academic study. The remainder of this introductory chapter is devoted to the topography of this project; sketching the disciplinary areas within which it operates.

From the starting place of inter-disciplinary childhood studies explored below in section 1.2 'childhood and youth, I introduce other key literatures in relation to the field. The sections that follow, feminist research in childhood and youth, gender and sexualities studies in childhood and youth and Disabled childhoods culminate with an introduction to Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and the neurodiverse child. This context is developed to highlight the absence of girls, the focus of section 1.7, 'where are the girls'? From here an introduction to the way participatory methodologies are increasingly recognised as a key strategy for engaging with children and young people precedes a consideration of neurodiversity and the posthuman child.

The link here is that posthuman approaches, troubling the binary logics of humanism, also turn to the participatory, creative and arts-based in research. The latter half of the chapter introduces the gaming literature, sections on what gaming is, representation and gender and neurodiversity and gaming are provided to show how I arrived at my research questions. These research questions guiding the project are introduced at the close of the chapter. Each of the areas I outline below childhood and youth, neurodiversity, cultural preferences (gaming) always intersect with myriad other categories including (but not limited to) gender and sexualities race and religion (Krenshaw 1989). For the purposes of sense making each area is introduced in turn but all these categories work together to produce subjectivities 'intersectionally' or in relation to the theory I outline in chapter two 'intra-actively' (Barad 2013).

## 1.2 Childhood and youth

*The child is precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back. (Bond-Stockton 2009, p.5)*

Childhood and youth studies are now widely established as important fields of academic inquiry. Over the last thirty years there have been significant shifts in the way that children and childhood studies have been studied and theorised (Kehily 2015; Tisdall 2012; Spyrou et al. 2018; Cooper and Holford 2021; Qvortrup et al. 2009). As Bond-Stockton (2009) argues, childhood is a concept much romanticised by adults. It is an area that everyone feels they have a stake in as experiential experts. Increasingly, however, research engages with key

stakeholders of childhood, children and young people themselves (Prout 2004; James and Prout 2014; Cooper and Holford 2021). Ideas of childhood as a bounded and discrete, historically and politically consistent concept have been challenged by decades of critical research and thinking (James and Prout 1998; James, Jenks and Prout 1998; Tisdall and Punch 2012; Kehily 2015; Walkerdine 2007; Cooper and Holford 2021). The historic debate between, on the one hand, developmental psychologists who posited the ages and stages approach to studying childhood as a trajectory to adulthood. And, on the other hand, sociologists and anthropologists committed to the study of childhood practices as important and relevant in their own right, have loosely grouped into what is now an interdisciplinary field (Woodhead and Montgomery 2003). Childhood studies is a broad church with a large congregation. Differentiated along theoretical, methodological and empirical axes, the discipline is vast; each specialist area wrestling with new iterations of the debates and dichotomies that have come to characterise the field, those of structure and agency, power and powerlessness, at risk and risky (Kehily 2010, 2018; Goldstein et al. 2004). Contemporary research evidences the limitations of imagining childhood as a monolithic, homogenous category and recognises instead that childhoods are always situated in time and place and intersect with other categories such as disability, social class, ethnicity, religion, age and gender (Hickey-Moody 2019 a; James and Prout 1998; Bragg et al. 2018; Berryman and Thompson 2018; McGrellis et al. 2006). This contingent, relational child (or young person) is the one that populates these pages.

### 1.3 Feminist research, childhood and youth: risky territories

A key area in the field of childhood research is the feminist study of gendered childhoods. Osgood and Robinson (2019) outline the changing shape and nature of the field acknowledging the debt that contemporary feminist childhood research owes to the evolution of the discipline over the last 30 years. As I sketched above debates have focused on the tensions created through a number of binaries, binaries that prevail (at least in media and some public discourses), those of agency and powerlessness (Buckingham 2014). Discourses of childhood as an unsullied space of innocence are key strategies for gatekeeping children and young people from the 'adult' world of consumerism, technology, relationships education, harmful media and considering them as serious contributors to the



research process (Rixon et al. 2019; Renold 2004; Lomax 2015; Lomax et al 2011; Holland et al. 2011; Mannay et al. 2017; Buckingham 2014; Buckingham and Sefton-Green 2003; Giroux 2000; Woodhead and Faulkner 2000). Scholars of childhood have a long history of troubling this presumed innocence (Renold 2004; Buckingham 2014; Kehily 2015; Renold and Ringrose 2016; Paechter and Clark 2007) and questioning the categories that circulate and coalesce around the figure of the 'natural child' who is white, middle-class, able-bodied, sexually innocent (Jackson 1982; Fine and McClelland 2006) and in need of protection (Walkerdine 2004; Kehily 2015). Moreover, this mythical child figure that has developed along 'natural' lines, enjoying healthy, gendered, age-appropriate pursuits is still mobilised, particularly by the right-wing press to exclude children from their right to speak out and have their voices included on topics that affect their lives. Contemporary feminist childhood researchers have made significant contributions in challenging these ideas (Renold 2008; Osgood and Robinson 2018; Lomax 2012; Lomax 2015; Renold and Ringrose 2016).

Making conceptual moves beyond these imagined binaries and boundaries in their gender and sexuality research with young people Renold and Ringrose (2011) conceptualise 'schizoid subjectivities' in the place of identity stasis and binary categorisations. So, rather than attributing agency or its lack, or tethering their research participants to fixed, static subject positions, Renold and Ringrose highlight the 'multiple pushes and pulls' (2011, p.392) of 'becomings'. Young people, they explain, negotiate, move forwards, backwards and sideways in a perpetual process (Renold and Ringrose 2011; Bruhm and Hurley 2004). These subjectivities are situated and temporal, fluid in every sense. Walkerdine (1999) too, rejects singular conceptions of childhood, as a natural trajectory and urges critical engagements with notions of 'natural and normal' childhoods, in what contexts they circulate and who is constructing them. She argues for 'an approach which understands the discourses and practices through which particular subjectivities are produced in specific locations' (1999, p.4). Crucial to this project, Walkerdine suggests, is attending to who falls outside of these categories and classifications, who is obscured or rendered invisible and why. For instance, precocious, aggressive, confident and smart girls feature in her profile of those positioned at the intersection of contradictory and competing discourses (1999).

The field of gender and sexualities research with children and young people occupies a difficult and dangerous research terrain. Politically it remains a sensitive and risky area, and the reach of the state into the area of childhood and youth sexuality has historically been met with public and media panic (Ringrose et al. 2015; Robinson 2008; Talburt 2018a; Talburt 2018b). In turn, researchers in this area often face barriers in negotiating access to children and young people as participants. There are of course notable exceptions and feminist researchers continue to find ways to engage with children and young people on these topics (Bragg et al. 2018; Renold 2004).

#### 1.4 Gender and sexualities research in childhood and youth: What is on the AGENDA?

In their work on Gender Matters, Bragg et al. (2018, p.4) map the 'diverse and uneven' terrain of gender cultures in the lives of young people in England in the UK. Evidence from 150 interviews with young people aged 13-19 shows that young people's experiences of gender are diverse and vary between and across peer groups, age groups, schools and regions. This qualitative study, employing arts-based methods alongside the interviewing process, also gave participants the opportunity to send messages about the role of gender in their lives to policy makers and politicians (as well as each other), writing them down and sending them in glass jars.

EJ Renold's work has been influential both within and beyond the academy, providing a conduit for the voices of children and young people in Wales in the UK. Their research has informed national relationships and sexuality education reform (Renold 2013; 2018; Renold et al. 2020). Developing a free to access, co-produced, positive relationships resource, firstly in Wales and then UK wide, Renold's collaborative work highlights and showcases some of the activism for change that is already happening in young people's lives. The AGENDA resource ([www.agendaonline.co.uk](http://www.agendaonline.co.uk)) is not a teaching manual or a 'how to' guide on relationships education, instead it links children and young people to the stories of others who are already working in the area (Renold 2019).

I have had the good fortune, over the last five years to be involved in the development of this resource, as a researcher and a member of the outreach team working with schools and

young people (Renold et al. 2020). The stories that populate the pages of the resource are produced, collaboratively with schools and youth groups, these case studies are presented with sections on how to use arts-based methods to craft activisms and spaces for young people to have their say on the issues that matter to them. In the classroom, AGENDA provides a template for approaching tricky topics in an affirmative and collaborative way. Consequently, I have visited schools and worked with teachers and young people who are creating fantastic resources for collaborating affirmatively around topics such as period poverty, child sexual exploitation, gender stereotypes and consent.

This work, both the research experience and the school contacts has been influential and beneficial to my doctoral research. I gained experience in negotiating access in educational settings where resources are always stretched and time is limited. In the process of meeting with school leaders to explore how AGENDA could be used in their schools, I had conversations around participation in my own doctoral project. Writing and researching for AGENDA also brought me into contact with feminist researchers of gender, either directly working alongside them (EJ Renold, Gabrielle Ivinson, Jessica Ringrose, Carolyn Jackson, Sara Bragg, Ester McGeeney, Kate Marston) or engaging with their research to think through and inform the topics I was engaging with. Working creatively, visually and ethically with children and young people on sensitive topics is very much at the heart of this thesis and it is situated within the rich body of work that is being produced by the feminist researchers listed in this section. This work and its legacy underpins my approach to studying childhood and youth as an important area of research whose chief objective is to work ethically and responsibly with research participants.

### 1.5 Disabled Childhoods

There are parallels in the developments the field of disability studies have undergone with those in childhood studies. These two fields share questions of ethics, exploitation and the disruption of the power differentials that have, historically, characterised research encounters (Tisdall 2012). Forging links to a social justice agenda this is an expanding area of research that has sought to broaden opportunities for including those with disabilities within an 'emancipatory and participatory' framework (Runswick-Cole et al 2018). This work

has Developed from the 1970's social model of disability which argued that it is not the individual nor the impairment that are disabling but the spaces and structures of society (Oliver 2013, p.1024).

However, some disabilities activists, particularly those within the deaf community, are critical of the social model, arguing that its homogenising effects further disadvantage disabled people (Merchant and Merchant 2018). In other words, the social model flattens out the within group differences of those with impairments and disabilities and is therefore ill-equipped to provide for individual needs. Those who remain unable to participate are further Othered and excluded and the onus remains on the child or young person to 'fit in'.

Vertovec (2007) uses the concept of 'superdiversity' to describe diversity within diversity, in much the same way intersectionality is used to indicate that each diversity does not exist in a vacuum. Instead, categories of subordination and discrimination such as disability, race, age (childhood), gender and sexualities intersect (and I would argue, after Barad, 2007, intra-act) in ways that the identity politics of single-issue causes obscures. So 'superdiversity' points to the way that a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can co-occur with other neurodiversities such as depression, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Dyspraxia and dyslexia. Charman et al. (2011) estimate that this rate of co-occurrence is around 55%. Indeed, the British Dyslexia Society (2020) acknowledges the high frequency of co-occurrence in these specific learning differences (SpLD) gathering them all within the 'neurodiversity' category. As all the participants in one of my research sites had a diagnosis of ASD it is worth sketching the field here.

## 1.6 ASD and the neuro-diverse child

The field of autism studies is interdisciplinary, heterogenous and, unsurprisingly, divided (Fitzgerald 2017; Silverman 2008; Silberman 2015). Many binaries, real and imagined operate to codify this neurodiversity. In its classical medical definition, it is characterised by the 'autism triad of deficit', impaired communication, impaired reciprocal social interaction and restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behaviour or interests (Murray 2011).

However, the deficit model is contested, and instead the language of neurodiversity is favoured by some disability activists such as Judy Singer (1999) and Lucy Blackman (2005). Liddiard (2018) summarises the association of autism and young people with discourses of lack and abundance, where autism is constructed as an overabundance of, for example, rationalism, and a lack of empathy. It is fair to say that there has been an increasing public awareness of autistic spectrum disorders over the last twenty years, and certainly much more so than when Asperger (1944) and Kanner (1968) were outlining their diagnostic framework. It remains, however, an elusive and contested category, within the autistic community and the neuroscientific community and the field has made startlingly little progress over the last thirty years (Murray 2008, 2011; Fitzgerald 2017).

Despite the best efforts of neuroscientists, biologists and any number of specialisms its cause and any possible treatment remain as much a mystery now as they always have (Murray 2011; Fitzgerald 2017). At the time of writing, in some areas of the UK the waiting time for a diagnostic assessment for a child or young person with autism is between 2-5 years and this has resource allocation implications for the families concerned (Send Matters UK, 2020).

However, the visibility of neurodiverse people has increased awareness of the positive impacts of thinking and relating in different ways. Most notably here, author, academic and activist, Temple Grandin. Grandin's empathy for the perspectives of animals generated the widespread revision of slaughterhouse practices, to the benefit of the animals and the factory owners. She publishes prolifically, delivers Ted talks (2010; 2020), is the subject of a major motion picture (Temple Grandin, 2010) and is an enthusiastic champion of the value of being able to use your talents - talents which the creative industry has long romanticised (Salter and Blodgett 2017). Most famously in 'Rain man' (1998) and more recently with the characters such as 'Sheldon Cooper' in the Big Bang Theory, one of the most popular and widely watched American sitcoms of all time (Salter and Blodgett 2017). Cooper is a physicist and many of the traits associated with stereotypical portrayals of neurodiversity come home to roost in his characterisation. Cooper is poor at empathy, poor at emotions, great at logic and high, abstract mathematical theory (The Big Bang Theory, 2007).

These tropes find something of a foothold in reality too. Silicon Valley the global tech epicentre has the highest concentration of neurodiverse diagnosis in children (Murray 2011; Silberman 2001). While the emergence of neurodiversity as ‘male brain’ (Baron Cohen et al. 2002) is bolstered by the supposed natural affinity amongst the neurodiverse community with numbers, logic, unemotional and rational feelings. In other words, for some, the neurodiverse (implicitly male) individual is the rational unitary subject at large. In this vein the backwards diagnosis of some of the most brilliant minds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have, unhelpfully, abounded. Every eccentric genius can now be linked to undiagnosed neurodiversity. Being a ‘bit on the spectrum’ has entered common parlance as both a compliment and an insult (Murray 2011). Attention to detail, rigour, single minded pursuit of a topic, obsessive compulsive disorder, are all increasingly subsumed within the broader diagnostic umbrella of Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

### 1.7 Where are the girls?

The reality for many young people is unsurprisingly somewhat different. Beyond the unhelpful discourses of ‘high functioning’ exceptionalism the everyday, lived experiences of children and young people remains, for the most part, under-explored. In particular, little is known about the everyday lives of girls with a diagnosis of neurodiversity. There are several possible reasons for this. Firstly, despite the increasing awareness and diagnosis of neurodiversity, girls remain an under-represented group (Lai et al. 2015; Egerton and Carpenter 2016; Happé et al. 2006). This representation reduces further under an intersectional lens. One teacher, with 20 years of experience working in special school settings across South Wales, most recently in an area with a high Muslim population, remarked that he had “never” had a female Muslim pupil with a neurodiversity diagnosis. While he could not say with any certainty, he was unable to recall a female pupil with neurodiversity from any BME background. His explanation was the socialisation of girls to be docile, pliant and quiet, unrecognised against their problematic, physical and more disruptive male counterparts. Although this is the view of one teacher, his experience finds some consensus in research. (Egerton and Carpenter (2016) and Happé et al. (2006) argue that girls are less likely to be diagnosed as a consequence of gendered socialisation. The relation of neurodiversity to masculinity is, seemingly, thoroughly entrenched within the

cultural imagination. This thesis considers, amongst other things, what the impact of this is for girls in educational settings.

## 1.8 Neurodiversity and posthumanism

This thesis also engages with emerging critical studies of 'disabled children's childhood studies' (Curran and Runswick-Cole 2014). This relatively new discipline addresses the ways that existing, cultural understandings of different abilities are linked to problematic, historical narratives of lack. While these debates continue, the past decade has given rise to the field of disabled children's childhood studies driven forward in the UK, notably, by Katherine Runswick-Cole, Tillie Curran, Kirsty Liddiard and Dan Goodley. Along with a focus on participatory approaches, researchers in this area are increasingly interested in what posthuman theories can bring to understanding lives that traditionally do not get included within the classification of 'the human' (Goodley et al. 2014; Goodley et al. 2015). Indeed, Posthumanism and disability studies have a shared history. In 'What is Posthumanism' (2010) Wolfe devotes a chapter to Temple Grandin (whom I introduced above). Wolfe links the way that Grandin describes her subjectivity as more akin to the image-based thinking of animals than the 'thinking with language' Cartesian form. Grandin's thinking, she says, is visual not verbal (Wolfe, 2020 p.129). Using this example, Wolfe (2010) argues that implicit in the link between consciousness as evident through reason, is the idea that consciousness (and subjectivity) is evident where there is language. Wolfe also draws on the work of Dawn Prince-Hughes (2005) whose world leading work with primates is informed by her neurodiversity. For Grandin (2006), Prince-Hughes (2005) and Wolfe (2010) our narrow conceptions that tie consciousness and subjectivity to language are used to subordinate and Other any consciousness that does not represent itself through language. Grandin (2006) argues that this impoverished view of consciousness is the link between disability studies and animal studies.

A key strategic argument for posthuman approaches, according to Wolfe (2010), is to begin with exploring the boundaries of what counts as human and to open up understandings of being that transcend those borders. Applying this to the study of contemporary (disabled) childhoods opens up research to the serious consideration of forms of expression that are

not limited purely to the ability of participants to express themselves linguistically (Goodley et al. 2015). Critical of the standardised interview format in qualitative research, the emphasis for researching *with* disabled children and young people remains rooted firmly in crafting methodologies that open up different modalities for participation. Machonochie (2018, p.134) argues that: 'respecting young children's rights to participate depends on accepting that all human beings are bodies as well as minds'. In summary, the literature in this area retains a strong methodological focus, rather than reporting about participants the emphasis shifts to reporting on how spaces of possibility might be created. Insights generated across this work frame the innovative ways researchers are creating spaces for children and young people to have their 'say'.

Applying posthumanism to disability studies Goodley et al.'s 'DisHuman child' (2016) is an extension of their concept of the 'DisHuman', defined as the 'theoretical, political and practical work done to the category of the human by the presence of disability' (2016, p.775). Situating the DisHuman squarely in Braidotti's (2013) 'posthuman condition' they explain that the concept is put to work to:

*'respect those human virtues of rights, autonomy and respect whilst also celebrating moments of mutuality, interdependence and a shared common that expands our connections with other humans, non-humans and technology, breaking down borders and boundaries between self and other, individual and society, private and public' (2016, p.775)*

Synthesising research across three empirical projects the DisHuman is employed to trouble notions of normativity and concomitant assumptions about lived experiences. Disrupting notions of typical families, for example, shifting the focus to encompass new types of family capacious enough to include all kinds of care (without immediately describing this care as dependency in any negative sense). Moreover, Goodley et al. (2016) argue for new notions of childhood that do not have their sights set on individually achieved, teleological, incrementally developmental stages. They imagine a different type of childhood, one removed from the neoliberal project of producing future workers and consumers. Goodley



et al. (2016) argue that the prefix 'Dis' can be attached to most areas of childhood study to highlight the way that the lives of disabled children are pathologised.

For example, 'DisPlay', they argue can be operationalised to draw attention to the way that failure to engage in 'age-appropriate' play (characterised always as a 'natural' feature of children's lives) can draw anxious focus from professionals towards those lives. They include 'DisFamily' and 'DisSexuality' to offer similar critiques of the pathologizing effects of normative conceptions of bodies and what bodies can do. The usefulness of posthuman theory to the field of disability studies is evident in this research and across a number of publications arguing similarly that traditional notions of the rational unitary subject, posited explicitly and implicitly in much research design, is not up to the task of researching with disabled children and young people (Liddiard et al. 2019; Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2014; Liddiard et al. 2018). These lives are instead characterised by intra-action, inter and intra-dependence, some are techno facilitated and distributed, concepts that I return to in chapter two (Barad 2013). With this in mind the focus instead should be on engaging with these assemblages, with the goal of illuminating the ways that our research encounters produce subjectivities and can reinscribe particular ways of knowing and being. For these reasons, the way that participants are described in this thesis is relevant and important.

### 1.9 Building the project: a caveat:

I did not ask the young people who participated in this project if they wanted to be called 'disabled young people' or 'young people with disabilities' A blunt question like this would not have felt appropriate. Furthermore, I think it might have harmed the researcher relationship I was aiming to build, wherein I was not another adult asking them about their disability as the most interesting or salient facet of their lives. This is not to say that I avoided the importance or otherwise of this for participants. Engaging with young people with disabilities and deliberately avoiding that topic would have felt equally as unethical and dishonest. The approach I adopted was instead affirmative, curious and open. This was not a project on disabilities, rather a project on young people's videogaming practices and that was how I introduced it. When, as they sometimes did, young people spoke about their diversities I used those moments to prompt further reflections. We considered the impact

this diversity might or might not have on the way videogames were experienced and played. Inevitably, discussions of how else their lives are perceived to be shaped by these diversities occurred. My fieldnotes and audio recordings reflect that young people used words like difference and autism rather than disability. So, faced with deciding the language at all times, I went with what felt most comfortable to me at that time, terms are used interchangeably. However, as this introduction has explained, neurodiversity encompasses all specific learning differences (SpLD), and this is the terminology that feels most appropriate. As this section has outlined, the key focus of the research was gaming. The following sections introduce the gaming literature that informed the project.

### 1.10 Gaming: Ludic adventures

The video game research landscape is developing almost but not quite as quickly as the practice itself. Much of the early research in this area focused on the ‘negative effects’, linking videogames to problematic play, a narrative that continues to feature prominently in research linking gaming to ASD (Mazurek and Engelhardt 2013). Within cultural studies the study of gaming followed two routes, Narratology, the study of the stories and narratives of the game (Sarkeesian 2012) and Ludology<sup>4</sup> the study of the play of games as cultural artefacts in much the same way as film or theatre studies (Newman 2004). Ludology is differentiated by the specific focus of the study, for example studies of gaming spaces (Taylor et al. 2014; Pearce 2011) social relations (Ito et al. 2010) or the relation to player identities (Walkerdine 2007; Jensen and Castell 2010). Many contemporary researchers in this area, however, use the term ‘critical games scholars’ (Taylor 2006) and what follows draws on research from scholars employing both definitions.

In the last two decades there has been an increasing awareness of the significance of gaming as a social practice (Ito et al 2009; Kafai et al. 2008), that attracts people of all ages

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<sup>4</sup> Ludology is the study of the play of games and encompasses all games including board games and gambling (Frasca 2003, p.222)

(Yee 2011). The ubiquity of game franchises such as Pokémon and Fortnite have made the medium as familiar as other media, and educators have co-opted gaming as a tool for learning (Heeter et al. 2005). Buckingham and Sefton-Green (2003) attribute the success of the Pokémon franchise to its ability to move across platforms and play modes. Cardboard gaming cards can be traded in the playground, there is a film and TV franchise, collectible plastic figurines and most recently an augmented reality (AR) videogame. Manufactured scarcity creates competition for the rarest Pokémon and in recent years organised gatherings of Pokémon 'hunters' can be seen chasing their phone screens around parks and outside areas. If the hierarchies surrounding what counts as gaming are set aside (Ito et al. 2009), and mobile gaming is given equal rather than lesser status (Shaw 2018), then it is fair to say gaming is more popular and common than ever before.

This shift in public awareness and acceptance is not, however, reflected within the sociological research community with studies of cyber-social relationality and childhood remaining limited (notable exceptions include Sims 2012; Buckingham and Sefton-Green 2003; Ito et al. 2011). Which, given the affordances of gaming consoles and digital devices, to connect children and young people to each other, is surprising<sup>5</sup>. More surprising still is the adhesive nature of the trope of the lone male player as the figurehead of gaming. It is estimated that girls occupy at least 46 % share of the gaming population (Statista 2017; Ghostgb 2020).

#### 1.10.1 Gender and gaming

The gender dynamics of gaming relations have been the focus of academic research and journalism (Sarkeesian 2012; Grimes 2014; Kafai et al. 2008; Shaw 2014; Harvey and Fisher 2014; Jenson and de Castell 2010). In 2007, Walkerdine, provided a psychosocial analysis of the gendered relationality of gaming and a detailed explication of the link between the production of masculinities and the social relations of young people's gaming practices. The link between gaming and the production of contemporary masculinities is an important one,

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<sup>5</sup> Gaming is, however, often subsumed into research on children and young people's digital lives more broadly (Livingstone and Blum-Ross 2020; Davies et al. 2014; Livingstone 2009)

this is the stickiest of all gaming tropes, a heated topic of debate and an online battleground whose war continues apace. The notion of gaming as a space for teen boys in darkened bedrooms remains, perhaps as a generational relic but there are several other factors to consider too. Chief amongst them is the domination of the tech industry and game design by men. While this landscape is shifting, the shift is slight and women in the industry remain the exception rather than the rule. Taking up the issue of female representation, Shaw (2014) argues that men design the games they want to play featuring the gender relations they want to see. The broader relationship between gender and technology is well documented (Cockburn and Ormrod 1993; Wakeford 2000; Hovenden 2000). In schools, despite continuing efforts to get girls into Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) progress is slow.

'Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat (Kafai et al. 2011) gathers research inspired by the original book 'From Barbie to Mortal Kombat' (Cassell and Jenkins 1998) one of the first academic texts to look at the role of gender and gaming. When the Barbie fashion designer game became the biggest seller on its year of release the industry could no longer ignore girls who game. Of course, it is more likely that those girl gamers were there all along and a combination of lack of media, industry and popular culture interest combined with girls' own reluctance to identify as gamers (for reasons well outlined by Walkerdine 2007) meant that they remained an ignored and invisible population. From Barbie to Mortal Kombat mapped this absence of visibility both of players and their representation within game design. Exceptions tended to be tied to stereotypical ideas of play, Barbie being a very good example, closely followed by cooperative house-making games such as 'The Sims'<sup>6</sup> or 'educational puzzle games' (Kafai et al. 2011, p.xi).

Interestingly, in their update to the original, Kafai et al. make a case for the increased presence of girls in gaming spaces and cite statistics that posit women and girls as occupying a larger share of the 'casual' gaming market (2011). Implicit in their claim is the idea that boys are 'serious' gamers and girls are not. Walkerdine (2007) offers a compelling account

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<sup>6</sup> The Sims is the bestselling videogames of all time. Players create lifestyles and characters and online worlds (Gee 2011)

of the way gaming links to gender discourses. She focused on the production of masculinities, what was at stake a decade ago, and arguably still is (although things are changing) is gender performativity. The idea that to perform contemporary femininities in a recognisable way, girls and women should avoid displaying expertise or an appetite for gaming and its practices of violence. However, Gee (2007) argues that the approach of feminist researchers who focus on gender are missing the mark.

### 1.10.2 Gaming: narrative and representation

For Gee (2007) the issue of gender and gaming is purely academic. Sexualised and sexist representations of women in gaming narratives are simply a reflection of the representation of women across cultural forms. Gee (2007) argues that the rising population of female gamers is a clear indication that gender equality in those spaces has been reached and further investigations should focus instead on what happens inside in gaming spaces. To some extent this thesis would appear to agree with his position. However, Gee retains a somewhat narrow focus of what gender equality in gaming signifies. His later book 'Women and Gaming: The Sims and 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning' (co-authored with Elisabeth Hayes 2010) is a clear indication of the way Gee and Hayes imagine the future of women and gaming. Within the gaming industry the appropriation of gaming practices into educational settings is referred to as 'serious games' (Kafai et al 2011). Gee's work (see also Kelleher 2011) attributes the progress of gender equality in gaming to the enthusiasm demonstrated within classrooms, amongst girls, for 'learning' using video games. Rather than engaging with girls playing for pleasure, examining the structures of that play, or even affording girls the same discourse of gaming for gaming's sake, as a leisure activity, a whole strand of research (particularly in the United States) ties girls' gaming practices to educational discourses. As Kafai et al. (2011) highlight, gender stereotypes are further reinforced by practices aiming to get girls in to gaming by presenting them with a game that allows them to program dance moves. Rather than signifying gender parity in gaming spaces, this line of research seems to further solidify heteronormative, gender stereotypical tensions between femininity and technology. It is also slow to realise that handheld mobile gaming, is gaming, and that girls occupy the largest percentage of this population (Ito et al. 2011).

Gender divisions in gaming have also received prominent media attention. The 'Gamergate' scandal (Shaw 2014) is symbolic of the depth of feeling on both sides when feminists critically engage with the medium (Sarkeesian 2012). In a popular vlog series, 'Tropes vs Women', Sarkeesian engaged with game content to highlight the representation of women in popular games. Those critically engaging with representation examine the physical dimensions of female characters, the role of women in the game narrative and the presentation of female characters as they appear elsewhere in the game (Sarkeesian 2012; Pearce 2011; Taylor 2003). Looking at the role of female characters, Sarkeesian argues that most are incidental to the plot or function purely as a trophy or prize to be rescued for the male hero protagonist.

Sarkeesian (2012) also analysed the way characters are dressed, comparing the battle dress of Lara Croft to that of Batman in two very popular games. Lara Croft from the popular Tomb Raider (2018) franchise is often expected to perform acts of heroism in the scantest of clothes. Batman, meanwhile, is always heavily cloaked. For many people, the content of the Vlog highlighted a familiar issue in an entertaining way. However, Sarkeesian became a hate figure amongst the male gamer community, she received death threats and had to leave her home. Images of her were photoshopped onto scenes of violence and she received rape and death threats (Shaw 2014). These practices are all too familiar for those women who step into the limelight to offer cultural criticism (Beard 2017). However, Gamergate thrust a community more commonly associated with geek culture and nerdiness into the public eye (Salter and Blodgett 2017).

### 1.10.3 Gaming beyond representation?

This focus on representation has also received significant academic scrutiny. Shaw (2014) for example, provides a compelling critique of the depictions of femininities in game design. Furthermore, she argues, any gender analysis should widen its focus to the depictions of race, disability, religion and all elements of diversity. Shaw argues that tethering the lack of diversity in games to the lack of diversity in the gaming industry is an over-simplification of a more complex issue. She cautions against imagining that men working within the industry are incapable of producing characters beyond their own image or desires. Similarly, she

argues that not all women are feminists. In other words, simply increasing the number of women would not be synonymous with better representation.

However, Grimes (2003, p.1) argues that 'identifying with the protagonist is an inevitable part of playing the game'. Like Shaw (2014) Grimes' analysis points to the lack of diversity across the board and very little discussion of the way that gender intersects with other social categories such as disability, race, ethnicity and sexuality. Sarkeesian's vlog asks viewers to consider whose gaze they are being invited to view the game from, in much the same way that the masculine gaze has been linked to art and film work (Mulvey 1975). Sarkeesian (2012) contends that players who are increasingly able to engage with female avatars, do so while engaging with game as if they were men. Shaw's counterargument is that developing games specifically to appeal to girls is not a desirable outcome, as we have seen above in the example of 'serious games' conceptions of what appeals to female players can be restrictive and stereotypical. Indeed, Shaw (2014) argues that for many girls, engaging with masculine content can be a significant motivation to play. Shaw's research, (interviews with hundreds of adult gamers) reveals a hugely diverse gaming community who engage and identify with a seemingly narrow conception of what a gaming protagonist looks like. For many of those in her study, game characters are complex and multi-faceted enough that they find something to identify with in characters who on the surface look nothing like them.

This active participation is a central feature that separates games from other digital media and is explored in depth by Brown and Cairns (2004) who argue that ideas of 'flow and immersion' are a unique appeal of gaming spaces. Flow and immersion conceptualise the mode of participation as being, where players become, to some extent, lost in the game, what I would call 'becoming' with game. These ideas are linked in the gaming literature to gamer's enjoying the ability to not be themselves for a while and this was certainly a feature of some of the conversations that took place during the fieldwork phase of this project. Moreover, Shaw (2014) claims that the debates on representation overlook players immersed in these more ludic elements of game play, the game's narrative, puzzles, overall aim and competition. These players do not need to identify with or even like the character (indeed, in some cases there is no character) and instead take pleasure in the game's

scenery, story, or its capacities for collaboration and sociality. It is this final facet of game culture that I was interested in. When young players don a headset and connect to their gaming communities, what kind of cyber-social relations are forged in the networked spaces of online play?

#### 1.10.4 Gaming and Queering Gender

A recent book series on gender and gaming produced three titles: 'Queerness in play' (Harper et al. 2018), 'Masculinities in play' (Taylor and Voorhees 2018), and 'Feminism in play' (Gray et al. 2018). Interestingly, there was no 'Femininities in play' nor 'gender in play' and there is a preponderance in all three editions of research in the Global North). Each edited collection provides an update on research and of the way gaming and its narratives have been subverted. 'Queerness in Play' outlines the diverse and detailed way that players 'mod' (modify) games using self-developed code. However, there is strong focus throughout the book on male characters. Taylor (2018) outlines the way that characters can be 'modded' to have sex with other players, but the discussion is almost entirely limited to men having sex with men. Where Trans lives are talked about it is with reference to character's ambiguity and the affordances of gaming for those wishing to play as a different gender. Lawrence's (2018) chapter on the subversive gender constructions within the Nintendo universe is entitled 'What if Zelda wasn't a girl'?

The 'Masculinities in Play' collection focuses heavily on the links between the industrial military complex and warfare in gaming. Finally, the Feminism in Play collection adds to the body of research that scrutinises the representation of women in games and game development, attention is paid to the rising number of female gaming streamers, how issues of consent play out in videogames and the kinds of behaviours female players can expect to encounter. What none of these books offer is an account of the everyday gaming practices of young and older girls or indeed childhood and youth in relation to gaming. The sole contribution to understanding, in-depth, the gendered cyber-social relations of young people's gaming relationships remains Valerie Walkerdine's (2007). While her study focused mainly on boys it remains unique in its scope and focus, the relationality of gaming.



### 1.10.5 Gaming In-forming research

Walkerdine (2007) ran gaming clubs in educational settings. Young people's videogame playing interactions were observed and video recorded. This data was supplemented with parent interviews and offers a unique inter-generational insight into the gaming preferences of the young people who participated. In theorising the allure of game play Walkerdine's psycho-social approach also offers an understanding of game player's affective terrains. She conceptualises affect as comprising, 'sensation, ideation and phantasy' (pp. 25-26), linking the experiential terrain of gaming to the landscape of desire. The key claim of the book is that contemporary masculinities are produced, significantly, through gaming relations. Walkerdine outlines the way boys must walk the line between displaying desire for violent and bloody thirsty games, while simultaneously distancing themselves from discourses of addiction, or any sense that what they are doing is 'real'. Linking gaming to practices of 'ageing up', Walkerdine (2007) argues that game spaces provide an arena for demonstrating autonomy. While it is primarily a study of masculinity and boys, girls feature too. Walkerdine demonstrates that being good at videogames was not a desirable social identity for the girls in her study at that time. Girls couched any successes in terms of luck rather than expertise. Girls in the study also deferred to their male counterparts in the research setting and the gender relations in those spaces remained quite heavily stratified.

### 1.10.6 Gaming and the social

Ito et al (2011) differentiate videogame play along a typology of practices. Their study explored young people's different modes of engagement with games and the identities they claim are linked to them. 'Hanging out, Geeking out and Messing around' (2011) describes how for some young people gaming is used to supplement their social identities and to signify something about themselves to their peers. 'Hanging out' is linked to the fortifying of friendships where the technology is used to facilitate and solidify friendships by creating an area of common interest and site of collaboration. 'Geeking out' describes the way that gaming practices can be the foundation of the social encounter and as skills and expertise develop, those who have honed a similar expertise form friendships on that basis. 'Messing around' is used to describe the way that for some young people a game might be used to

occupy small sections of time that would otherwise be free of other activities. No personal investment is made either of time or material resources and gaming never develops beyond this. Jenkins et al. (2009) describe this development of gaming identities as ‘participatory cultures’, within them there is little expectation of expertise and instead sharing creations, supporting others and developing collaborative communities are the sole purpose.

In his ethnographic study Sims (2014) uses Connell’s (1995) hegemonic masculinity to draw out a slightly different taxonomy. He argues that in gaming practices, previously denied hegemonic and valorised masculinities are rendered visible and available to those who would ordinarily be excluded. Thus, the physically smaller, less sporting boys can become football champions or heavy weight boxing champions if they stay inside gaming spaces. What all these studies and conceptual frameworks assume is group homogeneity, while Ito et al (2011) concede that there is movement between groups, there is little attention paid to the differences within these groups. None of these studies capture multiple, contradictory or ‘wild card’ positionings, never mind the variance within and beyond them.

#### 1.10.7 Autism and gaming

The top hit for a search on ‘gaming’ on the ‘researchautism.org’ site returns an article from 2013, ‘How do videogames affect boys on the spectrum’ (Organisation for Autism Research 2013). The article summarises and reinforces some of the most commonly held beliefs in this area. Namely that children and young people (boys) with ASD are more at risk, more addicted and more likely to play videogames than the rest of the population. At the intersection of the already gendered discourses of ASD linking it to boys and men, is a similar discourse that (as outlined above) posits the imagined player of videogames as male. Interestingly, rather than linking ‘problematic’ gaming behaviours to the amount of time spent gaming, here it is the type of gaming engaged in that gives the authors and by extension the reader, cause for concern. Action games, that is classic, shooter style games such as Star Wars (2019) or Call of Duty (2019) and platform games like Mario (2019) are positioned as less ‘problematic’ for the gamer with ASD than role playing games (RPG) like

Final Fantasy (1994). Mazurek and Engelhardt's (2012) survey-based study links RPGs to 'precursors'<sup>7</sup> for disruptive behaviours.

Such narrowly conceived visions of who young people with ASD are and who young people who play videogames are dominates the research in this area. Elsewhere, much like some of the research on girls, it is tied to educational discourses, the idea that games are a fruitful learning resource to use with children and young people with a diagnosis of autism (Durkin 2010). This links to the broader notion that people with neurodiversity experience the internet as an emancipatory communicative space (Davidson 2008). Writers within the autistic community have drawn parallels between the advent of internet for neurodiverse people and the impact of sign language in the deaf community (Mazurek 2015).

Unfortunately, this research sits alongside other psychological studies that offer further, unhelpful, stereotypical and homogenising accounts of what people with ASD are 'like'. This research constructs gaming as an arena capable of overcoming several supposed difficulties that are characteristic of those with ASD, such as difficulties in imaginative play (Jarrod et al. 1993) and 'executive functioning difficulties' (Rosenthal et al. 2013) that make anticipating expected behaviours difficult. None of these characteristics were evident in my research.

However, there were examples of finding digital spaces preferable to non-digitally mediated spaces across participants, not just those with a diagnosis of ASD, for many different reasons. It is also true that chaos, noise, excitement, imagination and creativity abounded through the project and in every young person who participated. It is surprising then, that so many studies (Brownlow et al. 2015; Mazurek and Wenstrup 2013; Moore and Taylor 2000) make so much of accounts amongst 'autistic activists' (Brownlow et al. 2015 p.191) that social media, the internet and digitally mediated spaces offer positive social affordances as if this is not reflected in the wider population too. I would argue that such

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<sup>7</sup> The next chapter explores the nature of precursors and their role in the professional relationships of staff to the young people in their care in more depth. Simply understood, it is the antecedence to violence, the idea that there are key indicators for each young person that enable staff to read from their behaviours or bodies when they are likely to become aggressive or violent. The investment in developing these skills is understandable, the rewards being a more peaceful setting and a more predictable day.

unhelpful connotations run the risk of relegating those with neurodiversities to digitally mediated spaces, while abdicating responsibilities to make off-line, non-digital spaces more accessible and enjoyable. In other words, constructing digital spaces as conducive to neurodiverse subjectivities is a risky over-simplification that side-lines the way those spaces matter in online and offline ways too.

### 1.11 Building questions

The contextual, substantive literatures sketched above informed the development of this project. These are the wider fields that I am contributing to and also hopefully pushing beyond. The key points that I take from each of these fields are outlined here as a reminder. Childhood and youth are contingent and relational concepts (Walkerdine 2004; James and Prout 1998). A number of binaries and dichotomies have been used to create a notion of childhood as a distinct and separate space of innocence and naivety (Jenkins 1998; Paechter and Clark 2007; Buckingham 2014, Kehily 2015). As we have seen feminist researchers have been at the vanguard of troubling these easy categorisations, questioning the foundations of 'natural' childhood to explore children and young people's own experiences (Lomax 2015; Rixon et al. 2019; Renold et al. 2011; Buckingham 2014; Buckingham and Sefton-Green 2003; Giroux 2000; Woodhead and Faulkner 2008). It is from this seam of research that I took my cues to research 'with' and not on or about children and young people.

I have outlined the symmetry with disabled childhood studies as an emerging discipline that also situates participants at the centre of research that concerns them. The development of the terminology in this thesis is drawn from those critical disabilities scholars that I have introduced above (Runswick-Cole et al. 2018; Curran and Runswick-Cole 2013). I follow their lead in employing descriptive language with care and sensitivity. The narrower focus on neurodiversity SpLD and ASD was introduced to highlight the uncertainty and heterogeneity of this category despite its increasing mobilization in popular culture (Murray 2011; Fitzgerald 2017).

Importantly, this section evidenced the very noticeable absence of girls within the diagnostic statistics as well as the research (Egerton and Carpenter 2016). I outlined too how gaming is stratified by gender both as a cultural practice and a research field (Shaw

2014; Gee and Hayes 2011; Gray et al.2018). This lengthy section evidenced how feminist research in gaming engages with gender as an analytical lens through which to view both games and their players (Sarkeesian 2012; Walkerdine 2007; Jenson and de Castell 2010). Despite the recent publication of edited collections on queerness in gaming (Harper et al. 2018), and feminism in gaming (Gray et al. 2018), studies that move beyond gender representation and include the perspectives of children and young people were noticeably absent. This gap in the literature becomes even wider if we include the gendered spaces of neurodiversity (and ASD) and gaming. This thesis is to the best of my knowledge a unique contribution to understanding the practices of gaming in the lives of neurodiverse young people. Where the focus is on the affordances and enjoyment of play spaces and their associated cultures, rather than focusing on danger and risk or how gaming came be used educationally. Moving away from this restrictive focus is the rationale for my core research questions, below.

A central aim of this project was to map the methodological terrain of engaging with neurodiverse young people from complex social backgrounds. It aimed to engender a process for answering the core research question:

1. What can a neuro-diverse teen gamer do?

And the subsidiary research questions:

2. How do territorializing forces immobilise or impede neurodiverse teen gamers' digital practices and what lines of flight are possible?
3. What happens when the territorializing forces of binarised (heteronormative) gendering are troubled?
4. What can a teen-gamer-activism project do?

In the following chapter the key concepts that are operationalised in these questions are unpacked and explained. What should be clear, however, is that these questions aimed to open up the under-researched areas of gendered, neurodiverse, gaming practices in a way that did not foreclose participants experiences. Each empirical chapter aims to address the questions more specifically. These questions are purposively broad and aim to generate further questions rather than provide definitive, fixed answers. These questions also eschew

a focus on gender that assumes its discursive production, situating it instead in the complex, relational, material (human and non-human) webs of its production (Osgood and Robinson 2018). These questions were developed to enable a focus on moments of rupture that almost escape capture, that are fleeting and indefinite, wild moments of bewilderment. In every case I struggled to justice to the unsaid but affect laden importance of what unfolds. I grappled throughout the thesis with ways to convey the urgency that permeated some of these stories.

### 1.12 Figuring the thesis

By way of an introduction to the project that follows this chapter has offered a critical engagement with the substantive areas of concern to this thesis. The literature cited above has informed my work across multiple disciplinary thresholds. As it progressed, I will admit that this felt less like a thesis about gaming. Rather than providing rich accounts of the interactive affordances of within game cultures and communication, this instead became a project about enjoyment, desire and survivability for the participants and for me. This is self-consciously not a thesis on disability, although it would be disrespectful to the participants to omit this category entirely. Furthermore, it is not a critique of others and their approaches. Instead, it is an affirmative and speculative engagement with young people, that sought to maximise the capacities for them to tell different stories about their lives within the context of a doctoral research project. Together we explored the possibilities afforded through creative, arts-based methods and youth activism in participatory research, to tell the stories that they thought were important about cyber-sociality and digital gaming. There is a need for more research literature that includes disabled children and young people, where disability is not the primary focus of the research. This is evident too in the literatures on technology. These studies tend to focus on technology as a space or artefact to help overcome the supposed limits of their (dis)ability (Goodley et al.2019). The theories and concepts that are introduced here and detailed in the literature and 'method-ing' chapters are those that provided analytic insight across disparate fields of study. In the chapter that follows I pick up on theories and ideas that were conceptually useful and capacious enough to tell different kinds of stories.

### 1.13 Thesis bewilderment

In the following chapters of the thesis, I have used moments of data to animate theory and moments of theory to animate data. This process of bringing the thesis abstract to life is a deliberate feminist, Frankensteinian<sup>8</sup> move. This metaphor for the monstrous is a refrain that I found useful to think with; and it is reflected in existing feminist literature that brings the monster to the analytical fore (Shildrick 2002, 2009; Stryker 1994, Haraway 2016; Mittman 2013). I borrow also from Halberstam and their use of the \* as a symbolic holding open of a space for wildness. In the second chapter re-wilding with literature, I am guided by Halberstam's (2020) entreaty towards 'bewilderment' as a worldly orientation, what they call an outlook of 'stunned curiosity... a baffling, a bafflement that's close to being enchanted' (2020). In 'Wild Things' (2020) Halberstam sets out bewilderment as a kind of 'anti-epistemology' wherein, if epistemology is how we come to know, bewilderment is how we come to unknow' a foray into what Foucault termed the 'untamed ontology' (1989); for there to be an order of things Halberstam (2020) continues, there must be a disorder of things and this is what untamed ontology represents. The things that fall outside the realm of the categorisable, nominal and recognisable. It will probably be noticeable that taming the wild and monstrous chaos of data generation was incredibly challenging. Deadlines and milestones for this project forced decisions on what stories to tell. I was guided by those moments that refused to leave, that adhered to every thinking about what I might be finding.

### 1.14 Conclusion

This introduction took the unusual approach of including substantive literature in a lengthened chapter. This is a good indication of what is to come and reflects the entangled nature of the theory-method-research, strands that are only separated here for narrative purposes and were enfolded together at every stage. The following chapters present accounts and analysis of adhesive, bewildering stories.

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<sup>8</sup> Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein* (2010) was the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft writer of 'A Vindication of The Rights of Woman' (1792/2010). Both women were linked to the feminist movement (Carr 2018)

Chapter Two, 'Wilding with Literature' introduces the theoretical and conceptual literature that I have engaged with to develop the methodology and make sense of the empirical chapters. Post-human and feminist new materialist literature is introduced to highlight the entangled way that we create worlds through our engagement with them. This chapter introduces the core concepts of affect, intra-action, subjectivities, response-ability and assemblages. This conceptual toolkit is 'Frankensteined' with empirical data. Given that this toolkit was assembled on the basis that its contents were useful for understanding the data, demonstrating how that usefulness operates was an intuitive if unorthodox strategy.

This practice of weaving theory, empirical data and literature together continues in Chapter three 'Method-ing'. This chapter Introduces the evolving methodological and ethical approach of the project. The chapter starts with an introduction to the participants and the research sites. I then sketch the emerging literature on participatory approaches in research with children and young people with SpLD to contextualise my research. This chapter also introduces 'The Case of Ethics' an object-based resource that I developed to introduce, explore and materialise consent and ethics with participants. A detailed account of the broad range of arts-based and creative methods that evolved throughout fieldwork dominates the second half of this chapter. Photographs of the data production techniques accompany these descriptions to provide a sense of the variety of ways I engaged with participants. Some of these sections are also enlivened and Frankensteined with the inclusion of empirical data.

Chapter 4 'Neurodiverse girls?', is the first empirical chapter. It introduces the neurodiverse girl and her presence and absences in this thesis. The focus is on the Castlebridge special school site and the experiences of the girls there. Staff perspectives accompany data produced with these girls to provide a troubling account of the way gender operates around the category of the neurodiverse girl. Chapter four relates specifically to research question three (What happens when the territorializing forces of binarised (heteronormative) gendering are troubled) and details the implications for girls of gender trouble in a special school setting.



Chapter 5 ‘Dolls\*’, the second empirical chapter, focuses on the participants in the mainstream school, one girl and one trans\*/ non-binary young person. This chapter addresses research question two (How do territorializing forces immobilise or impede neurodiverse teen gamers digital practices and what lines of flight are possible?) through the doll methodology, where participants modified and transformed Monster High dolls<sup>9</sup> while describing transformations in their own lives. This chapter outlines the positive affordances of gaming and online communities in the lives of young people with SpLD.

Chapter 6 ‘Filming resistance: teen gamer activism projects’ is the final empirical chapter. Here I outline the production of youth activism videos, produced by participants from the special school and the mainstream school. Each of the groups that are introduced in the thesis produced a short film that they presented at a youth activism conference arranged around the theme of inclusion (Renold et al. 2020). This chapter describes two very different films. The difficult decision not to include links to those films here was taken to protect the anonymity of the young people involved. However, I present stills and outline the narratives of each film. I also include detailed accounts of the chaotic and messy process of film production. Linking these films to the global zeitgeist around youth activism and Greta Thunberg, this chapter addresses the final, subsidiary, research question (What can a teen-gamer-activism project do).

The concluding chapter addresses each research question in more detail. This chapter argues that a neurodiverse teen-gamer can create spaces of survivability and acceptance. Furthermore, it pinpoints where moments of movement are possible within the rigid regimes of heteronormative gendering. It considers the impossibility of existence for the neurodiverse girl and how the processes of creativity and gaming can provide ways for her to materialise. In my concluding arguments I also evidence how a teen gamer activism project can change the world, one micro movement at a time. This chapter draws together the process of researching in innovative and creative ways with young people with SpLD. It

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<sup>9</sup> Monster High is an American doll franchise. The key difference is that the dolls are based on monsters (e.g., Frankie Stein) While they retain many of the trademarks of hyper-femininity such as slim figures and pouty, made-up faces their skin tones, hair, outfits and eye-colour tend to be unconventional. For more information see: <https://play.monsterhigh.com/en-us> [Accessed 5 May 2018].

highlights that, if one is prepared to stay with the trouble and chaos, new modes of engagement are possible. The closing sections of the final chapter details some of the challenges and limitations of researching in creative and participatory ways while grappling with complicated theoretical ideas. The thesis closes with a Frankenstein moment of empirical data.

## Chapter 2

### Wild-ing with Theory

*The rewilding of theory proceeds from an understanding that first encounters with wildness are intimate and bewilder all sovereign expectations of autonomous selfhood. To be wild in this sense is to be beside one-self, to be internally incoherent, to be driven by forces seen and unseen, to hear in voices, and to speak in tongues. (Halberstam and Nyong'o 2018, p.454)*

#### 2.1 Introduction: wild relations

The following engagement with emerging feminist thought is driven by my commitment to what Stengers terms an 'Ontology of Engagement' (2019, p.19), where the praxis of creating the world happens through our engagement with it. The wildness outlined above; where reading and concept gathering are not driven by patterns of coherence and structure, describes ideas like infections. Inspired too by Haraway's 'worlding' (2016) the theory engaged with before and during the crafting of this thesis is wholly entangled with every element of its design, fieldwork and writing. This chapter introduces the theoretical movement and conceptual apparatus entangled with this project.

Deleuze and Guattari (2013) emphasise the process of concept building rather than application. Concepts are relevant, that is, insofar as they are useful. It is therefore incumbent upon the writer, thinker, researcher to adapt, re-shape and re-frame these concepts to stretch and warp them, to ensure their fitness for purpose. It is from this conceptual fluidity and processual knowledge generation that the project began. The process philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari (2013) and its application by feminist researchers (Renold and Ivinson 2011; Hickey-Moody 2019 (a); Lenz-Taguchi 2019; Jackson and Mazzei 2017) has infused and informed my work. This however, is not a theoretical thesis and the application of these concepts and ideas, as I have noted above, are not

strictly adhered to. Instead, they are taken up only with reference to their usefulness in research settings (Hickey-Moody 2019 a). These concepts have become a way to think about the project, its productions and participants. To refocus in a way that attempts (but not always succeeds) to untether what emerged from a rigid set of practices, tropes and presuppositions in relation to gender, gaming and SpLD. The key justification for my approach is its capacity for telling different stories about gender, disabilities and sexualities that are situated in material milieus and complex relational webs.

This chapter introduces the key theoretical concepts that have been useful to research and write with. Firstly, I sketch the onto-epistemology that frames this research, where knowing and knowledge (epistemology) are produced via our entangled relations with the worlds we describe (ontology). I introduce the Baradian concept of 'intra-action' (2003) to illustrate what I understand these entangled relations to mean. This concept shifts the notion of agency from the property of individuals to the relationally produced, distributed agencies of the material world. I employ the concept of assemblages to think about situated, distributed agencies in this thesis. Another Baradian concept of 'cutting-together-apart' is introduced to explain how researchers adopting this approach make decisions about where our analytical focus rests. From here I explore the implications of this for notions of subjectivity, which instead become subjectivities in assemblages. A key analytical concept that guides this research is affect and in section 2.8 I evidence and animate its usefulness to this research with an extract of empirical data. The final sections of the chapter illustrate the way feminist researchers use 'posthuman performativity' to extend Butler's performativity as a way to understand gender relations. Lastly, understandings of the gendered nature of neurodiversity in research literature are considered. In places I have included data extracts to demonstrate how these concepts animate the data, and the data brings the theory to life in an 'ontology of engagement' (Stengers 2019). In outlining the theoretical position of the thesis, I explore feminist philosophy and research that has appropriated the work of Deleuze and Guattari (2013).

## 2.2 In the wild with PhEmaterialism

This project aimed to tell stories about experiences, affects, contexts and different ways of knowing. Central to this style of thought is a focus on the potentialities and capacities of people, context and materiality. It asks, what can this or that situation become, how does it operate, what might hinder and hold it down (territorialize) but what possibilities does it afford, and what freedoms might it generate? I introduce here the feminist scholars whose work has infused and informed my own approach to researching with young people. Hickey-Moody's wide-ranging research interests have brought a Deleuzian conceptual apparatus to a number of empirical topics (2009, 2017, 2019a, 2019 b, 2020). For instance, she sketches the co-production of choreography as research encounter uniting disabled and non-disabled young people through dance. Re-focusing on embodied, material movement in a decisive shift from the empirical and analytical focus on the linguistic and discursive (2009, 2017). More recently, Hickey-Moody has curated an arts-based engagement with children on faith issues engaging young people across the UK, Australia to explore, creatively, how faith comes to matter in their lives (2020).

Renold's (2019) research in the post-industrial South Wales Valleys has experimented with the way that the material artefacts of the school can be re-imagined, re-purposed and enlivened to tell stories about sexual harassment. The Ruler skirt materialises what Renold (2019) has termed dARTa (a collision of art and data), that produces an affectively imbued 'dARTaphact'. In their research participants wrote about the hurtful slurs, gender violence and sexual harassment they experienced on rulers. These rulers were attached to a belt and assembled into the skirt. The ruler skirt (dARTaphact) carries stories of violence and harassment experienced by the fifteen-year-old participants and delivers their messages in a creative, material and engaging way (2019). This skirt has travelled the world, visiting the National Government here in Wales as well as the United Nations. The skirt carries research stories and messages, such as 'They use rulers to lift up our skirts' into new spaces in an eye catching and impactful, 'PhEmaterialist' way. PhEmaterialist researchers gather loosely under the theoretical umbrella of Feminist new-materialists or the post humanities, this movement has also been termed PhEmaterialism (Renold 2019). The PhEmaterialisms website (2020) provides the following definition:

*The P-h refers to Post-Human PHilosophy. “Phem,” refers to multiple feminisms; “E” refers to Education in the broadest sense; “Materialism” comes from new materialist thought; The ‘ph’ is pronounced ‘f’ so that sound and letter bring posthuman and feminism together in one expression.*

Ringrose et al. (2019) summarise the theoretical and conceptual moves they see as central to the task for empirical researchers adopting a PhEmaterialist approach. Firstly, they argue it is vital to trouble the notion of ‘human exceptionalism’. Human exceptionalism in thought and research is the idea that our focus in researching the world should be human subjectivities, that human experience is the locus of all meaning making and (implicitly at least) the primary unit of analysis. Instead, they argue, we should be expanding our analytical frames to bring relationalities of the material and affective to the fore. In practice this means acknowledging that agency is distributed across the social and material world. Rather than thinking of agency as the force of an individual being, it is distributed across human and the more than-human ‘becomings’ (Ringrose et al. 2019, p.11).

### 2.3 Ontology and epistemology or onto-epistemology?

Braidotti’s ‘process ontology’ (2013, p.35) inspired by Spinoza, posits a universe in constant flux, always on the move, shifting perpetually. In a decisive move away from notions of fixity, permanence and stasis, this project takes the fabric of reality (ontology) to be in a state of permanent movement in multiple directions. This is an approach that prioritises the certainty that everything will become something else. It also underpins my commitment to shift the research agenda away from identity politics and the multiple categorisations that work to fix the diverse participants of this research. Consequently, I make no claims to revealing objective truths about the participants or their environments. Instead, ambiguities, inconsistencies and equivocations are of analytical interest here, to evidence the complexity and fluidity of participants lives. Using the related concepts of assemblages, intra-action and response-ability outlined in this chapter and in the chapters that follow, allows for ambiguity and fluidity in everything that came to matter. Accordingly, I acknowledge that as a feminist researcher, gender was of analytical interest. However,

practically speaking, these ideas informed an openness to participants and processes. For example, taking the idea of distributed subjectivities in assemblages seriously, meant that excluding participants based on gender or SpLD (or any other categorisation) would have been counter-intuitive to developing an understanding of the processual, distributed and relational nature of gender and gaming relations.

I acknowledge that my understanding of those things is partial and one possible meaning among myriad (cuts). This situatedness, alonsideness, knowing as being, and becoming with, is the basis for onto-epistemology. As partial as the knowing is it is implicated in the process of creating the very thing it describes. So, the project created me as researcher, participants as such, and the knowledge we produced is specific to these relations. Barad (2003) outlines what, in her view is the untenable separation ontology and epistemology:

*The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse. Onto-epistem-ology—the study of practices of knowing in be-ing—is probably a better way to think about the kind of understandings that are needed to come to terms with how specific intra-actions matter. (Barad 2003, p.829)*

Notable here is the emphasis on 'intra-action'. For Barad, materiality (including bodies, things and structures) exists prior to the events through which they unfold and en-fold and intra-act, yet ontological status is only gained relationally through the process. I return to the concept of intra-action below as it is key to understanding onto-epistemology. In other words, everything is in a constant dance of negotiation; discursive, symbolic, material, affective relations flow through and around the unrepeatable, unique spatial and temporal contexts through which they unfold and enfold. It is through the relations in this specificity that matter comes to matter. So intra, rather than inter-acting emphasises that those actors are not separate or 'a priori' to the relations they are entangled in. Inter-act assumes this separation, whereas intra-act indicates the relational focus.

For example, the neurodiverse gamer comes to their screen, that calls forth a particular embodied posture, they bring embodied memories and preconscious habits (Grosz 1994) sedimented through frequent gaming. The gamepad controller is a prosthesis, pointing and acting upon the narrative of the game, an avatar gains additional capabilities, becomes stronger, becomes the finger powered weapon that abruptly wipes a player in New Zealand out of the game and off the leader board. Elsewhere this might be understood as 'muscle memory' or 'cognitive immersion' (Taylor 2002) in relation to gaming, but 'knowing-in-being' resists such a body and mind dichotomy. It also includes agency of the game controller (and myriad other more-than human relations), to call forth a particular style of knowing-in-being on the part of the gamer. So, while we would not say that the gamer did not exist prior to the encounter, Barad's point is that the different configurations prior to this encounter will have rendered an altogether different set of relations, beings and things. If we are researching events and encounters, everything within is unique to their 'knowing-in-being' (Barad 2003).

Understanding what things have the potential to become and do, or do not become with those potentials can help us to learn about the way things change and provide opportunities for things to become otherwise. So instead of looking for another example of what we already know (representational thinking) to be there, it might be possible to map ambiguity, the unexplainable, which refuses categorisation, as a way to map difference and change? If as I have outlined above change is constant, then mapping change can also say something about conditions surrounding it. This was an important consideration for this research, a theoretical position that remained open to possibilities for difference. But also mapping the ways that we might create the conditions conducive to productions of difference (instead of anticipating and finding more of the same).

This research has drawn on the theory of Braidotti (2013, Barad (2003) and Haraway (2016) but I am not claiming that their work as inter-changeable or synonymous. Haraway (2016, p.4), for example, is keen to distance herself from the 'post' of posthumanism. She employs the concept of 'composting' to draw our attention to the messy, entangled, relentlessness of our relationality with all things. For Haraway, 'post' humanism suggests a movement beyond humanism, a concept that she would rather stay in the situated, messy 'trouble'



with. Indeed, 'Staying with the Trouble' incites the researcher to do just this, to be, 'situated, someplace and not noplac, entangled and worldly' (Haraway 2016, p.4). Borrowing concepts from Haraway, as well as Barad and Braidotti in this thesis is indicative of the 'wildness' that Halberstam and Nyong'o (2018, p. 454) are describing in the quote that opens this chapter. Each concept affords a way to understand my research process through a broadly aligned emphasis on messy, entangled relationality, where knowing and knowledge (epistemology) are produced via our entangled relations with the worlds we describe (ontology). There is no 'outside' of things from which to observe for these theorists.

Importantly, for Barad the hierarchical separateness of researcher, participant, audio recorder, classroom, weather, time of year, time of day, discourses of childhood, participants experiences and fleeting affective registers, is untenable. In other words, nothing outside of the research encounter pre-exists it. Rather everything comes into being co-constitutively, the categories listed above are called into being by their relationships with each other, each producing the other in specific configurations or assemblages. This is not to say that the past and history of all these things is not within the frame, quite the reverse. The question here is not, what are those things? Instead, how do they become what they are and what else might they be? Three critical concepts are needed here to formalise this framework and are used throughout this thesis: Assemblages, intra-action and agential cutting together-apart. These concepts are used to describe the way that I have understood the relationality I have outlined above. 'I' is important here, as I will explain, the decisions around what to highlight, explain and introduce were mine, and a good example of the 'cut' that I define below. I will start with assemblages and link the other two concepts to this. From these concepts I will build outwards to demonstrate their usefulness to this project and to my understandings of gender.

## 2.4 Intra-action

For Barad (2007) the idea of interaction assumes discrete and bounded entities, beings and bodies meeting and affecting each other. Intra-action, on the other hand, is akin to what I have outlined above, equal agential status of the human and non-human (rather than

human exceptionalism) is given, and scrutiny applied to the idiosyncratic ways that each invokes something particular from the other (Barad 2007, p.3). The particularities of each research assemblage call forth a specific set of relations between bodies, structures, affects, spaces, and context and time. This should not be confused with the idea that 'everything has been building up to this point' in a fate driven alignment. Barad rejects the notion of incremental telos and argues that history and future are deeply enmeshed in the experiential now. What at first sounds complicated, becomes self-evident. We do not live completely in the phenomenological now. Affective registers can work in anticipation (Manning's 'pre-hension' 2016) or perhaps in the past, a familiar feeling is conjured up by an encounter. We might feel fear, but that fear can be feeling forward in anticipation or in retrospection of the way that a previous encounter ended badly, more likely is that we are doing both, and more.

A more thorough exploration of affect, affective capacities and registers follows in a later section, but the point here is to identify one very possibly small strand that might be entangled in intra-action and not just an intra-action with another person, equally this could be the same in an encounter with a photograph, a t-shirt, a doll or some nail varnish. In this case a Baradian analysis of the encounter would pay attention to and acknowledge the agency of those non-human facets of the assemblage. What does a classroom do? Importantly the classroom-person assemblage is mutually constitutive, and each asks something of the other, it is a situated, unpredictable assemblage. Lenz Taguchi (2011) analyses this type of relationality in play in the early years. Lenz-Taguchi uses the example of the young child and the sandbox to illustrate the point, she argues that instead of seeing the active child playing with the inert sand in the sandbox our gaze might also be viewing the sand playing with the child (2011, p.38). Play, for Lenz-Taguchi, is not happening in between the child and the sand, instead the affective and textural capacities of the sand as a malleable, temperate, silky substance evokes a desire to be run through fingers. The agency of the sand is apparent here in the reframing of the event, and play is the distributed web of agencies between the girl, the sand, a bucket that is evokes a desire to be filled with sand and so on. This collection of agencies is a good example of an assemblage.

In this thesis, these ideas materialise through the practice of embodied noticing and paying close attention to time, situations and things as well as people. This included employing a range of traditional research methods, ethnographic and creative while retaining a focus on what these methods can do, rather than what they are. These concepts, methods and analysing are, as Barad says 'material practices' that constitute the practices I go on to introduce in the empirical chapters (2007, p.91). This research is implicated in the stories I go on to tell, and are in part, what makes those realities I 'report back' on. This is what an onto-epistemology of engagement describes. Our research intervenes in the world and what we know is produced as part of its very production. Separating out those micro moments of hair raising, gut wrenching, déjà vu, the eerie, the joyful and the frightening and the heavy, from their context was difficult, but these embodied affective responses to my surroundings informed the path we followed in research encounters and alerted me to moments of importance. Listing every such moment here would be impossible, however, the most persistent of these embodied noticings, the 'stickiest' are included within this thesis. The decision to include (and inevitably what to exclude) was mine. The inclusion of particular stories and ideas around what the research did are representative of 'cuts' I made to the data. To return to the Frankensteinian metaphor of the introductory chapter, the assemblages gathered in this thesis are in some way sutured and stitched but the cuts remain (Shelton et al. 2019).

## 2.5 Assemblages and speculative pragmatism

In this project I follow Feminist researchers who appropriate the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of assemblage (Hickey-Moody 2019; Ringrose et al. 2019; Renold and Iverson 2015). Assemblage is not a bounded and discrete jumble of relations tied to a central concept, vector or person. Assemblage is not a washing line of ideas, strung out and pegged together to form a linear pre-supposing of the historic as it journeys through the contemporary and into the future. For a lucid and comprehensive definition, I turned to DeLanda's (2016) 'Assemblage Theory' only to find on the first page that Deleuze and Guattari had six differing definitions, unsurprising given that 'concept building' is the motivation behind the invention of 'assemblage (DeLanda 2016, p.3)'. DeLanda devotes the entire book to an exploration of assemblage, journeying through its associated 'knobs' (2016, p.3) outlining

that any object or subject in materialist ontology can be thought with assemblage. The clearest definition for the purposes of this thesis appears at the beginning of DeLanda's (2016) book, where it is characterised as a multiplicity comprised of heterogeneity which establishes liaisons, relations between and across them and in his words: 'It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys, these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind' (DeLanda 2016, p.1). And for Deleuze and Guattari, conceptual and material assemblages are the stuff of the world (Hickey-Moody 2019).

Puar (2011) also describes the 'uneasy translation' of the word assemblage which she outlines is derived from the French: *agencement*. *Agencement*, Puar (2011) continues is, '*a term which means design, layout, organization, arrangement, and relations--the focus being not on content but on relations, relations of patterns*'. This is a crucial point, assemblages are dynamic and agentic, protean and always in-formation. The focus is on the connections that aggregate in assemblages. Situating assemblage in relation to speculative pragmatism, Manning (cited in Massumi 2015, p.157) emphasises the agentic capacities of the event or encounter when she says, 'the event itself as agency-ing'. She is gesturing towards the complexity of *agencement* and that the scope of its dynamic nature is somewhat lost in translation. Here, Manning is describing the way that events and assemblages cannot be planned or predicted or known in advance. The 'what' is only available in the research rear view mirror, no advance mapping is possible. The event, each event, every event, generates its own speculative pragmatism, where pragmatism is knowing that things remain unpredictable. For Renold and Ivinson (2019), this pragmatism is akin to Whitehead's 'pure experience'. They draw on Massumi's (2011, p.10) description of this as 'the relational composition of a multiplicity of forces from different worlds/disciplines/fields' (2019, p.3). The task here is to remain present as part of the *agencement* of the event, not to try and remove yourself from the complex web of relations, or to situate agency in any subject of the event. The speculative for Åsberg et al. (2015) is distinguishable as retaining its focus on 'the importance of situatedness and context, relationality and affinity – and the possibility for rewiring relations- amid a plethora of lively historiographies and emergent post-disciplinary movements and world-makings' (2015, p.145). In simpler terms, there is no denying that our energies energise research encounters, and it is to the specificities of these encounters we

must attend. In terms of planning and crafting this research project, these ideas translate in to creating spaces of possibility and remaining open to research assemblages and the force relations unique to them.

Lury (2020) favours the term methodologies instead of methods for describing the way research practices are connected to the type of theory I have sketched above. For Lury, methods are more akin to situated practices and processes than they are standalone tools applied from a distance.

*Speculative design or research invites the researcher to think about the future in relation to the present, or to try to actualize the future in the present, and that is really important in the sense of making a difference. The concern is precisely about who is able to act on latent futures; the focus is on the distribution of agency –whose futures are anticipated and enabled, and whose are foreclosed. (Lury 2020, p. 45)*

Here the rationale for holding open spaces for different stories, in ways that do not foreclose particular experiences is clear. The evolving ‘methodologies’ of this project are of those encounters, at that time. Relinquishing anxieties around (research) outcomes to the process was no easy task in the early stages of fieldwork. But there are no traditional ‘outcomes’ in this thesis. This is a different story of processes where ‘being there’ in the relational field mattered, being engaged in co-composition (Massumi p.157). The following ‘method-ing’ chapter maps the multiple idiosyncratic methodologies and assemblages of this project. These were made possible from a starting place of an ‘ontology of engagement’ (Stengers 2019). For Manning, this flexibility of thought is also necessary so that a more collective understanding of value can be forged:

*‘A collectivity in the way I understand it is always concerned with these speculative pragmatic questions – speculative because they remain open to invention, pragmatic because they are born of a continual exploration of the in-act’ (in Massumi 2015, p.165).*

Drawing on her experiences as part of the SenseLab<sup>10</sup>, Manning talks about affective speeds and opening up encounters to different kinds of participation as ethical praxis. In other words, remaining attuned to the event and not attempting to stand outside of it. This includes responding, pragmatically to the event. For Manning, exploring the affective timbre of the encounter is more than a trust fall relying on inventive retrospect, it is an ethical attunement to the responsibilities of being present. This attention to the distributed, material and affective inevitably has implications for our understandings of research participants and ourselves. Subjectivities, including my own, are an inevitable facet of research assemblages. Neurodiverse, teen gamer subjectivities, for instance, are of particular relevance to this project.

In this thesis, these ideas materialise through the practice of embodied noticing and paying close attention, to time, situations and things as well as people. Alongside this more familiar, traditional research methods, ethnographic and creative, informed all of what follows in the coming chapters. Lury (2020) argues that innovative methodologies are not just those that appear new or novel. Instead, she argues, the analytic position we take towards existing methodologies, being open to new ideas of what we might learn, widening our epistemological scope are all innovations. Separating out those micro moments of hair raising, gut wrenching, de ja vu, the eerie, the joyful, the frightening and the heavy, from their context was difficult. However, this kind of affective analysis is the kind of methodological innovation Lury (2020) is describing and the three empirical chapters were informed by those micro-moments.

## 2.6 Cutting together apart

*Cuts cut 'things' together and apart. Cuts are not enacted from the outside, nor are they ever enacted for once and for all. (Barad 2007, p.179)*

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<sup>10</sup> Erin Manning founded the SenseLab in 2004 it is 'an international network of artists and academics, writers and makers, from a wide diversity of fields, working together at the crossroads of philosophy, art, and activism' (SenseLab3e, 2020)

For Barad when we as researchers or speakers and describers of the world engage in this naming of constituent parts, this labelling performs a 'cut'. Importantly, particularly in matters of ethical responsibility, performing this cut is a decisive exercising of the agency of the person performing the cut or description. In this case, me. This notion of the cut is crucial as well to understanding that it is one of many possible such cuts. For Barad 'different cuts produce differences that matter' (2007, p.38) and this is of significant consequence when researchers (or anyone) attributes labels to people and things. In their work that re-engages with interview data to produce an analysis that reconfigures the 'autistic child', Frigerio et al. (2018) shift the focus to the emplacement of objects in a family interview with a mother and daughter. They argue that the material resources in the interview setting were used to limit or territorialize the girl with the label 'autistic'. Frigerio et al. (2018) demonstrate the way that the non-human exercises agency within the assemblage of their research setting. They map the way that the child's sensorial engagement with the material world leads to her pathologization. Once the objects are removed, her 'becoming' with them is shut down and she withdraws. This withdrawal is then, discursively employed by her caregivers to signify a 'weird and eccentric' child (Frigerio et al. 2018 p.396). This re-focusing on existing interview data highlighted that an alternative 'cut', one that privileged that agency of the play materials could be used to reconfigure the production of the 'autistic girl' cut.

A Baradian 'cut' is what separates out a thing for analysis. This thing could be a person, an object, a practice or a process. In chapter four, for example, I cut together-apart discursive materialities around neurodiverse girls in special school settings. In performing this cut I become entangled, ontologically, with what follows. This is the together-apart. It acknowledges that this is one cut amongst a possible myriad, someone else might have had a very different idea of what was happening. The cuts I perform on the data presented in this thesis, entangle me in the creation of those worlds. The concepts of knowing-in-being (Barad 2007) and ontology of engagement (Stengers 2019) that I introduced above are again useful here. The knowing-in-being guided where those cuts were made. So, there is a separation and simultaneous entanglement, 'cutting together apart' (Barad 2007; Taylor 2013). Within gender and education research this theory has been used to highlight the

agency of the material in children's lives (Taylor 2013; Ringrose et al. 2019). Osgood and Robinson (2019 p.67) posit that:

*Working with flattened ontologies insists that the human subject is not privileged within any investigation, instead researchers are required to pay equal attention to materiality, affect, and corporeality. This confederate approach shifts the emphasis from viewing gender as an exclusively human concern to appreciating it as endlessly produced and reworked through entanglements; gender is generated through micro-events and is constantly shifting and mutating.*

It is the 'confederate approach' to gender, outlined by Osgood and Robinson (2019) that permeates this thesis. Fixity and certainty are not included in confederate approaches to gender, nor is it the property of the individual, rather it is relationally produced via objects, places, time, affects, animals, plants, technologies discourses and people. This gathering of entities has a conceptual name, assemblages. Amongst the multiplicities of these assemblages subjectivities are produced.

## 2.7 Subjectivities in assemblages

*He's always happy he's never, if you ask him about his emotions in the morning he's always, he's always happy .... Love him, he hasn't really got... it's the same every day. So, in regards to that, he just can't perhaps elaborate...and sometimes if you say something to him and you can tell his whole body will react if you kind of say something and he hasn't quite got you and you're trying to explain, he's almost nervous to answer you he thinks he's going to say something wrong and he will stop and get really agitated if he hasn't understood you. (Lindsey, ASD classroom support assistant)*

Lindsey is describing Laurie in the quote above. Laurie is a 14-year-old neurodiverse boy with an ASD diagnosis. I met Laurie around five times in total. The first time was during a visit to his whole class to introduce myself and the project. He was interested to talk about video games and noticed my t-shirt, asking if I was from Nintendo. Laurie, I noticed sat



slightly apart from the rest of the group, next to a female staff member, Lindsey. I visited the class at lunch time, again Laurie was alone, talking although I could not see anyone else there. Lindsey explained that he was in his 'gaming world' somewhere he often 'went' where he could 'see the game' or he was 'in the game'. My fieldnotes reflect that several staff members comment on this when I introduce myself and my interest in gaming. However, as the quote above goes some way to explaining, exploring the topic with Laurie using a more traditional research style would not have been appropriate, not least because of Laurie's preferred interactional style. Lindsey, who worked the most closely with Laurie suggested asking him to show me rather than tell me what I wanted to know (what Laurie can do in gaming worlds). Introspection is very difficult for Laurie, and his is perhaps a useful example of the need for thinking differently about subjectivities.

In their ground-breaking theorising of subjectivities, in the inaugural issue of the journal *Subjectivity*, Blackman et al. (2008, p.8) ask, '*What else is the subject here other than a produced form, the outcome of a complex constellation of textual, material, institutional, historical factors?*' In attempting to understand what a gamer can do; I am interested in motivations to play. However, simply asking questions such as, what is good about this? What do you enjoy about this? Include a hidden question around the 'you' that is enjoying? There are epistemological assumptions in anticipating this to be an answerable question. Assuming that each person will have subtle differences in their experiences, it is necessary to understand how I am thinking about the enjoying participant. Notions of the 'rational unitary subject' a stable set of character traits available to self-reflection and report (Walkerdine 2018) have been called in to question over the last thirty years (Blackman et al. 2008; Walkerdine 2018). What is more this is not useful to understanding Laurie's sense of 'self'. It became apparent from the earliest encounters with staff and Laurie himself that gaming spaces, constitute what Ivinson and Renold (2013, p.370) describe as 'existential territories of survival' for Laurie.

Existential territories are those opportunities for subjectivities otherwise, that make the ordinary and mundane, the everyday circumstances of some liveable. In the same interview that I have drawn on above Lindsey recalls the way that during an episode of 'escalation' (physical restraint) Laurie was 'in his gaming world' and 'levelled up'. She said that

accompanying his verbal commentary there was a perceptible surge in his bodily strength, felt by those staff restraining him. For me there remains little use in understanding Laurie as something separate to, what others posit as a fantasy world. Even when faced with the material agency of Laurie's 'gaming world' in a serious restraint incident, there is no attempt to reconcile this facet of Laurie with Laurie the classroom student.

There is a clearly identifiable existential terrain for Laurie that I cannot see, hear or experience. 'Gaming world' it seemed to me was a place that afforded Laurie a different type of subjectivity to the classroom or school setting. Ivinson and Renold (2003) argue that there is a lack of recognition of those subjectivities that 'don't make it into the classroom' and a focus on what young people cannot do rather than what they can. They argue persuasively that exploring these alternative subjectivities can provide valuable insights as to the way that these existential terrains can provide spaces for young people to 'creatively survive in the world' (2003 p.371).

For Foucault, subjectivities are produced through and moulded by regulatory discourses; we orient ourselves in relation to them and internalise a disciplinary gaze (1978). Subjectivity, then, is the experience of the living at this nexus of positionings (Blackman et al. 2008). According to Foucault, our very sense of ourselves, our experiences, our bodies are filtered through the prism of discourses. Therefore, to find out about our subjectivities we need only look at the multiple disciplinary discourses that we are subject to. However, Strathern (2014) complicates this picture, arguing that explorations of subjectivities need to acknowledge their situated assemblages rather than singling subjectivity out as, and attempting to understand it, 'for itself'. While discourses are inevitably and evidently implicated in our understandings of ourselves and others, not least by limiting what it is possible to think or say about our circumstances (cf. The History of Sexuality for Foucault's persuasive arguments in this area), other agential forces and relations are in the mix. In the context of a 'special school' (which I define in the following chapter) where notions of identity and self-presentation are diverse, often-pathologised and categorised as non-normative, situating subjectivities in the relational assemblages is a deliberate and decisive step away from the neo-liberal individualising project. If, as Rose (1998) contends, subjectivities can be conceived in the Deleuzian sense - a folding inwards of materiality

(bodily experiences) the discursive (the process of subjectification through discourse), technologies of the self, the intellectual (acquisition of language, mathematical sense and legibility) producing a processual, discontinuous surface; what can be the basis for understanding that surface?

In the context of this thesis these surface subjectivities are understood through experience and affect. Rather than attempting to continue to explain this approach in the abstract the following extracts are drawn from fieldnotes, video transcription and analysis of gaming with Laurie to show how subjectivities as affect and experience work in my data. In order to approximate a greater understanding of Laurie I had to attempt to visit this existential survival terrain. It was necessary to create a space of possibility, to open up the research process. I spoke to Lindsey about the best way to create a space that Laurie would enjoy. Laurie is an expert at the videogame 'Just Dance'<sup>11</sup> (2018) on the Wii<sup>12</sup>. I arranged with Laurie and Lindsey that we would play the game together in a classroom. This was a sonic, embodied, affective lively space and the longer I spent there, the more open, relaxed and talkative Laurie became. The following extract is combined from my fieldnote and transcription of the video data on that day.

Combined extract from fieldnote and video transcription

Castlebridge school 07/06/2018

*'Laurie remarks several times to me during the dance, telling me who his character is and the dance itself involves us facing each other numerous times. Each time we smile and laugh. Laurie exclaims that he is hot at one point and I agree. I can feel the sweat on my back, but I am also enjoying keeping up this time.'*

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<sup>11</sup> Just Dance (2018) is a game where you shadow the movements of Avatars who are dancing in the game and on the screen. Console sensors read your ability to move the game controllers in time with the rhythm of the music.

<sup>12</sup> 'Wii is a home console from Nintendo. Launched in 2006, it introduced motion-controlled gaming to a wide audience of Nintendo fans and people who did not traditionally play video games' (Nintendo 2020)

*I am not sure I could offer an adequate or eloquent explanation of what was enjoyable, nothing that couldn't be read from the cover sleeve of the game anyway. There was a sense of achievement, mastery of the moves and my own body, the enjoyment of dancing and the enjoyment of dancing with Laurie. I feel that any young person would struggle to evaluate and articulate the capacities of enjoyment in a game. And, instead, Laurie could most definitely see that I understood. And, although I like parameters, I am not someone who finds a prototype almost necessary to knowing what to do in a situation. Laurie is, and it is entirely possible to surmise that this is a liberating and expansive experience for Laurie. One almost certainly free from the risk of getting it wrong. There are no facial expressions to try and decode in the figures on the screen. Copying is the aim of the game.*

*After the first three rounds Laurie becomes much more animated in our interaction and when I ask him about his gaming more broadly, he confidently takes to the laptop to show me. The remainder of this meeting was so loud I could hardly hear him, and it made my head hurt. But this background noise and the flashing images of game play behind us seemed to make it much easier for Laurie to talk to me. Watching it back I was reminded of something Lisa said in the interview, when I asked her if there was anything he didn't like. She said he wasn't good with lots of noise, he found loud classroom behaviour unpleasant and avoided it if he could. But it's noticeable that the digital noises issuing from the computer seemed to have the opposite effect.*

*And when I reflect on why this might have been it seems that there are particular ways of being in the world that Laurie finds challenging and they all involve the unpredictability of the social world. Communicating with people and decoding fast paced ever evolving situations, encounters and conversations. It isn't hard to see the appeal of a more predictable digital situation. However loud the noise was it signalled only the continuation of his favourite game in the background. And the audio and visual familiarity also seemed to make our conversation flow much more easily. Laurie enjoyed telling me about the game, at times he walked in circles, occasionally he flapped his hands, all signs, according to Lindsey, that he was excited,*

*and he enthusiastically explained to me the rules of the game play we were watching, and the characters of the game.*

*This, in turn, led to discussions about other games, games he played, favourite characters, favourite colours. And at times he moved closer to me, eye contact increased and at one point he came close to my face to show me the colour of his eyes. He was unable to tell me if he played with other people online, I am not sure if he knew or cared, he populated his gaming worlds with colourful characters and described some very fondly. And, the constant movement, at the end of the meeting became Laurie sitting down next to me to talk to me”.*

Subjectivity as experience provides a way to think through immediacy and immanence where experience is processual, unfolding, never finished and existing only in an undetermined moment. The extract above does not provide an account of mine or Laurie’s interiority nor describe the production of subjectivity, rather it is an account of an experience. It implicates bodies and gestures and affect and is a necessarily partial account of a shared phenomenological encounter. It focuses on the relationality and production of a shared communication; it is a mapping of a positive research encounter that did not and could not rely solely on discursive interaction as research. The situatedness of experience and understanding is highlighted where I draw on the memory of a conversation with Lisa. Lisa has told me that Laurie does not like noise. And yet, this encounter felt facilitated, if not powered by the deafening sounds that accompanied the game. The loose grouping of characteristics that we might think of as comprising subjectivities coalesce around these notions of stable traits, of things we like and do not like. The onto-epistemological underpinnings of this research do not make these assumptions. I argue that traditional research methods would not have worked here. Any approach that was rigidly structured or planned too heavily in advance would have fallen short of creating the conditions for Laurie to participate.

Here the conceptual usefulness of affect as distinct from emotions is evident. I can convey my understandings of those qualities of the encounter that exceed the spoken, the gestured, the subjectified, the personally experienced emotional (the terrain of classical

understandings of subjectivity). They are necessarily difficult to explain and belong to the realms of the relational, the flow, tempo, rhythm and cadence of the encounter that was produced relationally. Laurie's subjectivities are produced as an assemblage, here he is gaming expert, embodied, noisy, talkative, proximal excited Laurie. And this can be relayed without reference to those characteristics that stratify and disadvantage, without drawing on normative discourses of difference, without attempting to write them out. Instead, this account is run through with its inherent multiplicities, strung together, coherently, only for the sake of sense making in writing. The cut above, shows how Laurie and I co-produced ourselves in the encounter. Interested-engaged- pained researcher is produced alongside gamer-expert-participant Laurie. The partiality of these accounts is perhaps a desirable one as the chaotic experiential nowness at the time gave me a migraine.

The usefulness of Deleuzian inspired conceptual apparatus is evident here; rather than viewing the self as a bounded, separated, agentic being, Deleuze instead acknowledges the assemblages through which subjectivities are produced. For Deleuze, then, subjectivities are multiplicities of forces, of desires and intensities formed through 'dynamic individuation' (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, p.93) a process from which the assemblage of the 'self' is produced in dynamic relation or becoming. This dynamic relationally is characterised by a mutually constituting dance of matter and the mind, so co-constitutive as to be inextricably linked. Similarly, Braidotti (2019, p.42) posits subjectivity as 'a structural relational capacity, coupled with the specific degree of force or power that any one entity is endowed with: the ability to extend towards and in proximity with others.' Again, the focus here is on plural and distributed subjectivities, rather than centralised and coherent ones. Bodies are both embedded and embodied and have relational affective powers. This description of subjectivities relates to attributes and modes of understanding that are frequently used to define another key concept in this thesis, affect.

## 2.8 Affect: Baby whispers, growls and bouncing balls

*'to experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only toward an object, but to "whatever" is around that object, which includes what is behind the object, the conditions of its arrival.'* Ahmed (2010, p.33)

The 'affective turn' as a response to the over emphasis on the discursive no longer represents new ground (Wetherell 2012). It is an heterogenous and divided field of research and thought. For instance, Deleuze and Guattari (2013) use Spinoza's 'affect' to conceptualise bodily capacities, to affect and be affected (Massumi 2004). Brian Massumi (2004) explains that, for Deleuze and Guattari, affect can be understood as a bodily, pre-personal, intensity and in this sense affect is not to be confused with emotion. Where emotion describes the situated and the personal, affect describes the contextual and the pre and post-personal, the lived and embodied energies and intensities of existence. If emotion is described as an inner force, affect is relational. Furthermore, these intensities lie, just beyond the realm of the discourse of emotions or representational feelings in an inarticulate landscape (Massumi 2004). All the empirical chapters that follow will refer to affect as it is defined here, although it sometimes feels risky to use affective intensities as a speculative analytical tool, I believe that doing so opens up research to the sometimes opaque and ignored textual richness of intra-personal encounters which include non-verbal encounters and embodied practices.

The following section is a short extract from a fast-paced, wide ranging, wild research assemblage. The excess that affect alludes to, that feeling beyond discourse, renders itself visible fleetingly but vividly. There are several possible readings or 'cuts' of what 'happens' here. For instance, the more literal and even symbolic act of the female autistic participant taking the ball(s) of her male friend. Over the course of a forty-minute encounter, her affective force side lines him in every possible way. Interesting as this may be this section and the wider conversation that it is part of is more illuminating as an example of the movement of affect in the event. This exchange that is transcribed below happens at around ten minutes into the meeting. Lena and Blethyn are writing a story/game world together. Lena frequently interrupts Blethyn and corrects him after most of the points he makes. They have been friends since primary school, and this is not an unusual dynamic between them. I have highlighted the blips and excesses, where laughter is indicated, the laugh here is not the kind that is motivated by humour or comedy, it is a guttural, loud and imposing laugh and it creates a sonic space, at the time, in the room, obliterating any other noise. It also punctuates moments that shift the tempo of the encounter to Lena's rhythm.

*(Blethyn starts rhythmically, persistently, bouncing a ball on the table)*

*Lena: He's completely ruined the team world*

*Blethyn: I like to think of it as bending the rules*

*Lena: It's breaking it (laughs)*

*Blethyn: Some rules are, need to be broken*

*Lena: (In a growly whisper) This is the team rule Blethyn. Growls. Plus, it's really annoying when like one character, when like one team has this really odd spelling.*

***(Lena takes Blethyn's ball)***

*Vicky: Hmm. So, it starts with these teams.*

*Blethyn: Really? (He looks quizzically at Lena and is talking about the ball here)*

*Lena: Laughs*

*Blethyn: Really Lena? (Lena gives the ball back) Thank you (Blethyn starts bouncing the ball again)*

*Vicky: Ahh.*

*Lena: (In a high-pitched baby voice) It's really squishy*

*Blethyn: It's a stress ball.*

*Lena: Squishy*

*Vicky: So, it's nice to squish?*

*Lena: (In whispery baby voice) Squiiiiiiiiiiish*

*Blethyn: Yeah, um, the original web series, Ruby um follows four girls: Ruby Rose, Blake Belladonna, Weiss Schnee and Yang Xiao*

*Lena: (Over the top of Blethyn speaking) growls in Chinese accent Yaaang*

*Xxxxxxxiao. Laughs*

*Blethyn: On their path to become fully formed huntresses*

*Lena: Over the top of Blethyn's last words shouts: Huntresses Huntresses, and hunters. Can't forget about the men. Can't forget about them men (Lena's talking over Blethyn here and I can't hear what he is saying).*

*Lena: Actually, we can forget about the men. (In a deep, throaty whisper) We can.*



The vectors and forces that are highlighted in bold and sub-texted in parenthesis, are agentic, affective expressions of the inarticulable registers of this encounter. We might advance this further and in an exploration of agency and affect in this encounter we could ask, what can a ball do? Above we can watch as the power of the ball, its affective capacities are met affectively with different and strange vocal registers. Baby whispers, ball bouncing, and growling are all force-full affects of this exchange. Later in the conversation Lena will lose her voice, as she describes feeling pain, she gapes, moves her lips, coughs forcibly and then these words will come: 'the original pain she was supposed to feel'. What was felt and known instinctively is that Lena wants to tell her own stories, this desire is irrepressibly becoming throughout the encounter. As Massumi clarifies (2011, p.11), affect is not 'raw experience' instead it is 'thinking-feeling' that is inflected with experience and potential, it in-forms experience; an instantaneous collision of what has been and what might be creating what Massumi calls a 'speculative gesture' laden with the alternatives and the instantaneous appraisals of the situation.

Lena is introduced in more depth in Chapter four, *Neurodiverse Girl: making sense of sensing gender trouble*, but her feminism is not constructed or named as such. Instead, her matter-of-fact engagement with the world reflects the way her predominantly male peers (girls are hugely outnumbered in special school settings) engage with her. The rejection of her interactional style by her male peers confuses and upsets her. These blips, the moments of excess, erupt as alterations to her voice, her posture, her look and most painfully her rib crushing-possessive hugs. Here I am reminded of Manning's reflection on affect as: 'that which is excluded because it cannot be fitted within order exceeds capture' (2016, p.4).

Massumi summarises this in *Parables of the Virtual*:

*'Reserve the term 'emotion' for the personalized content and affect for the continuation. Emotion is contextual. Affect is situational: eventfully ingressive to context. Serially so: affect is trans-situational. As precessual as it is processual, affect inhabits the passage. It is pre- and postcontextual, pre- and postpersonal, an excess of continuity invested only in the ongoing: its own. Self-continuity across the gaps. Impersonal affect is the connecting thread of experience. It is the invisible glue that holds the world together (Massumi 2002 p.217)*

The most important distinctions, as this quote demonstrates are those between affect and feeling and affect and emotion (Massumi 2002; 2015). Elsewhere scholars of affect, using the concept in their empirical research, are less troubled by this distinction (Wetherell 2012; Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2016). My adherence to Massumi's perspective here is entangled with the notion of forces and agencies, the concepts of emotion and feeling fall short of this conceptual usefulness. Of course, emotion and feeling are present and circulating too, but it is the relentless socialness (rather than a concern with interiority and psychosocial explanations) of Massumi's account of affect, of its situated relationality that helps me to understand and work with participants, research materials, human and non-human agencies.

Returning to the example above, it may or may not be the case that Lena was 'feeling' frustrated and so took the ball or felt uncomfortable and expressed that discomfort by taking Blethyn's ball. But the ball-Lena-bouncing-growling-Blethyn- assemblage was not that simple. It included the place and space of the interview, me, our relationships, Lena and Blethyn's separate and shared histories, the gaming story-world they were constructing. It could be the case that Blethyn bounced the ball on the table to annoy Lena and to highlight that he needed a stress ball. It did not feel that simple. Instead, the ball was shared and shared them, it called up a different vocal register. While those voices narrated words, and sometimes in an onomatopoeic way Lena was narrating an inner-dialogue, or creatively expressing a train of thought, these blurts and blips erupted and in the assembled company (the ball, Lena, Blethyn and me) were unremarkably, enfolded into the affective research assemblage. In the chapters that follow, the affective terrain of the research encounters is often introduced and explored in the way they are above. Crucially, though, the empirical chapters are affective chapters, these stories are the ones whose adhesive textures are the basis for their inclusion. My own affective registers are therefore obviously, squarely in the frame.

In crafting these research assemblages I also employ the concept of 'response-ability' (Barad 2007; Haraway 2016). 'Response-ability' Haraway (2016, p.13) argues, acknowledges that in our entangled material engagements (assemblages) we are all responsible but 'not in the

same ways'. This is an ethical imperative that is entangled within the situatedness of research assemblages knowledge production practices. For Barad (2007) response-ability is about recognising and maximising the capabilities of everything in the relational entanglement. It is understanding that questions are not 'innocent' and that their very nature expects and uninvites particular types of response. Response-able research is about acknowledging that questions are not neutral and crafting research that is open to responses that researchers might not expect. It is about responding in ways that value diverse force relations at all times. It acknowledges the political, material, situated and partial entanglements of researchers and it distances them from the imperatives of objectivity.

## 2.9 Territorialisation/de-territorialisation

To understand the spatiality or organising of the world Deleuze and Guattari (2013, p.5) describe their concept of the Rhizome. Rather than imagining a world of stratified, hierarchical agencies and materialities they posit the rhizome as a way to understand that roots (and 'reality') can self-produce along non-hierarchical formations. Rather than a central stem with off shoots (where the centre remains the root from which all else sprouts), a rhizome is instead a horizontal distribution of stems without a centralised core. 'The rhizome itself assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion in bulbs and tubers' (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, p.5). For Deleuze and Guattari, a 'rhizome can be connected to anything else, and must be', the rhizome is their principle for understanding relationality. Characteristic of rhizomes are 'segmentary lines' (Deleuze and Guattari 2013 p.22) these lines are its dimensions. For the concept of the rhizome to function however, conceiving of the way that it multiplies (and it always does) in the multiple directions that the rhizome suggests, movement must be possible. Rhizomes variate, expand and transform, the 'maximum dimension' of this metamorphosis is what Deleuze and Guattari call 'lines of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, p.22). This deterritorializing of the rhizome, changes the nature of the rhizomatic relations.

The concepts of territorialisation and de-territorialization have been used successfully in feminist new materialist research (Renold and Ivinson 2015; Coleman and Ringrose 2013;

Hickey-Moody 2009; 2019a) to describe the limiting processes that capture matter in normative, restrictive ways; social categories, conventions, norms and normative discourses, for example (Papadopoulos 2010). On the other hand, de-territorializing 'lines of flight' describes the possibilities for things to become otherwise, to be ruptured. As Ringrose (2011, p.603) contends, they are the moments that allow a glimpse of other modes of becoming visible and therefore possible. A good example of the usefulness of these two concepts, is how they can be meaningfully applied to understanding gender.

Renold and Ivinson's (2015) extensive work with young people in the South Wales valleys details rich descriptions of girls becoming otherwise with burnt wedding dresses, mud and mermaids. In each of these examples, tiny moments of 'rupture' garner insight into the way movement (lines of flight) can operate through heavily sedimented, traditional (territorializing) spaces. Renold and Ivinson (2015) demonstrate the way that objects are entangled in the lives of girls whose social experiences are heavily shaped by the historical legacies of the places they live. Simplified, this means that, although there are many forces (parental, cultural, societal, peers, enfolded norms and categories) that territorialize possibilities for becoming, moments of escape can be attuned to. Studying these moments involves a conceptual and analytical shift towards acknowledging the vibrancy of the material world. For example, Renold and Ivinson (2015) illustrate how the historical legacy of coal and dirt, that carry an emplaced (ex-mining community) 'affective charge' (dirt or coal was the primary signifier of income and prosperity) can be used as a resource to obscure the materiality of a girl body. Where the coal and dirt of previous generations had signified financial safety, the mud in this research project became a space of safety from gender violence.

For Deleuze and Guattari, territorializing acts are woven into the fabric of life. Rather than the very pronounced, exaggerated and obvious examples that could be used to illustrate this point, it is worth remembering that territorializing practices are, for most people, our very mode of thinking, as Papadopoulos (2010, p.74) argues:

*For Deleuze and Guattari there is no empty space there is always matter and matter is always differentiated. Representations are a particular form of differentiation in*

*their own right; they do not exist prior to or vis-à-vis matter. Representations are movements of matter as much as genetic mutations or geological movements are. Deleuze and Guattari's point is not to eliminate the distinctive importance of representations and ideas, rather, their claim is that when representations are considered as separated from matter they become strategic tools for ordering material reality. Representations are closures and re-territorializations that are used as powers to organise matter in a particular way.*

So, as Renold and Ivinson (2015) demonstrate above, figuring in the material, contexts, history and imagined futures as more than (symbolic) representations, and considering their capacities to affect change acknowledges that posthuman agency does not exist solely beyond the realm of language but instead makes it possible. Moreover, paying close attention to the territorializing forces of representation might render moments of deterritorialization more visible.

## 2.10 Gender/sex/Sexualities

Despite decades of feminist research in the area, theorisations, discussions and research exploring gender and sexualities in childhood studies remain a risky undertaking. Discourses of sexualisation and moral panics around sex and children prevail in the media and often work to ring fence the topic as a taboo area (Jenkins 1998; Robinson 2008; Talburt 2018). However, feminist researchers continue undeterred (Renold and Ringrose 2016; Rasmussen and Leahy 2018; Bromdal et al. 2017; Osgood and Mohandas 2020; Blaise and Rooney 2020) and research in this area has an increasing impact on policy development (Renold and McGeeney 2017; Buckingham et al. 2010). The important contributions made by feminist post-structuralist researchers to the study of gendered childhoods is detailed by Osgood and Robinson (2019) who summarise the broader shifts in understandings of sex and gender since the 70s. They sketch the journey which begins with biological determinism, where genital identification at birth presumes sex and gender as a stable trait of the individual through the life course. De Beauvoir (1952) and De Lauretis' (1987) foundational work provides a platform for moving towards a more socially constructed and less biologically driven narrative of sex and gender, where sex indicated the biological categorisation of

genitals at birth and gender the individual expression of gendered identity. Osgood and Robinson map the developments of these ideas, that sex is what you have, and gender is what you do and how that is perceived depending on context (2019 p.53). Inevitably as with any consideration of gender theory since the 1990s their discussion turns to the contribution of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). Before outlining Butler's theory in more detail, it is worth situating this work in relation to a key influence on Butler's thought and much of the post structuralist landscape in general, Michel Foucault.

## 2.11 Foucault and Butler

As an undergraduate I was introduced to the work of Michel Foucault (1978) in critical social psychology modules, through his influence on the 'psy' sciences (Rose 1998) and his framework evidencing the regulatory powers of 'discourse' in understanding mental health, criminality and 'normal' development. 'Discourse' here refers not just to language but the socially constructed instruments such as concepts, theories and common-sense understandings that form the basis for thought. Nothing for Foucault falls outside of these discourses. Examples were illustrated via his critical engagement with the 'confessional' model of interviewing (and psychotherapy) and its implication in the development of identity. For Foucault this very mode of communication assumes a stable notion of the self, an 'I' that is available to description and disclosure and tends to be ignorant of the role of context and social norms in constructions of the self. Foucault's thought was illustrated too with Bentham's (now famous) panopticon as a visual metaphor for the increasing surveillance we are subject to and its subjectifying capacities.

I encountered Foucault next in the context of a module on gender, studying his theories on discourse, developed through *'The History of Sexuality'* (1978). Here Foucault outlines the historical situatedness of the way we come to understand sexualities and our sexual selves through regulating discourses. These discourses, Foucault argues, govern what it is possible to think or know about sexualities. These regulating, normalising discourses are promulgated (as truth) by the powerful (unflinching heterosexual white males) and produce "discursive formations", loosely translated as the concepts through which we can think and know things about a particular topic. We position ourselves in relation to these

discourses which govern the prevailing norms, and they are the rubric for understanding ourselves. So, for Foucault, it is this positioning that is constitutive of subjectivities.

Importantly, this governing system of discourses maintains its stranglehold on thought through the productive power of the surveillance. It is not simply the case argues Foucault, that this subjectifying process happens from the outside in. Returning to the Panopticon metaphor, it is the very uncertainty of outside surveillance that motivates our own 'disciplinary gaze'. In other words, it becomes natural and unnoticeable to always function as if we are being seen and we produce our subjectivities under the glare of our own scrutiny on that basis. The normalising and naturalising discourse in this instance is compulsory heterosexuality (Lyttleton-Smith and Robinson 2019), that serves to subordinate all non-heterosexualities (as well women and children), heterosexual men reproduce their subject positions at the apex of 'normative' humanity and, moreover, are the sole legitimate locus of desire. Here the benefits of the circulation of this productive power for the powerful are clear. But the key point here is that what masquerades as normal and natural is actually socially constructed (e.g., a different power/truth regime would produce different types of normal/natural), and therefore requires maintenance. Linking sexuality to gender Butler (1990) extends Foucault's theory to evidence this maintenance which appears effortless to most of us.

For Butler, it is the 'one *becomes* a woman' section of de Beauvoir's (1952) famous claim that is the important crux of the issue. The 'becomes' signals a process, one that is never finished nor achieved. As an ongoing discursive practice gender is open to intervention and resignification. Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the 'congealing' is itself insistent and insidious. Butler's claim and key concept in the 1990s was that gender is not the presentation of a 'naturally' sexed body, rather gender is 'performative'. Not to be confused with Goffman's 'performance of the self', 'performativity', assumes no 'being behind the doing', we are not acting out a performance of gender, gender *is* the performance and its recognition. Butler describes the way that gender is produced within a complex, heteronormative matrix:

*I use the term heterosexual matrix...to designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders and desires are naturalized...a hegemonic discursive/epistemological model for gender intelligibility that assumes for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality.*  
(Butler 1990, p.151)

In other words, having one's gender recognised relies upon our ability to convey it consistently and recognisably to others, a key component of this is via attraction to the opposite sex. Breaking with the idea that gender is a property of the person, something that you have, Butler argued for the verbing of gender as a 'doing', for ourselves and for others. An important component of this doing is its social recognition. One can fail to do their gender in an intelligible way (Butler uses the example of 'drag') and risk 'gender trouble'. As the next section sketches, Butler's work provided a conceptual framework for thinking through gendered childhoods as fluid, discursively constructed and 'performative' (Butler 1990; Renold 2015; Osgood and Robinson 2019).

## 2.12 Butler's Trouble

The influence of Butler's thought in feminist childhood studies cannot be overstated. Where previously the child could be posited as the site of the reproduction of normative gendered scripts, imbued through the processes of socialization, feminist post-structuralist scholars engaged with the agentic capacities of children and young people, attending to the complex and complicated ways that they produce gendered selves. Butler's work provided a conceptual framework for thinking through gendered childhoods as fluid, discursively constructed and 'performative' (Butler 1990; Renold 2015; Osgood and Robinson 2019). 'Performativity' is Butler's concept for describing the way that gender never precedes its performance. Gender is not an expression of a stable trait or characteristic that someone



has, rather it is what one does and does again, in a culturally recognisable way. Furthermore, for Butler, gender is not something that is achieved in a static way, nor ever really accomplished in a fixed sense. Instead gender must be constantly and consistently performed in intelligible ways. It is this 'performativity', recognised through cultural frames that creates the illusion of what we think of as gender. The 'hegemonic heterosexual matrix' (Butler 1990) is an example of a discursive cultural frame. Butler argues that the performance of heterosexuality, linked to two binary oppositional genders is foundational to normative gender production. Butler highlights the way that these repeated performances of gender become inscribed on bodies, to the extent that they appear natural; it is only when one tries to perform these gestures consciously (Butler uses the example of drag) that their difficulties are revealed.

Gender can also be subverted, deliberately through queer practices deliberate or otherwise. However, the societal consequences are swift. As Butler contends, failing to offer up an intelligible gender draws strong censure and the considerable social ruptures produced by those troubling the gender binary are more visible now than ever (Butler 2020). Like Mary Douglas (1966), Butler describes the way that bodies that do not offer up easy readings can provoke fear in societal contexts. In other words, that which fails to render itself recognisable and predictable can be quickly categorised as dangerous. Butler, Foucault and much of the influential and ground-breaking research that has driven forward the field of childhood studies (Davies 1993; Renold 2006; Paechter and Clarke 2007) demonstrated that gender is fundamentally a property of the discursive and socially situated rather than a biological fact of children's bodies.

However, while Foucault returned to discussions of the body in later writing (Foucault 1982) to acknowledge that it exceeds discursive representations, post structural approaches including Butler's continued to situate gendered subjectivities in their discursive production; interiority and the agency of the material (rather than a material analysis that situates objects as ontologically separate but semiotically relevant to a multimodal analysis) are not accounted for. In theorising and conceptualising difference and rendering capacities to tell different stories possible post-structuralism remains a useful but somewhat limiting frame. For instance, within the prison of discourse how can we recognise the perpetual change of

context, bodies, subjectivities and being or becoming? Queer performances, for example, are identifiably so only in relation to existing gender and sexualities hierarchies, drawing on fixed notions of what masculinities and femininities are (Hickey-Moody and Rasmussen 2009). Storying non-conforming practices relies heavily on those existing categorisations. What theories and methods open up spaces for moving beyond existing representations (while unavoidably drawing on them to explore difference)? These are the questions that informed this research and the research questions.

So, for Butler (1990), gender must be repeatedly, consistently and intelligibly performed, to the extent that the customs and practices associated with it are rendered 'natural'. For the most part, she argues, we do not even think about it, it is only when normative and recognisable performances are transgressed that the complexity of doing gender becomes visible. Analysis of power and discourse are at the centre of Butler's thesis. The focus on gender performativity, as produced through available discourses, as almost an embodied mimicry, is often the starting place for analysing the multiple way children and young people are socialised into gendering practices. The influence of Butler's theory has been significant to my own developing thought since I encountered the concepts made famous in the 90s in 'Gender Trouble'. Where previously the child could be posited as the site of the reproduction of normative gendered scripts, that were imbued through the processes of socialization, feminist post-structuralist scholars engaged with the agentic capacities of children and young people, attending to the complex and complicated ways that they produce gendered selves. Butler's work provided a conceptual framework for thinking through gendered childhoods as fluid, discursively constructed and 'performative' (Butler 1990; Renold 2015; Osgood and Robinson 2018).

Bronwyn Davies, (1989) analysis of children's fairy tales is a good example of this analytical value. Her research with young children, attends to the stereotypical, binarised gender representations of traditional stories for young children. Using the example of the princess and the frog, Davies demonstrates the way that the Princess is constructed as superficial and having very little moral character and lacking the physical capacities to retrieve her own ball. In the story the princess defers to her father who compels her to do the right thing and

to the male frog who rescues her ball. This abridged description does not do justice to the erudite depth of the analysis, it had a profound effect on my own studies.

Davies (1989) also provides an account of the resistance amongst young children to narratives in stories that reimagine gender norms, describing the dissatisfaction amongst the children in her study when the princess saves herself or does not wear a Princesses dress. Studies of playgrounds have been used to implicate gender in the division of physical space (Thorne 1993; Renold 2004). In the early childhood classroom researchers highlight the way that toys are used as material resource to bolster gender performativity (Osgood 2019; Lyttleton-Smith 2019; Ringrose et al. 2019). While in the lives of young people gender is used to territorialize and de-territorialize online social media spaces (Renold and Ringrose 2016; Mendes et al. 2019).

For Butler, though, these normative discursive constructions always restrict our gendered possibilities, which remain tied to the normative frame (Colebrook 2009). While it is possible, through queer identities to trouble and engage critically with these normative discourses, those performances rely, still, on the consensual understandings of a normative framework, to queer. Butler's (1990) work has also been criticised for its inability to conceive of the body beyond its discursive production (Hey 2006). Rather than devoting space to a critique of Butler's work, I follow Osgood and Robinson (2019) in acknowledging the debt to Butler's theoretical and conceptual contribution and consider how feminist new-materialism has worked with those contributions by acknowledging additional layers to the analytic frame.

### 2.13 Butler and Barad from discursive performativity to posthuman performativity

Barad's (2003) theoretical work has been pivotal in developing a conceptual framework that recognises that equal (but not excessive) importance of materiality and affect to developing the capacities of feminist-new-materialism in accounting for difference and change. As Osgood and Robinson (2019) cogently argue, theoretical moves and conceptual shifts in this area are not symbolic of a break with the old; it is not the case that the discursive baby is thrown out with the new materialist bath water. Instead, feminist new materialism is indebted to post-structuralism. The power of the discursive remains as relevant now as it

has always been to understanding contemporary gendered childhoods. What Baradian and Deleuzian perspectives bring to the field is a lens that affords the embodied, material and affective equal status:

*'The relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment. Neither is articulated/articulable in the absence of the other; matter and meaning is mutually articulated. Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other'.  
(Barad 2003, p.822)*

A key shift here is to view children and young people as active participants in gendered worlds, instead of the passive recipients of gendered scripts (Osgood and Robinson 2019). Researchers have shown how the spaces of childhood are infused with discourses and power relations that are implicated in children and young people's understandings of their own and others' genders.

Osgood and Robinson (2019, p.61) differentiate Barad's (2003) performativity from Butler's (1990). They contrast Barad's 'iterative intra-activity' with Butler's 'iterative citationality', drawing an important distinction. Butler's 'iterative citationality', or repeated performances, based on previously experienced performances by others would fall firmly into an interactive understanding of things. Where Barad's position highlights that events never unfold in exactly the same way twice. As Osgood and Robinson (2019) maintain, it is not the case that a shift to post-human, feminist new-materialist mode of engagement requires a paradigmatic shift based on a critique of past theory, instead it acknowledges that those citational practices still matter and come to matter. However, as Renold's (2015) work that I introduced earlier demonstrates, much more besides unfolds, enfolds and is entangled within. Extending Butler's conceptualisation of performativity to Barad's is generative in the sense that it becomes possible to understand human subjectivities as 'always relationally generated through material-semiotic-affective assemblages in which gender is constantly (re)produced' (Osgood and Robinson 2019, p.70).

So, thought, affect, matter, discursive enunciation, objects, the materially experienced and the affectively known, relationally produce gender. Like Hemmings (2019) I cannot claim to know what gender *is*, but the empirical chapters map the way that gender and sexualities have come to matter as part of this research project. In other words, rather than saying what gender is, I can show what it does. Chapter five 'Dolls\*', for example, engages in more detail with gender through an engagement with a trans\* participant's video co-production process.

## 2.14 Trans\*

While it is tempting to conceive of trans issues as a contemporary debate, Halberstam (2018, p.24) traces Trans lives in the media from 1592 onwards. In 1803, Halberstam reports, Juana Aguilar was, 'accused of unnatural acts with women'. Following medical investigations to definitively determine their sex, it was reported that Aguilar was, 'sexually neutral like some bees'. Halberstam employs the term 'Trans\*' as they argue: '\* puts pressure on all modes of gendered embodiment and refuses to choose between the identitarian and contingent forms of trans identity' (2018 p.xiii). So, there is space within this concept for those who might not consider themselves part of the trans\* movement. Halberstam uses the examples of Prince and David Bowie to demonstrate that gender has always been complex. Halberstam argues that categorisations of gender are mutable and changeable, that the current formulations of trans and the boundaries that are drawn invoke the very categorisations that theories of gender complexity eschew. Furthermore, every new and evolving terminology is drawn into its own discursive web, constituting the very people being described. Caution, Halberstam warns, is needed here or instead a more playful and less fraught gender language. In chapter Five, the playfulness and fluidity of trans\* is explored in more depth through Ceri's story.

Puar (2015) outlines the overlap between discourses of disability and models of transgenderism, she draws out the sometimes contradictory and sometimes complementary goals of transgender and disability activism. Puar explains how transgenderism has been excluded from the category of disability both to purge disability of

any connection to 'perverse' gendering but also to protect transgenderism from pathologization. In the process, however, both discourses reinvest in normativity and create narratives that 'suffer from a domination of whiteness and contend with normativization of the acceptable and recognizable subject' (Puar 2015, p.52). Using a framework of capacity and debility to mark the shuttling of bodies between productivity and neediness Puar explicates how, within capitalism, normalization revalues bodies that have otherwise been reviled and rejected while making distinctions between differently located trans and disabled bodies.

## 2.15 Gender and neurodiversity

This separation is, however, on less solid ground than Puar (2015) might think. Baron-Cohen has a long history of working gender through accounts of autism, positing originally that autism was a surfeit of masculinity, an excess of 'male brain' (Baron-Cohen et al. 2007). More recently Baron-Cohen's name appears in a publication that attempts to evidence a link between neurodiversity and trans lives. People with autistic traits, it is claimed, are more likely to identify as trans (Warrier et al. 2020). Attempts to link diverse sexualities and gender to psychiatric 'disorders' is hardly new (Foucault 1978) but given the cultural zeitgeist around these two communities in contemporary society, it is likely that this research will receive increasing attention.

Warrier et al. (2020) report that wide scale survey data can be used to demonstrate a higher 'self-report' of 'gender variance' (GV) with higher 'self-reports' of 'autistic traits'. Aggregating data across studies of '641,860 individuals' (2020, p.1) the most significant correlation (an increase of 7%) is amongst the self-report survey respondents, some of whom (without diagnosis) report behaviours that they consider 'on the spectrum'. This universalising concept 'on the spectrum' is an expression to describe all manner of behaviours (beyond SpLD). Arguably, the inclusion of this type of terminology makes the results of this research questionable. In agreement with Puar (2015), McRuer (2006, p.46) summarises why research of this nature should give cause for concern: 'Compulsory heterosexuality is intertwined with compulsory able-bodiedness; both systems work to reproduce the able bodied and heterosexuality', extending this to include normative

gendered presentations is not a huge leap. The able and heteronormative, cis gendered body continues to dominate the research, which focuses mainly on adults.

Disabled young people's additional, almost automatic categorisation as vulnerable further limits research in this area (Liddiard 2014). Björnsdóttir et al. (2017) argue that disabled people are often associated with 'eternal childness' making the negotiation of sexual selves difficult if not impossible for young people with disabilities. Ignani et al. (2015) posit three key areas that work to exclude disabled people from notions of citizenship: consumption, labour and loving, areas they link to the idea of 'intimate citizenship'. Ignani et al.'s (2016) article draws out the connections between the intimate lives of people with disabilities and the 'neoliberal citizen'. They argue that ideas inherent to neoliberal citizenship such as autonomy, labour force capabilities and the capacity to care for others in the family, work against the lived experiences of people who are disabled. Similarly, Liddiard (2014) argues that rather than being attributed the capacity to care for others, people who are disabled are imagined almost unexceptionally as those who require care. Much of the intrusive surveillance of disabled lives stems from the circulation of these tropes and norms. The impact of such discourses is evident in the research landscape where studies exploring the lives of young people with disabilities in relation to gender and sexualities, pleasure and desire have been noticeably thin on the ground.

## 2.16 Concluding forwards

This chapter has outlined the onto-epistemological position of the thesis and in doing so implicated myself, the researcher within the knowledge producing practices of this research, knowing-with participants, rather than reporting about them. The concepts that have been introduced here comprise the conceptual and analytical toolkit that I carry into the empirical chapters. I have illustrated how I am theorising and working with the concept of gender as 'iterative intra-activity'. This shift away from Butler's iterative citationality figures gender performativity in the agentic flows of the research assemblages. Rather than viewing gender as a characteristic of the individual, Barad's performativity attends to the way gender is produced, actively in assemblages. Assemblages, as I have outlined, comprising personal and shared histories, materialities, spaces, places and situated

practices and processes. Importantly, digital relationalities are afforded equal onto-epistemological significance in this approach. I took the unusual step of including empirical data in this chapter to highlight the way concepts helped me to make sense with my data. For reasons of space, it was not possible to do this for every concept. I made the decision to adopt this approach here as a link to the broader thematic of this thesis, that I cannot say with certainty what something is, but I can show you what it does.

It should be apparent by now that I situate myself firmly within this research, not as an external, objective observer but as response-ably implicated researcher. I was ethically situated, in intra-action, within the research assemblages. Rather than providing a lengthy reflection on my researcher positionality as a consideration of research design at the outset, this relationship was a consideration throughout the project and beyond. I situate myself in the analytical chapters and indeed all the written work. As the final chapter details, these complex entanglements and relationships did not ever finish in any definitive sense. The 'lively matter' (Coole and Frost 2010) produced will continue to intra-act with further research in my own projects and others (Mannay 2020; Lomax 2019; Renold et al. 2020; Renold 2016). I am responsible for the cuts and sutures represented in this thesis. Along with other feminist new-materialist researchers I am, 'inseparable from the materiality of the world and our knowledge of it' (Osgood and Robinson 2019, p.20) and continue to be. In other words, this research is a material engagement, it is firmly implicated in the topic it hoped to engage with and self-consciously produces knowledge that in turn has material consequences (Barad 2007). These consequences are explored in greater detail in the empirical chapters of the thesis and in the next chapter 'Method-ing'.

In the chapter that follows, 'Method-ing', I introduce the creative methods that evolved with this project. Again, I include empirical data to animate descriptions and to give clear examples of the generative capacities of the methods used. The chapter begins by introducing the participants and the research sites. This is followed by a description of the innovative and creative approach undertaken to engaging with ethics and informed consent. A detailed description of the variety of creative and participatory methods follows before the chapter concludes by linking the methods to the research questions.



## Chapter Three

### Method-ing

*Research with disabled children should not be perceived as a specialist activity but rather one that has wider lessons for research methods and analysis. By questioning effective communication, research claims, and ways of participation, research with disabled children adds to research more generally.*

*(Tisdall 2012, pp. 16-17)*

#### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I introduce the methodological approach developed to engage with young people's experiences of digital gaming spaces. This project was deliberately methodologically innovative and employed a broad range of participatory data production techniques. Existing literature, empirical data and description are woven together and reflective of the research process as it unfolded. In the opening section below, I summarise some of the literature on participatory methodologies in research with disabled children and young people. Across this literature there is an emphasis on developing collaborative and creative approaches to research in this area. I then provide an overview of the participants and the research sites. This is followed by a section on the 'Case of Ethics' the approach I developed for engaging, materially with participants around consent and ethics and research participation. I then focus on the methods that evolved, introducing each in detail. Some of these descriptions include extracts of empirical data to highlight the usefulness of the methods.

This chapter's final sections describe my analytical approach. I sketch how I shook an analytic snow globe and cut the data to produce the empirical chapters, using a combination of traditional and material, embodied techniques and concepts. Unusually again, empirical data is included in this chapter to highlight the usefulness of the conceptual

and methodological choices that were made to bring them to life. I have taken my cues in crafting this method-ing chapter from scholars working with Deleuzo- Guattarian concepts in childhood research (Coleman and Ringrose 2013; Osgood and Robinson 2019; Lenz-Taguchi 2010; Renold et al. 2020; Osgood 2019) and those working with visual, creative and participatory methods to explore contemporary childhoods (Lomax 2015; Mannay 2015; Renold et al 2011; Kellett 2005; Machonochie 2018). Additionally, this project draws on my own experiences of researching creatively with young people engaged in a range of youth activism projects (Renold et al. 2020). As the title of this chapter indicates, method-ing captures the evolution of the techniques that generated data as an active process, if the process can be understood as an agentic assemblage, a 'method assemblage' then we can understand method as a 'verb as well as a noun' (Coleman and Ringrose 2013, p.5).

### 3.2 Participatory approaches and disabled childhood studies

As I noted in the introductory chapter this project engaged with the emerging discipline of 'disabled children's childhood studies' (Curran and Runswick-Cole 2014). Edited collections in this area include a Handbook (Runswick-Cole, Curran and Liddiard 2018) and an edited collection of 'critical approaches' (Curran and Runswick-Cole 2013). Each volume collects and synthesises accounts from children and young people, their parents and care givers and academics. Publications in this area are self-consciously participatory and reflexive (Machonochie 2018; McElwee et al 2018; Manns and Manns 2018). Co-produced research projects and research dissemination include, a mother and son texting project (Manns and Manns 2018), illustration and comic strip drawing (Naseem, 2018). Co-authorship with families and disabled children and young people is used to develop what Tyrie et al. (2013 p.5) term 'ethical voice'. The key idea here is that co-creating research outputs with participants is evidence of transparency and research integrity. However, issues of power and narrative control are never wholly absent.

Across these publications the inclusionary practices and ethical considerations of producing research with children and young people are given time and attention. The rationale for researching, creatively with disabled children and young people is cogently and compellingly argued throughout. While it remains true that research in this area has been conducted

both about and including these children and young people using statistics (Livingstone 2017) and ethnographies (Davis 2017; Watson and Shakespeare 2010), research committed to taking seriously the rights of the child or young person to be involved in issues that affects their lives must be committed to engaging with those voices rather than simply saying *about* them (Tisdall 2012). Runswick-Cole and Goodley (2013) used Lave and Wenger's community of practice approach to co-produce a toolkit on resilience in the lives of people with disabilities for the charity Scope. Lave and Wenger's popular approach (1991) outlines the common basis of a community amongst those with a shared common purpose or goal. Those within the community share their experiences and learn from each other with the common goal of improving the conditions for all within that community. Runswick-Cole and Goodley's (2013) study employed a 'life story' approach that positions participants of research as experts in their own lives. Machonochie's (2018) action research project was a particularly useful example of what a detailed and focused research engagement can bring to our understandings of the lives of children and young people who participate in diverse ways. I outline this project below as it links to my experiences of working with Laurie who I introduced in chapter two.

Machonochie's (2018) action research with early childhood experiences of disability takes a narrative approach to 'storying' the multimodal engagements of one child, with cerebral palsy in her participatory research. In a decisive move away from the medical discourses that she argues dominate the lives of children with disabilities, Machonochie attends to embodied gestures and strategies that children use to express meaning. Providing three stories that observe and notice her two-year-old participant 'Haniya's' embodied, relational interactions with her parents, caregivers and classmates; Machonochie highlights the importance of objects, proximity and noticing in encounters with children who do not express themselves verbally. By extension she argues that any commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)'s principle of inclusion needs to take serious account of the material objects that matter to children and that this materiality warrants inclusion in our provisions and practices (2018 p.131).

Additionally, Machonochie contends that, 'if children's participation is to be enhanced, then adults must move beyond the functional-custodial towards the relational-ethical' (2018

p.136). This means that paying close attention to the nonverbal multi-modal communication, taking time to develop that understanding and seeking ways to prioritise children's participatory preferences, must replace relations that focus on maintaining physical safety and presence. To illustrate the point Machonochie describes the way that staff are often engaged with other tasks while 'watching' the children in their care. Imperatives to multi-task while caring for children are doubtless employer directed but in Machonochie's study this busyness doing other things means that often subtle and not so subtle cues are missed. For example, she relays the story of a ball being rolled in one of the children's direction but the staff member walking on to undertake another task without realising that the ball never reached her. This child is unable to reach for the ball herself. These are the micro-moments that warrant attention argues Machonochie, and it is through this attention that we can learn about other ways that children and young people might communicate their experiences and meanings.

Similarly, Anna Hickey-Moody (2017) experimented with co-choreographed dance as an 'affective public pedagogy' with disabled and non-disabled people. This project worked with embodied encounters, attending to the somatic and corporeal registers of the research assemblages. These registers of noticing and paying close attention to the research assemblages are employed in a decisive move away from a focus on the linguistic. Of course, the luxury of time to notice and observe is more readily available to the researcher for whom this is their only task, the same cannot be said for the often poorly resourced professionals. Therefore, it is often the perspective of the person who has time to notice the minutiae and the subtle everyday practices, along with the time to write about them, who get to tell these stories of everyday lived experiences of these children and young people. These issues relate to power and positionality, a key concern within the participatory research literature (Gallagher 2005; Lewis et al 2004; Lomax 2015; Mannay 2016).

The wider literature on participatory and creative methods cautions against any conflation of the participatory as being more authentic research. Moreover, Mannay (2015) argues that very little research can call itself truly participatory. For this to be the case participants should be engaged and included in every step of the research from data production to dissemination. Instead, a kind of consultancy of participants is more commonplace. Often

researcher's own meanings, those of other adults and audiences can move into the territory of visual data production analysis (Mannay 2013; 2016; Fink and Lomax 2014; Naseem 2018). Furthermore, while there has been an increase in research with (rather than on) children and young people, in line with a 'rights-based' approach (Mannay and Staples 2019) we should not assume that these ideas are globally applicable.

Chataika and McKenzie (2013, p. 152), for example, highlight the redundancy of the 'human rights' discourse to studies of disabled childhoods in Africa where this is an 'alien concept' (specifically South Africa and Zimbabwe). Instead, they draw on the African concept of 'ubuntu', which translates to an idea of collective well-being. This collectivity is important, as it runs counter to the Global North promotion of individual human rights. It complicates ideas of family, who, in the communities they researched, have a distributed responsibility for raising children rather than the parental focus that tends to be normative in the northern hemisphere. Research aims that focus on the self-advocacy of disabled children and young people (or their parents) would not be appropriate in this context. Chataika and MacKenzie (2013) remind us that our well-meant practice can, in different contexts, encroach on indigenous knowledge systems.

Questions around what it means to be a participant in participatory research have been taken up by researchers engaging with creative and arts-based methodologies. Notions of democratising research processes and discovering or emancipating participants' 'voice' are replaced with attention to participation as a non-linear (Renold et al. 2011) 'lived relation' (Springgay 2016). Employing the concept of 'becoming participant' Renold et al. (2011) draw attention to the micro-moments in research encounters where participation as well as consent ebbs and flows, a point I return to below. They argue that the participatory journey is characterised by ambivalence and that participation is not a straightforward journey from a signature of consent to the production of data. Rather, young people opt in and out, moment-by-moment. Our role as researchers is to attend to the process, to respond ethically to moments of reluctance. These ideas are returned to in the section that follows in this chapter on ethics. However, it is worth sketching here the way that participatory research has been used successfully with children and young people from diverse backgrounds to engender spaces for ethically attuned participation.

Hart's 'ladder of participation' (1992) is probably the most well-known visual metaphor for describing the different levels of research participation that are adopted in research projects. The ladder is ascended as the degree of commitment to democratic research processes increases. So, the very bottom rungs of the ladder represent tokenistic or decorative consultation practices, while the higher rungs are more akin to the kind of action research projects that are gathered in Curran and Runswick-Cole's (2018) collection. These action research projects aim to include participants at every possible stage of the research. The ladder metaphor has not been without its critics including Hart himself (2008). Hart clarifies that the ladder metaphor was intended to provoke debate and reflection and was not intended as a yardstick for researchers to measure their own and others work against. However, the popularity of visual metaphors particularly in projects that include non-academic partners are obvious. They provide a quick and easy rubric or statement of intent. In the example I provide below they can be a way to consolidate views with participants about what participation means.

McElwee et al. (2018) created, 'The tree of participation' in their co-produced chapter on developing health care services in an inter-disciplinary community-based learning disability mental health service for children and young people and their families. It is presented as a transcript of the author's conversations around the meaning of the word participation in which service users are positioned as catalysts for change not 'patients'. A discussion on the usefulness of the tree metaphor as a model for co-production and participation produces the following ideas (see Figure 1 below): 'Seed of an idea; Roots as values, beliefs and ideas; Trunk for systems, structures and people; leaves and flowers as actions and outcomes seen when participation works well' (2018, p.18). They define participation as: 'participation means to join in with a conversation or activities'. And in the best definition of rapport that I have encountered, one that reflects the experiences in this thesis, another contributor describes the ongoing encounters as: 'It's like reunion all the time, a good reunion' (McElwee 2018, p.19).



Figure 1: 'Tree of Participation' McElwee et al. (2018, p.19)

### 3.3 Preparing, populating and placing as process

This section introduces the timeline, participants the research sites and the processes of inviting participants to the project. This process re-imagines what a snowball is in relation to 'sampling'. It would be simpler to tell a story that followed a traditional funnel shape design, familiar and characteristic of projects that intentionally identify a 'sample' (Bryman 2011). However, this project followed no specific criteria for inclusion and instead aimed to actively extend the possibilities for participation to the widest possible range of participants. What followed would be better described (sticking with the snow analogy) as snow globe sampling, I shook things up and watched in 'wonder' (Maclure 2013). The shining fragments swirl in different directions, gathering in glittery eddies and swirls but never settling. Each analytic shake of the globe would produce a different pattern of partially settled fragments, the globe would look different from every perspective, convex from a distance, concave from the inside, distorted and diffracted. However, for any snow scene to emerge someone must shake the globe and produce the blizzard, this thesis is the snow globe and the hand is

mine. There are other possible patterns and I intend to view as many as I can with undiminishing wonder (Osgood 2019). However, there were phases within this snow globe as the following section outlines. The table below (Table 1) provides an overview of the phases in each school and the methods and activities that were used. To protect identities pseudonyms have been given to participants and schools.



School	Talgarth Mainstream Comprehensive Date of first visit: (13/12/2017)		Castlebridge Special school Date of first visit: (08/03/18)		Tindeborne Special School Across two locations Date of first visit: (02/05/18)	
<b>Phase 1</b>	<p>Visual survey via year group assemblies. N= 405 (December 2017)</p> <p>Focus group with visual survey respondents (x2) N = 5 (Feb 2018)</p> <p>Following the 2<sup>nd</sup> focus group, 3 participants decided they did not wish to continue.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visual survey via form tutors N= 59</li> <li>• Classroom visits N= 46</li> <li>• Case of ethics (March 2018)</li> </ul>		<p>Visual survey via wellbeing lead N= 8</p> <p>Whole class groups</p> <p>Case of Ethics (May 2018)</p>	
<b>Phase 2</b>	<p><b>Methods</b> (Feb 2018 – Sep 2018)</p> <p>Case of ethics</p> <p>Sharing mobile phone content</p> <p>Drawing</p> <p>Doll modification</p>	<p><b>Participants</b></p> <p>‘Ceri’ (16 years)</p> <p>1 girl ‘Sara’ (14 years) (Core group members)</p>	<p><b>Methods</b> (March 2018- Sep 2018)</p> <p>Gaming (with and watching)</p> <p>Dancing</p> <p>Polymer clay</p> <p>T-shirt design</p> <p>Emoji sheets</p> <p>Disposable cameras</p> <p>Question cards (from visual survey responses)</p>	<p><b>Participants</b></p> <p>N = 14 (aged 12-17)</p> <p>Weekly core group members:</p> <p>Lena, 16 years old</p> <p>Terry 16/17; Judd 17/18;</p> <p>Blethyn 16.</p> <p>Staff:</p>	<p><b>Methods</b> (May 2018-July 2018)</p> <p>Mobile phone gaming</p> <p>Watch E3 gaming conference</p> <p>Flip chart</p> <p>doodle sheets</p>	<p><b>Participants</b></p> <p>16-19 years age range: N= 22</p> <p>9-13 years age range: N=7</p>

			Class and lunch hall participation/observation 1:1 professional staff interviews Friendship based focus groups Labelling	1 x focus group (2 staff members, 1 x 17-year-old, male, young person) 1:1 staff interviews x4	Attend 'coding club' 1:1 interview with teacher (x3) School walking tour	
<b>Phase 3 Activism projects</b>	<b>Methods</b> Felt feelings Film making Singing/song recording Youth activism conference attendance (film screening)	<b>Participants</b> Ceri (16 years) Sara (14 years) (Core group members)	<b>Methods</b> Film making Dance Whiteboard story telling. Drawing Song selection Youth activism conference attendance (film screening)	Weekly core group members: Lena, 16 years old, Terry 16/17; Judd 17/18; Blethyn 16.	None of the participants expressed any interest or enthusiasm for participating in this way, although it was offered and framed in the same way. This school joined the project at a late stage.	

*Table 1: Methods used in each phase*

### 3.3.1 Places: Research sites

As the Table above outlines, this project engaged with young people across three sites in South Wales, two special schools and one mainstream comprehensive. It is worth mentioning here that 'special education', 'special needs' and special educational Needs

(SEN) are contested, debated and increasingly outdated terms. This terminology has been linked to stigmatising effects on those who are educated in this way. Contemporary research is moving in the direction of additional learning rights, rather than needs (Sayers 2018). Alternative terminology suggested by New Zealand based researchers Rutherford and MacArthur (2018) posit school and education as rights-based environments of, 'learning for all' underpinned by 'inclusive pedagogies' (Rutherford and MacArthur 2018, p.384). However, the rate of progress in this area is slow and uneven. Drawing on research from 2011 that studied understandings of special educational needs across 50 countries Rix finds points of convergence around the terminology (Rix et al. 2013). 'Special', he argues, is synonymous with 'extra' or 'additionality' (2021, p.138). Primarily, this understanding relates to resources. 'Special', he continues, means additional, space and additional time. In the schools I worked with teachers and staff referred to the school as 'special' and for that reason I have adopted the same term. However, I prefer the broader definitions provided by Oxford Languages (2020). Firstly, 'special' is defined as an adjective meaning, 'better, greater or otherwise different than what is usual'. Or, secondly, as an adjective, 'belonging specifically to a particular person or place'. Lastly, the noun special means, 'a thing...that is designed or organised for a particular occasion or purpose' (Oxford Languages 2020). Each of these dictionary definitions capture, more accurately, my experiences in 'special' schools.

Talgarth is situated in an urban area, with a predominantly white-working class population. According to Estyn: 'Around half the pupils live in the 20 most deprived areas of Wales'. Castlebridge is a special school for young people aged 7-19 years, over 50% of young people are entitled to free school meals. Due to the nature of the provision the catchment area for the school is wide and there was a waiting list. School site expansion was planned for the year I was there, to accommodate two additional ASD classes. Again, the school population at Castlebridge is mostly white, working-class students. Lastly, Tindeborne School is a special school situated in a semi-rural location. Like Castlebridge it serves a wide catchment area, has a 50% free school meals eligibility and provides education to students with a broad range of complex learning and development needs. Connections with Talgarth and Castlebridge schools were forged through my outreach work with the AGENDA resource and the headteacher from Tindeborne approached me after visiting Castlebridge and seeing the lunchtime gaming club.

### 3.3.2 Recruitment and participation: Been there and got the t-shirt

In the early stages I was interested in ways of embodying my project, wearing my research and providing visual cues as to my position in the school. Before I started attending the schools, I purchased a black T-shirt with the PS4 logo on the front. In gaming circles there is a hierarchy and tribalism around consoles and modes of play (Sims 2014), so the PlayStation selection drew comment (positive and negative). I will return to discuss the idea of the t-shirt below and the way that evolved into a research creation with one group. But it proved to be, in every setting, a useful way to start conversations. The combination of the t-shirt and the use of a visual survey (Figures 2 and 3) to introduce the project proved successful.

I developed a short, image-based visual survey (Figures 2 and 3 below and Appendix 1) to introduce the project and its themes. In Talgarth school I introduced myself and the visual survey at the weekly year group assembly for years eight, nine and ten. I introduced the project and its aims and then gave young people the option to complete the visual survey or to use the time to talk to a neighbour. Those interested in participating could identify themselves either by leaving their name and form group details on the visual survey, approaching me at the end of the assembly or via their form tutor afterwards. In Castlebridge school I was guided by the teaching staff's expertise. They recommended that school staff explain the visual survey and assist the young people who wanted to complete it. I followed this up by visiting the school and six different classes, meeting young people, introducing and talking around the topic. Lastly in Tindeborne school, the headteacher's enthusiasm for the school to be involved was hampered by staff shortages and communication difficulties. Although the contact that I was given for the school only returned eight visual surveys, many more young people expressed an interest. So, I visited two classes of young people aged 16-19 and one coding club to follow this up.

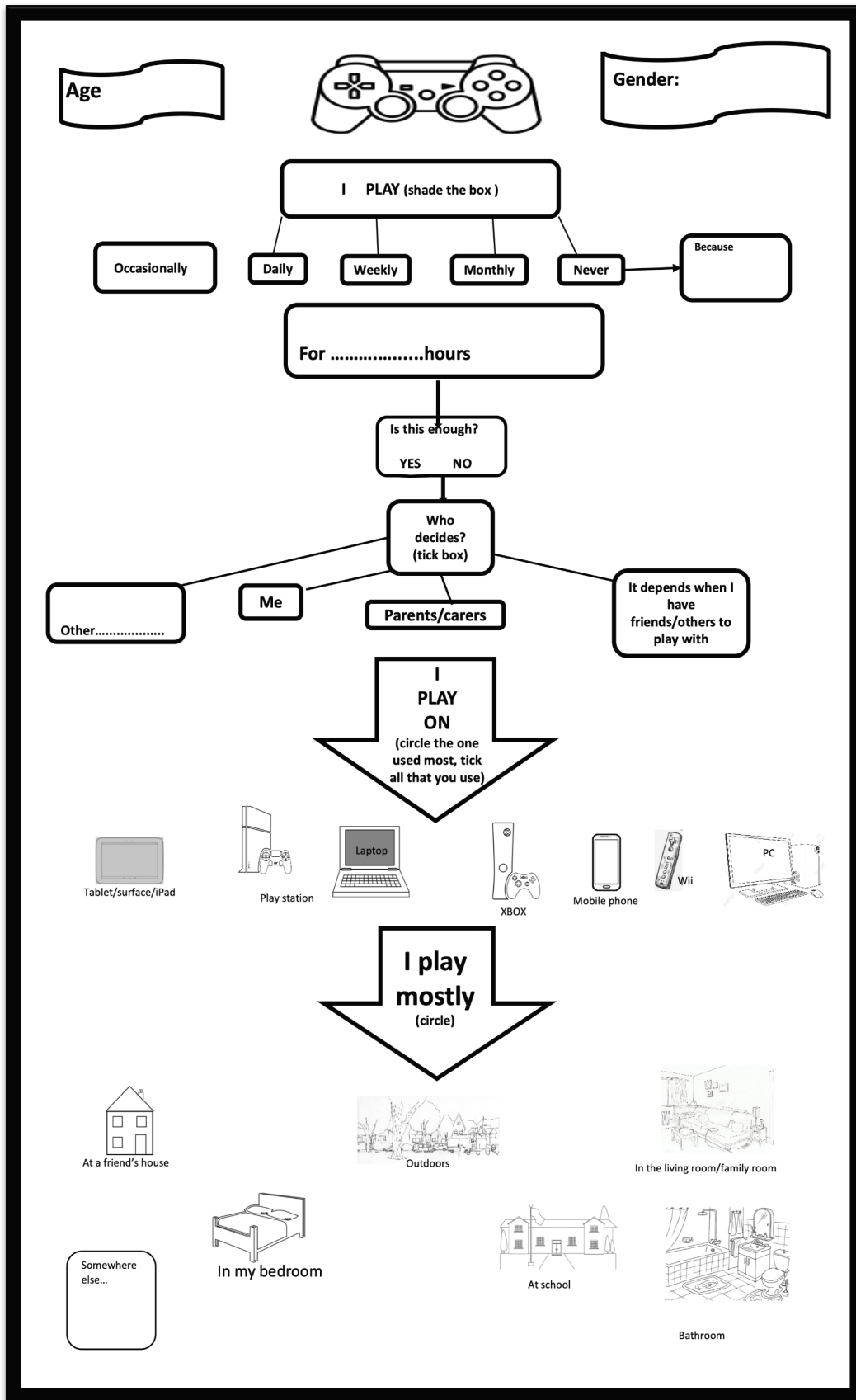


Figure 2: Visual survey, page 1

I play online: **Yes**                      **No**

↓

**I mostly play...**  
Use these circles to show who you play with and say where they live  
( F = friend, R= relative, O = online friend, S= stranger)

**My favourite game is.....**

**I'm not allowed to play.....Who decides this?.....**

**I watch other people play.....**

**The best thing about gaming is.....**

**The worst thing about gaming is.....**

**What question would you like to be asked about online?**

Ceri is new to online gaming. What would your  
5 Top tips be for Ceri starting out?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Figure 3: Visual survey, page 2

Using the responses to this visual survey small group interviews with young people who had asked to participate were arranged. A total of five young people in one group at Talgarth, and six groups of varying sizes in Castlebridge. Timings, methods and participation varied greatly across the three sites. Talgarth for example, commenced in December 2017. Although extreme snow and 'The Beast from the East' weather event greatly disrupted the project's timetabling, closing roads and schools. Tindeborne did not join the project until May 2018. Therefore, participation in the project evolved differently at each school. I have included a table (Table 2) to indicate the number of people who engaged with the project and how many meetings they attended. The stories of those young people who do not feature in the empirical chapters are very much part of all the research assemblages.

Within the groups that formed in the schools, attendance fluctuated. Young people took up and dropped out of the project at different times for different reasons. Having stressed the voluntary nature of the project to them from the beginning this felt like a positive, if less consistent, flow of things. A consequence of this is that those who participated most regularly became the core participants. These two groups, one in Castlebridge, one in Talgarth, also produced films for a young person's activism conference and therefore engaged with the project for the longest. However, this has not been a basis for selecting which data to include. The contribution of all participants is valued and the discussions that follow are obviously shaped by all the research encounters. This includes those young people who wanted to participate but were unable to, primarily for reasons relating to risk and behaviour but also attendance.

### 3.3.3 People

The table below (Table 2) outlines key characteristics of the core participants to the study, information on ethnicity is included where possible, although there was not always the opportunity to ask the young people. Where this was the case, I have made no assumptions. Two of the participants were looked after children (Terry and Andreas) and two (Ceri and McKenzie) were young carers. All of these participants fall within the categorisation of 'neurodiversity' which means that they had some level of Specific learning Differences

(SpLD). The British Dyslexia Association (2020) provide the following definitions of this terminology.

*‘Specific learning differences (SpLD) is an overarching term for a number of associated learning differences. The term ‘neurodiversity’ is increasingly used as it focuses on the positive qualities of thinking and learning differently’.*

These associated (commonly co-occurring) learning differences include: Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD); Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Dyscalculia, Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), visual impairments and anxiety and mental health. The British Dyslexia Association includes anxiety and mental health within neurodiversity as, they argue, there is a high level of co-occurrence with other SpLD. A list of the total number of participants who engaged in the project is included in Table 1 at the start of this chapter.

*Table 2: core participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>No of meetings</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>SpLD</b>	<b>Ethnicity *</b>
Lena	16	Female	Weekly ('Gamer's resistance' group)	Castlebridge	ASD, depression	White British
Terry	17	Male	Weekly ('Gamer's resistance' group)	Castlebridge	ASD, Dyspraxia, ADHD	White Welsh
Judd	17	Male	Weekly ('Gamer's	Castlebridge	ASD	White British



			resistance' group)			
Blethyn	17	Male	Weekly (‘Gamer’s resistance’ group)	Castlebridge	ASD, Dyslexia	White Welsh
Ceri	14	Non- binary	Weekly (Doll group)	Talgarth	Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, Depression. Problems walking due to long-tern knee injury	White Welsh
Sara	14	Female	Weekly (Doll group)	Talgarth	Depression, Anxiety	White Welsh
Brian	14	Male	4	Castlebridge	ADHD	White British
Andreas	12	Male	4	Castlebridge	Not Known. At the time of the study tests were ongoing.	Czech/Roma
Anna	18	Female	18	Castlebridge	Schizophrenia, depression, anxiety.	White Welsh
Laurie	12	Male	3	Castlebridge	ASD	N/K
McKenzie	17	Male	3	Castlebridge	ASD	White British

As listed above the total number of visual surveys received for each school were: Talgarth n= 405; Castlebridge n=59; Tindeborne n=8. From this stage, 62 participants at Talgarth school indicated that would like to be involved further. However, the planned distribution of consent forms and timetabling of follow up groups was cancelled due to school closures for snow in December 2017. I rescheduled for when the term commenced in January 2018 and the school closed again due to snow. Although I delivered consent forms for each of those who had opted into the project at the end of January, I did not manage to negotiate a return to the school until March 2018. Numbers had dwindled and many of those young people did not return their parental consent forms. Initially I ran two groups with the five participants who returned their parental consent forms, but three boys decided that they did not want to participate further after two weeks.

A different pattern emerged at Castlebridge school, many form tutors who had distributed and collected the visual surveys requested class visits. In the ASD class the visual surveys were not an appropriate method as students found communicating in this way difficult. Instead, the class teacher requested a class introduction and discussion. Many of these visits were the sole contact with those young people, however these were rich discussions of the importance of gaming in young people's (and sometimes their teacher's) lives. In some cases, issues around attendance and behaviour were the reason for stopping participation, staff shortages and commitments to other activities also featured.

In Tindeborne school, despite the head teacher's enthusiasm, staff workload and job insecurity made accepting additional duties (such as organising researcher access) difficult. My first key point of contact worked part-time, and this was complicated further by the distributed nature of the site. All post-16 education took place in a satellite college some distance away. The teaching staff were remarkably accommodating, often with no advanced notice of my visit. At the main site I was invited to observe and participate in coding club, a lunchtime activity for around six children and young people. Arthur, the teacher facilitating those meetings was enthusiastic, helpful and welcoming. However, due to the timing of the

project, scheduling issues for coding club<sup>13</sup> and patchy attendance it never really took off. I was grateful for the many conversations with Arthur, a knowledgeable special schoolteacher with fifteen years' experience. None of the young people at either of the Tindeborne sites showed any enthusiasm for working with arts materials. The same bag and case accompanied me on every visit but no interest at all was shown. Instead, I watched gaming on phones, watched a gaming conference on a young person's phone and joined in coding club. For these reasons there is little 'data' included on this school.

### 3.4 Ethics

Cardiff University's School of Social Science's ethical committee approved the research project. Alongside the ethics board mechanics that guide and govern university research, an emphasis on ethical praxis is central to the feminist research community (Lomax 2020). The fields of childhood research (Lomax 2015; Mannay et al. 2017; Renold et al. 2011; Osgood 2020) and disabilities studies (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2016; Runswick-Cole et al. 2018), are rightly attuned, reflexively, to the 'do no harm' approach. However, some feminist researchers particularly those with commitments to action, or activist-based research feel that 'doing no harm' is the very least commitment. Instead, they argue a 'do most good' (Mitchell, 2016; Mandrona 2016; Moletsane et al. 2008) ethos should drive research, particularly that which engages with disenfranchised and under-represented groups. Arguably, minimizing harm should by now at least be a given, and this opens up the space for questions to arise around the ethics of what we can *do* with the personal accounts of injustice that we are entrusted with (Hickey-Moody 2019a; Renold 2019).

Discussing ethical reflexivity in girlhood studies Mandrona (2016) argues that researchers often couch and frame their well-intended research practices within adult-centric conceptions of ethics when a more collaborative approach could be more useful. In other words, as McRobbie (1991) also suggests, a move towards earning the right to represent young people through consensual collaboration may sometimes be preferable to that of

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<sup>13</sup> The 'coding club' was a lunchtime group of approximately six young people. In the club participants were learning how to write the code for their own videogames.

self-appointed custodians. Alongside the dictum to 'do most good' should be an ethical imperative to actively address possible harms arising from the research encounter. Across the research landscape a picture is emerging of ethics and consent as an ongoing journey, actively doing most good and actively minimizing harm, rather than assuming that the requirements of consent and ethics are ever achieved in any finite way or evidenced simply through a signature on a piece of paper (Renold et al. 2011).

These same themes are increasingly visible in the field of disability research. Tisdall (2012) draws out the points of comparison within 'new' childhood studies and disability studies (particularly children with disabilities) wherein each has fought to gain ground around notions of agency and participation. Both for instance have problematised the notion of the research participant as a non-rational-adult-in-waiting. A model that produces the rational and agentic as gold standard, leaving little space for the non-linguistic or the emotional to be given serious attention in research and policy contexts. What is more, for Tisdall, the voice rendered audible is framed and filtered through the adult researcher. The point here being a critique of the idea that decontextualising and cutting loose verbatim statements in the children's own words is somehow more authentic and truthful. The reality is that privileging coherent textual and oral accounts elides the truth/power regimes that children and young people are produced through, and those for whom these modes of communication are not their primary methods of expression. Tisdall (2012, p.12) instead advocates a broader range of communicative forms such as, 'visual arts, sound, video and multi-media'. Tisdall (2012) directs researchers to visual sociology and anthropology for key methodological insights. However, Tisdall also adopts a cautious stance towards the valorising of the child-researcher position. She argues that that positioning children and young people as experts in their own lives does not mean that they are experts in other children's lives (Tisdall 2012, p.13) and that such assumptions homogenise and flatten out childhood. Furthermore, when children are employed (mainly without remuneration) as researchers they are often limited to areas that are of concern to childhood rather than being asked to comment on broader social issues and phenomena.

This project aimed to centralise and continually engage with the ethical dimensions of research assemblages. Strategies here included taking a critical approach to the

homogenising effects of the categories of child and young person. Paying attention to the ways that these territorializing categorisations always already intersect with other loaded descriptors (e.g., disability, race, gender, sexuality). I attuned to the way participants interacted with those categories, relationally with other participants, my researcher positionality, the absence or presence of other significant adults and the material environment. Throughout this process I was attending to and mapping the way my own constructions were contested. In practical terms I tried not to make assumptions of experience based on the age of participants, nor on their capacities to engage and disengage. And, in view of the particularities of the research group described here, as comprising neuro-diverse participants, issues of informed and negotiated consent were foregrounded and re-visited continually throughout.

### 3.5 A case of ethics



Figure 4: A case of ethics

‘A case of ethics’ (Figure 4) as a technique for portable, mobile ethics materialising was inspired by the ‘Truly Terrific Traveling Trouble-shooter<sup>14</sup>’ Game (squinky.me 2017) and

<sup>14</sup> The Truly Terrific Traveling Trouble-shooter is: A radically soft physical/digital hybrid roleplaying game about emotional labour and otherness, which fits entirely inside of a carry-on suitcase. One player takes on the role of

conversations with my supervisory team (Renold and Edwards 2018). The case of ethics is a vintage suitcase (Figure 6) filled with compartments (Figures 7 and 8). Its original design and purpose was a display case for a travelling salesperson. For its current purpose each compartment offers a different ethical object (see figures 5, 7 and 8).



Figure 5: Case of Ethics in action



Figure 6: Exterior of the case of ethics

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*the Troubleshooter and the other is a Customer with a trouble. Assisted by the Troubleshooter's toolkit, the SUITCASE (Suitcase Unit Intended to Cure All Sorts of Emotions), and the players work together to find a solution to this problem' (Squinkifer and Marcotte 2017).*



Figure 7: Case of ethics interior sections (1)



Figure 8: Case of ethics interior sections (2)

There is an increasing recognition amongst the research community and funding bodies of the need to engage with participants beyond the idea of a traditional consent form (ESRC 2010; Bell and Pahl 2018; Banks and Manners 2012; Renold et al 2011). Wherein consent is

recognised as an ongoing process of negotiation rather than an objective to be met in the initial stages of the research. So, although I developed a colourful and informative consent form (Appendix 4) in the initial stages of the project, I asked participants for their own understandings of confidentiality, anonymity and consent. While many were aware of ideas around privacy and anonymity through their digital practices (e-safety), understandably, none could make the connection between those words and the project.

So, we revealed and discussed, touched and felt the objects in the case that related to themes of consent, anonymity and what it means to participate in research. Items included: a consent form; the Cardiff University logo; a voice changer; a magnifying glass; tracing paper; felt wefts; a feelings cloud image; a book of paper masks; a game controller made from felt; an audio recorder, a camera and a video camera (for full details on the thematic conversations that I hoped each object would inspire see Appendix 5). Also included were two laminated pieces of A4 paper; one green and one red. Inspired by the AGENDA resource starter activity (Renold 2016) these laminates were included to discuss how difficult it can sometimes be to *say no*, particularly in educational settings with adult researchers (Renold et al 2011.; Mannay 2015). Furthermore, it can be difficult to indicate when clarification is needed or when a particular topic arises that a participant wants to contribute to but is still formulating how or why. Red, then, could be pushed forward, touched or written on in washable markers when participants wanted to stop or pause what we were doing. We agreed that this indication alone would be enough to stop the current activity, with no need for further explanation. Similarly, the green laminate could be used to ask questions or to stay on the topic a while longer.

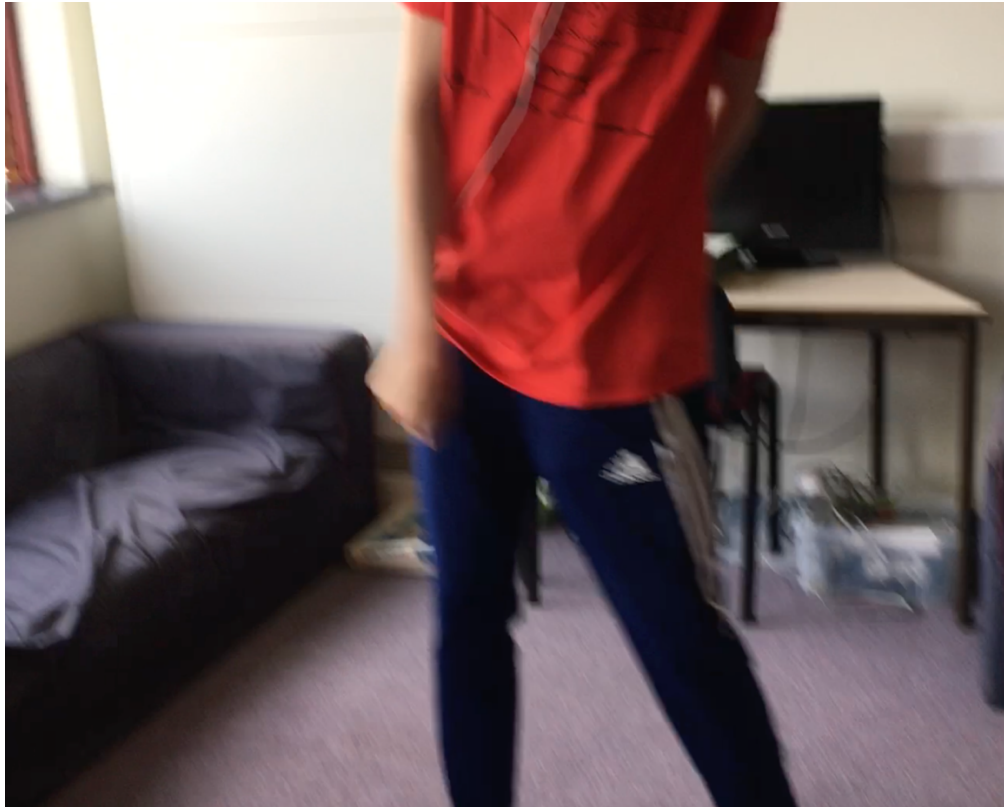
### 3.5.1 The floss of participation

Success though is not necessarily the bedfellow of innovation. The goal with the case and its contents was to render tangible the sometimes-abstract concept of informed consent. My hope, that the initial excitement and novelty of the case would give way to a deeper curiosity about the objects and engagement with their symbolic and literal meanings, was not straightforwardly realised. Shifting to different sensory registers such as audio and haptic brings its own set of difficulties. The following collection of field note, recording and



observational data serves as a useful reminder that the quest for inclusivity through ethical praxis sometimes only reveals its limitations in situ.

Terry (16-years-old, neuro-diverse) could not stand to touch the felt it, 'goes through me'. He did not like to look at it and he most certainly did not want to consider how it might be linked to his feelings. I recognised instantly the sensory hatred of cotton wool that my sister has had all her life. Terry also could not tolerate the noise of the voice changer he moved to the other side of the room and put his hands over his ears, 'No, no, no'. Predictably, seizing on Terry's discomfort Lena decided to direct the voice changer at Terry. I managed to persuade her that she was giving a good example of consent and how we need to be able to tell people when we do not like things and to ask for them to stop. When I ask Terry if he would mind the sound of his own voice filtered through the voice changer, he says yes. He says that he does not like to hear his own voice at all. He also says, however, that he does not mind the audio recorder being on, provided he does not have to listen to it. This created a space to talk about what happened to the recordings of these meetings. When, later in the project, other participants are recording narrations for the video they produce I remember these conversations with Terry, and we talk about how Terry would like to contribute to the video. Terry says that he wants to dance how he feels instead, and to show how he feels with his body as long as his face is not captured and recorded in the process (Figure 9).



*Figure 9: Terry's Floss*

These techniques, as part of the research assemblage opened up a way for Terry's preferences and consents to materialise. He showed us how he wanted to participate, his dance was recorded and directed by another participant to ensure his face was not visible in the recording. Regardless of the way other young people in the room felt about anonymity, we were all thinking about it in practical terms and respecting the consensual parameters of Terry's participation. While it is not my claim that these conversations would not have taken place without the suitcase or the generation of creative research productions, this unfolding of a consent-based relationship of trust became a foundation for the project for me as a researcher as well as the participants.

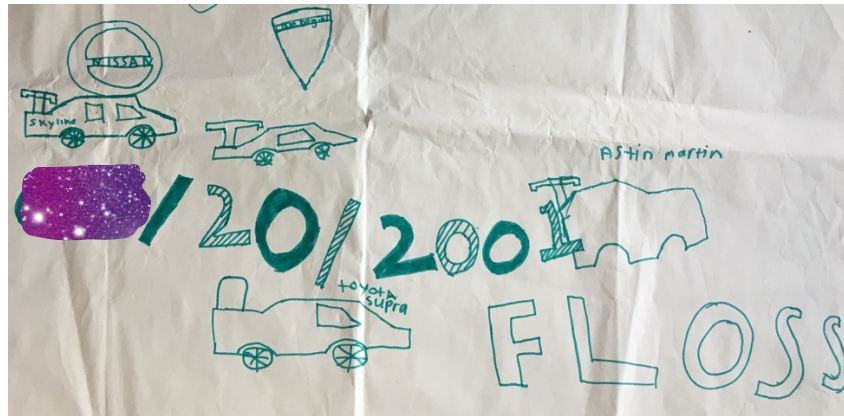


Figure 10: Terry's T-shirt design

One of Terry's research creations (Figure 10) includes the date of his birthday. The significance of this is that for Terry, freedom and happiness is his birthday. Not *one* happy thing but the whole affective event, including its build up, as an imagined joyful future and the happy memories it generates. This led to a group discussion about the dangers of exposing personal information like your date of birth. For Terry, the feelings of his birthday are what he wants to say and for him 'birthday' as an affective event collides with (the rather effective) e-safety rhetoric that all young people frequently encounter. That is not to say that such education and awareness raising is not necessary and valuable. Rather that this raises an interesting point about how these regulatory discourses may inhibit self-expression for some young people. Perhaps even more so in view of the uneasy line young people with disabilities, (particularly those that fall within the realms of neurodiversity) must traverse on their journey towards the neo-liberal ideal of independence and autonomy via the protective discourse of lack and dependency (Goodley et al. 2016).

There has been a need symbolically and intellectually for children's and/or disabled people's communication (and images and activities) to be taken seriously, to identify the responsibility for effective communication lying with the researcher and not research participants (Tisdall 2012). The emergent field of disabled childhood studies (Runswick-Cole et al. 2018) encourages researchers to understand and utilise multiple communication methods, to access, analyse and present research data. Milton (2018) argues that the Western obsession with the individual who has 'central coherence' as a way of relating to the world is an impoverished and ableist starting place for understanding the experiences of neurodiverse people. Milton (a neurodiverse scholar) argues that rather focusing on the

absence of 'central coherence' as lack we should consider a 'rhizomatic' construct system, as a mode of neurodiverse relating (2018, p. 464). Milton underscores the inadequacy of the interview as a mode of engaging with neurodiverse people (2018). Furthermore, Tisdall (2012) suggests being reflexive about the various constructions of 'researcher' and 'participant', testing them for their presumptions and assumptions of competency, expertise and agency. Thinking creatively and differently about engaging young people in this project, opening up the opportunities and modes for participation was a key concern. As I outline below, it was not my aim to research with young people in special schools, but it was my intention to engage participants from those groups that are not usually included in this type of research. This section has highlighted the potentials and pitfalls of overly optimistic creative design. I will now outline some of the ways these considerations feature in tensions around data production.

### 3.6 Crafting, co-producing, creations

The rationale for employing arts based and creative methods in research with children and young people is well versed (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008; Lomax 2012; Mannay 2010). Key justifications are couched broadly in terms of widening participation and maximising the opportunities for children and young people to engage in research that impacts their lives (O'Kane 2008; Kim 2016). Over the last twenty years shifting notions of agency and childhood have led researchers to adapt research methodologies to better serve the goal of positioning children as experts in their own lives (Prout 2004; Christensen and James 2008; Buckingham 2014). In Wales where this project took place, such initiatives are explicitly linked to the national commitment to embed the principles of the UNCRC (1989) in all areas of children and young people's lives, and policy directives aiming to realise this (Welsh Assembly Government 2004).

However, using crayons and paper as a participatory panacea has also, rightly, been problematised in critical engagements with the use of creative and visual methods (Lomax 2012; Mannay 2015; Gallacher and Gallagher 2008.). Mannay (2015) for instance, argues that for a project to be fully and truly participatory participants should be engaged in the process of creating the methods, and setting the research agenda as well as analysing and

making decisions about dissemination. Projects falling short of this should indicate so and be transparent around the choices made in this regard. The point here is that creative methods then are not inherently participatory.

Similarly, Lomax (2012) problematises the notion of creative and participatory methodologies as inherently capable of accessing and amplifying 'child voice'. She argues that viewing child voice as an existing resource to be emancipated by the generous adult researcher proffers an overly simplistic view of power dynamics in research settings, and a flattened notion of the children whose voices are heard (see also, Buckingham 2000; Holland et al. 2010). In other words, children, despite the agency and autonomy and expertise that makes their contribution so powerful, are presented as an undifferentiated, homogenous group, lacking the agency to disrupt the hierarchical power relations of research settings. For, Lomax (2012) some scrutiny is required of the 'authentic' accounts of childhood experience, which are often filtered through the prism of the adult notions of childhood that they have been socialised to recognise. Attention and reflexivity are the necessary companions to creative and visual approaches to avoid conflating all such research to the status of participatory. Moreover, the luxury of time (Brady and Brown 2013), realistic funder expectations (Lomax 2015) and the confidence and skill to employ these techniques (Mannay et al. 2018; Lomax 2012) can be personal and strategic barriers to researching in this way, and undoubtedly influence and shape the research process. Over the course of this project, I certainly facilitated meetings that seemed to descend into unproductive chaos.

### 3.6.1 Good data?

The idea of getting 'good data', arguably a necessary key concern for any researcher on any project, is where posthuman theory and process ontology have significantly guided my research process (Osgood 2019). As outlined in Chapter two, for those working with generative feminist new materialist and Deleuzian inspired methodologies there is no preoccupation with an achievable definitive finding or conclusion. Furthermore, the very existence of researcher impartiality and objectivity are refuted and rejected (Osgood 2019; Lather 1993; Ellingson and Sotirin 2020). Instead, taking process philosophy seriously

refocuses our attention on the process, the doing. This involves trading ideas such as, ‘how does this method answer this question?’ for, ‘what possibilities are created or curtailed by these conditions?’. This project was concerned with attuning to embodied modes of communication. It attempted to map affect and create opportunities to tell different stories about relationships, relationships with human and the more than human in the lives of the young people I worked with. Part of this work involves fostering research relationships that allow those young people who participated to do so in a way that was preferable to them, even if that felt like chaos to me. Those chaotic processes engendered a better understanding of the young people I worked with, being fully engaged with the process was being fully engaged with them, and this led to a deeper appreciation and understanding of them and their stories.

In 1981 Anne Oakley made a compelling case for the value of the interview as ethical feminist praxis. Her study of motherhood took aim at the patriarchal notion of objective interviewing and argued instead for a willingness to share intimacy as part of the research process. Her conclusion, that having the full attention of another human being who is interested in your life can be something very positive, was more than a wishful researcher justification. When people share their thoughts, vulnerabilities and the stories of their lives, it would be inappropriate to constantly police imagined boundaries. Oakley’s (1981) project on motherhood engaged with women at a vulnerable time (pregnancy) over subsequent visits, building relationships that created a space for telling stories of vulnerability and fear in a supportive and friendly environment. Her point and the relevance to those engaging in creative methodologies is the importance of finding some ethical, new and comfortable shared ground with participants. If the aim is to understand and document the lives of others, researchers must be prepared to meet participants in a space that is comfortable to them. Although Oakley drew criticism from the research community for linking ideas of feminist research to qualitative, (‘less scientific’) methods, her point has resonance for me. Relationship building aims to be less intrusive, stepping towards and entangling ourselves in research encounters and acknowledging that entanglement is an honest and ethical move.

Taking an affirmative (but not uncritical) stance towards research being conducted, and assuming that most researchers in the field are committed to the ethos of ‘do most good’, it

is undoubtedly the goal of most qualitative research to craft spaces of greater understanding of children and young people. This project engaged with young people who rarely feature in studies about anything other than disabilities, therefore the *process* of how to engage with them meaningfully and respectfully could be called a 'finding' or even 'good data' in itself. A central aim of the project was to map the methodological terrain of engaging with young people with complex social backgrounds and educational requirements. Oakley (2016) describes the process of participant engagement as a 'gift' and the list of methods below reflect the many gifts that young people gave. I went with ideas, resources and possible directions for the research encounters but not a rigid set of expectations or an interview schedule. I planned lightly and flexibly (Leavy 2020).

The following sections outline the techniques, materials and processes that featured in the second and third phase of the project, during the school visits and the activism planning. These methods materialised in relation to participants and contexts, therefore, empirical data featuring project participants is used in some places to demonstrate not what each method is or was but what it could do, at that time, in that space, entangled in those relations.

### 3.6.2 Surveying the landscape

As I have outlined above, I introduced the project using an image based, flow chart style visual survey (see Figures 2, 3 and Appendix 1). This was primarily a way to engage with the maximum number of young people. I aimed to introduce the project and to provide an opportunity for those young people who wanted to take part to indicate this in a way that protected their identity amongst their peers (unless they were sharing the information at the time).

### 3.6.3 Friendship based focus groups

Focus groups have been used successfully and extensively in qualitative research (Allen 2005; Robinson 1999; Holland et al. 2010; Hill 2006). Robinson defines a focus group as 'an in-depth, open-ended group discussion...consist[ing] typically of between five and eight

participants (1999, p. 905). Friendship based focus groups provide an opportunity to develop discussion relevant to experience rather than chronological age, and Renold (2004) successfully employed this strategy to engender a more comfortable research setting, where knowledge and interests were shared among peers. Furthermore, participants may feel more able to disrupt (but not transcend) power relations inherent to the research process (Mannay 2015; Hill 2006). Nearly every meeting (unless requested otherwise) was run in this way. A full list of participants and their groups is included at the beginning of this chapter. Only one young person, Anna, expressed a preference for 1:1 conversations. Anna did not attend school regularly but was keen to participate when she did, twice as part of the Gamer's Resistance core group at Castlebridge and three times when she requested a 1:1 discussion.

#### 3.6.4 Photo elicitation

In the earliest meetings with groups of young people I would place a variety of images (along with other items) on the table or floor space that I had been allocated in the room. These images aimed to evoke broad thematic discussions around gaming. The images served as a good way to start conversations about what games young people played and enjoyed (Harper 2002; Ford et al. 2017; Clark – Ibáñez 2004). Images were of well-known and popular games (Figures 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16).





*Figure 11: Fortnite Game image from IGN.com*



*Figure 12: Minecraft Game Image from IGN.com*



*Figure 13: Call of Duty (Rouse 2018)*



*Figure 14: Lara Croft: Tomb Raider (Righetti 2018)*



Figure 15: Grand Theft Auto (Rockstar Games 2018)



Figure 16: The Sims (EA Games)

### 3.7 T-shirt design

Conversations around the PS4 T-shirt that I wore on my early visits to the school led inevitably to questions about why I had chosen that shirt. I provided the same explanation as I have given here, I used it signal my purpose and interest but also to distinguish me from the academic staff. I invited all the participants to think about designing me a better t-shirt

to wear on my visits. The Castlebridge group were very enthusiastic about this, Lena's drawing below (Figure 17) is the final design of the idea that the group had.



Figure 17: Gamer's Resistance T-shirt design

This design, they argued, demonstrated inclusivity to all gamers. The image is self-explanatory, a PlayStation t-shirt became a t-shirt for all gamers. The line underneath, however, was Lena's. Freedom was an often-explored topic and as the following chapter on neurodiverse girls will highlight, gaming was a place where Lena's differences mattered less a terrain that felt more welcoming. This group's view of gaming was inclusive, welcoming and positive. Once the design was finished, they asked if they could have t-shirt too and so I had one printed for each of us.

The group decided that the t-shirts should be red and as the image below shows the colour worked well and the t-shirts were striking (Figure 18). I wore mine at every meeting in every setting from then onwards, the gamer group wore theirs every week too.



Figure 18: Printed T-shirts Gamer's Resistance

I was initially surprised by the success of 'design a t-shirt'. As a research technique it generated insights into one group's views and feelings about what a project on gaming should be. However, this was surpassed by the unbridled delight and glee when the t-shirts materialised. They were instantly worn and proudly paraded around all adjacent classrooms. Teachers visited the group to see and to compliment them. One teaching assistant remarked that it was especially meaningful as adults would sometimes not come through for these young people. She did not name any specific instances but said that people would show up from time-to-time and make promises that were not kept. I did not think about or perhaps I underestimated the positivity that the t-shirts would generate. Terry was particularly thrilled but unsurprisingly given his slightly marginalised status within the group started to make a case for another t-shirt after a few weeks. So, each group member that wanted to (all except Judd) designed their own more personal t-shirt (see images 15, 16 and 17 below). Once these shirts arrived, they became the weekly wear. In turn I will describe the background to each of the designed images below, these short descriptions also introduce, three members of the core group 'The Gamer's resistance'. Judd the fourth member of this group is introduced through the section on polymer clay modelling further along in the chapter. I am providing this detail here, as well, to introduce

some of the project's core participants. The T-shirt design activity was specific to the 'Gamer's Resistance' group, the core participants from Castlebridge school.

### 3.7.1 Terry's T-shirt hieroglyph

Hickey-Moody (2019 a) draws on data from her longitudinal study of interfaith childhoods and describes the 'identity portraits' of two participants. The boys draw fast race cars, and Hickey-Moody maps this molar gendered representation as a recuperation of the boys previously marginalised identities, as they become 'Muslim race car drivers' (2019 a p.95). In Terry's case rather than focusing on his gender, which may well be signified by the fast race car design on his choice of "bright pink, the brightest pink" t-shirt; (and this of course retains its intersectional relevance) we might look too at the importance of the birthday as part of the t-shirt-identity-hieroglyph assemblage. Terry's design conveys his joy at the anniversary of aging and one possible reading of this is his birthday as totemic emblem of good days and the joyous feelings that accompany parties, celebrations, cake and gifts both as memory and as imagined future. However, while this analysis certainly reflects Terry's life now, his history before the foster care placement, in a home where very little attention was paid to him and he experienced physical and emotional neglect was less likely to reflect this depth of feeling. An additional way that we might think of the t-shirt design is as a symbolic aging up. Terry, although 16 and turning 17 over the course of the project, says he will not have driving lessons (it is unlikely that he ever will).

A common feature of the lives young people with SpLD is the idea that they will remain 'lacking' and incapable of achieving the neo-liberal requirement to autonomy, work and contribution to society (Ignani et al. 2011). Beyond Terry's multiple diagnostic labels, he brought impetuous energy to every one of our meetings. He was a pleasure to have in the group. Although the more chaotic meetings and much of the shouting and jumping around often came from Terry. He was always the exaggerated version of the way you might describe a feeling, in a good natured and gregarious way, he rarely sat down, was always on the move, I liked him very much. However, his fellow participants (Lena in particular) would all express frustration with Terry, teachers too had reason to call him out of the meetings or speak to him sternly. My impression was of his being treated as more childlike than the

others, he was shown very little respect until the harshness had attention drawn to it. And sometimes Terry performed to that expectation. But there were glimpses and moments of a different Terry, the half-term photo project revealed a more mature young person, and the T-shirt design may well reflect this, Terry the aging race car driver (Figure 19). Drawing on multiple research projects with children and young people with disabilities, Goodley et al. (2015) describe how their participants often struggle to have their agency and competency recognised. I felt that this was particularly true of Terry.

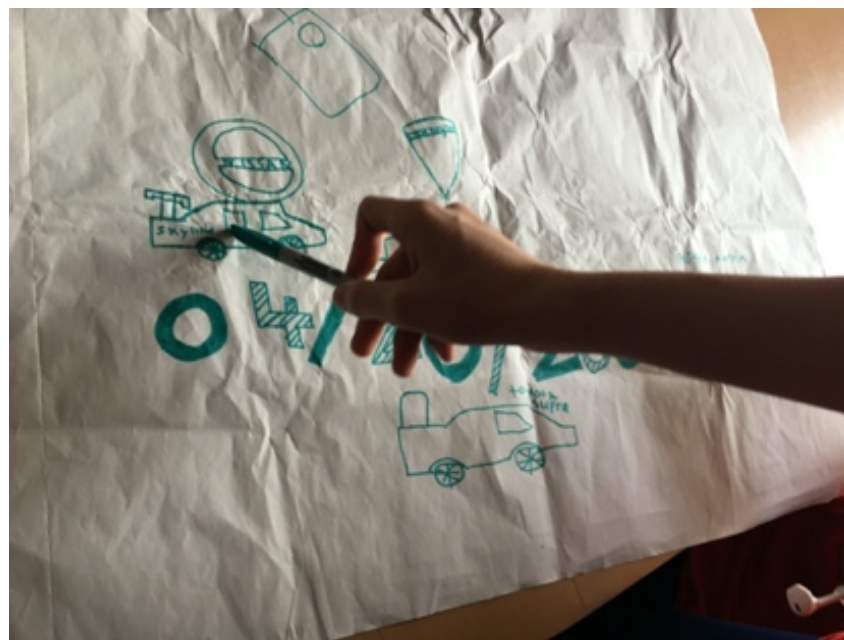


Figure 19: Terry's T-shirt hieroglyph

### 3.7.2 Blethyn's T Shirt: Caspian's semblance

Blethyn's t-shirt design (Figure 20) is of his Original Character (OC) as drawn by Lena (who is introduced below) Caspian is part of the online/offline, animation, storytelling/book writing universe that they are creating, their characters have back stories, Blethyn describes Caspian as invincible:

*Blethyn: I wouldn't die because of using the aura, which is a manifestation of their souls.*

*Lena: And they can use their aura, er, to heal themselves*

*Blethyn: And defend themselves*

*Lena: And yes, and they can also use their auras and a combination of their beings to create a semblance*

*Blethyn: Which is the manifestation, a physical manifestation, of their aura which gives them unique abilities*



*Figure 20: Caspian by Lena*

Blethyn described himself, primarily, as a gamer, gaming whenever he could, even when his parents told him not to. The oldest of four children, Blethyn was, at the time, unsure if he would return for the next year of school for financial reasons. In one brief sentence and never returned to he said: 'My mum says I might need to get a job to sort of, contribute to the family'. As Blethyn comes to the end of what might count as post-compulsory education there is an understandable anxiety around the loss of child related income from state



benefits. Blethyn had great aptitude and enthusiasm for technology and oversaw the entire process of this group's film production. He was also careful to value every person's contribution. Although Anna attended two or three times (rather than every week), Blethyn ensured her name appeared in the credits and that one of her drawings was featured. He was easy going but was much happier if music was playing (loudly if possible) wherever he was. For this reason, many meetings had very little audible data, once this became obvious, I did attempt to move the audio recorder away from where the music was playing. However, the importance of encouraging participation in ways that felt comfortable to them remained a paramount concern throughout the project and Blethyn wanted music on. It was often heavy metal remixes of Disney songs or the soundtrack to video games. An interview with the class teacher for this group, Jan, confirmed that Blethyn would always make a bee line for the class laptop and would play increasingly loud music. Jan described often feeling frustrated by this and I imagine conducting a lesson with a thrash metal version of the Little Mermaid can be very distracting. Where possible I allowed Blethyn to play his music, he was noticeably more comfortable and at ease when he did.

### 3.7.3 Lena's T-Shirt: Crimson Sapphire

Similarly, Lena chose to have her OC 'Crimson Sapphire' printed on her t-shirt (Figure 21). Lena listed Crimson's key features as indomitable strength and a power, activated by an adrenal gland that made her immune to pain. Lena's story is picked up in depth in the following chapters, and Crimson Sapphire was never far from her, when the t-shirt arrived with this image on, she squeezed me in her signature, crushing hug. The force of Lena's feelings could only be felt, I cannot imagine the words that would describe the weight and intensity of the happy-squeezy-gratitude-joy conveyed in that hug. Lena features further along in chapter four and is discussed in detail there.



Figure 21: *Crimson Sapphire*

### 3.8 Half-term photo project

Milton (2018 pp.464-465) advocates the use of more 'phenomenological' visual methods when inviting neurodiverse participants to reflect on their life narratives. Drawing on research expertise and his own experience Milton outlines the neo-liberal assumptions of internal personal identity coherence, which marginalises those whose episodic and semantic memory differences impinge or enhance their abilities to construct linear, teleological narratives of self-development. In other words: 'neurotypicality as foundational identity politics is rarely named as such' (Manning 2016, p.4). During half-term break, midway through the project I gave each of the young people in the gaming group a disposable camera and asked them to take photographs of the things at home that they loved, made them feel good or, simply, that wanted to show me. None of the photographs that were

generated through the 'take pictures of what you love about home' activity appear in the following sections. During a group discussion we decided that the photographs would remain the group's property and in this way the places they live, and their relatives would not be included visually in this thesis, although they were happy for me to discuss the process and the thematic content of the photographs (see Table 4, Half-Term Photograph themes below). I can summarise a little here and the great strength of this type of communication, showing and telling is that I was afforded a glimpse in to the everyday and the momentous.

Lomax (2012) highlights the shift in image-based research with children and young people, where the meaning of the image to its creator is centralised, rather than assuming meanings can simply be read and interpreted. Lomax notes too, the pitfalls of assuming that these meanings are instantly available to either creators or viewers and questions the disruption of power dynamics when researchers get the final say in what stories are selected. In this activity picture subjects were chosen with great care, a bus journey to a day out with friends, a pet rabbit whose 'floo' was a constant source of comfort, a bedroom with wood panelling presented with pride (as I have outlined above, I agreed with participants that I would not use these images in the research, and they remained the property of participants).

The last example, of a wood panelled bedroom, sparked a conversation about the way surroundings and a sense of ownership and stability improve life. This participant had rarely spoken about their foster placement. The space in the photograph was a source of great pride, a photograph of a photograph showed family and a loving description of a foster mum accompanied it. However, the most important element of the photographs, for this participant, was the gaming equipment (although this is possibly because of the project) and the walls. This participant's walls were covered in wood cladding, 'like a cabin'. Once they had said 'like a cabin' I struggled to imagine it as anything else. Another photograph captured the view out of the bedroom window to sand and sea, this vista lent credibility to the room as some kind of exotic space. I also understood that this was no ordinary bedroom, this space meant a great deal and showing pictures of it, bringing it in to this space had a noticeable effect on the young person's way of being in the room, a maturity

and calmness ordinarily absent accompanied the bedroom photographs. I am including this anecdote to show the necessarily fragmented and partial understandings of the people I engaged with, that paying attention to and asking for descriptions of what is meaningful and what matters can help to glimpse other selves (that we all have). This was a participant I had felt worried about sometimes, who was noticeably vulnerable sometimes and yet, once the familial love and the bedroom space was brought into the encounter a different fragment was rendered visible. In Lomax's (2014) study, cameras were given to participants from a local authority housing estate with a media reputation for poverty. Lomax notes that the images young people select rarely reflect the context on those terms. Similarly, none of the images produced by the Lena, Judd or Terry indicated any form of disability.

All participants elected to keep the photographs from the half-term project. One participant never returned the camera. I never followed up on this and instead provided ample opportunities for it to be dropped off if he wanted to, he never did. Although most participants had mobile phones, some did not, and some had never seen a disposable camera. The aim of the activity was for participants to share more about their lives beyond the school gates if they wanted to, inclusive of those who did not have a mobile phone. Notable uses of this method including children and young people include Einarsdottir (2005) whose study compared Icelandic children's uses of digital and supervised photography and disposable cameras similar to the ones in my project. Unsurprisingly, she found that supervised digital photography can often result in the capture and reproduction of (adult) culturally valued images. Those children using disposable cameras without supervision took many more photographs of toilets and 'taboo spaces', findings supported by other research too (see also, Dockett and Perry 2005).

Beyond the production of visual data this activity was an opportunity to develop the group's relationship, to render visible the process of respecting each other's boundaries. Little was made of their choice to keep the photos for themselves, one participant did not want to share the stories of their photos in front of the rest of the group, so time was made at the end of the meeting for a 1:1 and I am not sharing any of those details here, to respect that confidentiality. While I cannot trace a linear path, rendered visible to evidence my point, these small moments of trust and respect were important to the ethical and

respectful engagement of young people in this research. The stories they shared in the project reflect this. There is a fine line between interest and intrusiveness and at every stage of the project I attempted to position myself visibly as the former.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>No. of images</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Lena	24	Animals, outdoors, travel.
Terry	21	Home, gaming, family.
Judd	24	Family, friends, weapons.
Blethyn	0	

*Table 3 Half-term photograph themes*

### 3.9 Emoji sheets

In one meeting Lena noticed the sheets of paper in my bag that had commonly used emojis printed on them. I had not given much thought to how they may be useful and imagined that perhaps at some stage they could be used to think about spaces and places that felt good. This method has been employed successfully by Gabb and Singh (2014) in couples relationships counselling research. Participants in their study draw maps of their home and use different coloured emojis, with facial expressions corresponding to different moods to plot places in the home where fun or conflict occur. However, these types of discussion never occurred, conversations about home and school evolved in different circumstances and were it not for Lena I probably would not have used the sheets. In this discussion, I asked, what people in the group thought each emoji meant, I confessed that I found some of them ambiguous and confusing and that I possibly use some incorrectly (the sweating and the crying emoji, specifically). Below (Figure 22 and Appendix 2) are the sheets, annotated by either the participant or me where writing was difficult. The significance of these sheets for me, lies in the multiple understandings that these common images evoke. It would be a mistake to attribute this to neurodiverse frames of reference, while for some neurodiverse people reading facial cues is notoriously difficult, this is not true of all

neurodiverse people and it is not a generalisation I want to make. Instead, I am highlighting it as a possible area for exploring meaning making practices with young people. While some researchers link these emojis to the transmission of online ‘networked affect’ (Hillis et al. 2015; Renold and Ringrose 2016; Marston 2019) and explore the use of emojis in the exchange of sexual and intimate encounters (Marston 2019; Gesselman et al. 2019; Thomson et al. 2018) everyday understandings of the meanings of these images remains underexplored. From left to right the images below were drawn by Anna, Judd, Sara, Sara and Lena (Figure 22, Appendix 2).



Figure 22: Emoji Sheets

All of these images evoked different and contradictory meanings. However due to the unplanned nature of the use of these sheets there was little time to explore them in any depth. So, I am presenting them here as they were presented to me. They stand as a clear indication of the lack of consensus around the meanings of these images, the sweating emoji is no exception.

### 3.10 Interviewing (teachers and teaching assistants)

Researchers engaging with disabled people recognise that centring the individual as the sole interest of inquiry privileges a particular type of human (Liddiard et al. 2018; Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2016). While it is obviously true that research should never defer to a more ‘normative’ assistant in the place of engaging with disabled people, ignoring those who assist those with SpLD is ableist and ignores the relational and distributed lives of people with disabilities (Liddiard et al. 2018). Over the course of the project, at Castlebridge school in particular, I sought the views of teachers and teaching assistants who often worked very closely with particular young people for advice on ways to engage young people who wanted to participate (see Table 5). The importance of this is best highlighted in the way I worked with Laurie. Lindsey worked very closely with Laurie and was able to advise on Laurie’s communicative preferences. Dancing with Laurie was her suggestion.

Staff member’s name	School	Role
Judy	Castlebridge	Main point of contact. Class teacher
Emily	Castlebridge	Classroom assistant, Judy’s class
Alan	Castlebridge	Class teacher. Gamer (gaming consoles located in his room)
Martha	Castlebridge	Teaching assistant. Gamer
Jan	Castlebridge	Teacher in the Post 16 area
Lindsey	Castlebridge	Teaching assistant (ASD class)
Arthur	Tindeborne	Teacher

*Table 4 Participating staff members*

### 3.11 Gaming with

Some of the most insightful moments in the fieldwork process came from watching participants play. Joy, accomplishment and pride accompanied many of these digital tours. Anna was at her happiest sharing the houses she had made in *The Sims* (2014) or showing her achievements in *Star Stable* (2020) where she was one of the highest-ranking players, with the rarest horses. I describe Sara's game clips in more detail in chapter five *Dolls\**, as these feature in the activism video. Sara's clips in particular made it instantly clear, in a way that describing it to me could not have conveyed, why Sara loved her console and the game *Overwatch* (2015) so much. Her game play was impressive, even to someone who knew little about the game. Some of the clips she shared with me made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Sara's avatar full of exuberance and confidence performing their victory dance. The game called forth a very different, happier, more energised Sara.

Walkerdine's (2007) study of young people in a lunchtime gaming club describes the struggle faced by the girls whose achievements had to be carefully managed in public. The girls in Walkerdine's study talked about luck or stopped playing altogether, because, in that setting, expert gamer was not an available gendered identity for the girls. While it might be tempting to imagine that we have made some progress in this area, I would highlight that Sara was not and would not describe herself as one of the popular girls. Sara had a handful of friends and relationships with them were often fraught. I make no claims to discovering the situation for all female gamers but in this project I saw no evidence that things have changed since Walkerdine's (2007) research. Gender trouble is never far away and as I have outlined already gaming practices are linked to successful gender performativity. For boys, bloodshed, victory, a visible but appropriate appetite for violence are all strategies for producing masculinities in relation to gaming.

At Castlebridge school gaming consoles were available in some classrooms. Therefore, I had the opportunity to game, regularly with the gamer's resistance group and once with participants Andreas and Brian. Although their story does not feature in the chapters that follow, this process of playing with them altered my view of what the popular game *FIFA* (2013) can do. After being defeated (I won) Andreas left the room and I agreed to play with



Brian. We played one match before he showed me how to make the players perform what he called a 'ballet dance'. Using the controls, he was able to make the avatars of famous, premier league football players pirouette and prance on the screen. It was absurd, beautiful and funny. Brian was not a regular FIFA (2013) player and said that he did not like the game, preferring zombie games and *The Walking Dead* (2014). On a rainy April afternoon, however, he delighted in being able to make the footballers dance and being admired by me for doing so.

I also played Halo (2010), infrequently, with the Gamer's resistance group. However, I often felt that my ineptitude deprived them of being able to play a more enjoyable game, so I often sat alongside them watching them play. The skill, perception and mastery of the game looked very, very easy when they played. It was not. Despite being given 'homework' by the group to improve my skills ('play any first-person shooter') I never improved enough to play a good game. The closest I came was Judd, in exasperation, covering my hands with his to show me how to operate the controls and Lena playing with me and taking it easy to give me a chance. I learnt a lot about the way the group related to each other in this digital space (completely differently to the classroom).

### 3.12 Polymer clay modelling

A large bag of art and craft material accompanied me on every visit, including oven dry, clay polymers. Some of the participants at Castlebridge school used this to create things.

Accompanying talk was not limited to the use of the clay, the day the Gamer's resistance group used it, for example, was also the day that the plan for the activism film was finalised. The polymer clay sparked a number of conversations. Terry used yellow polymer to make a hashtag (Figure 23, below), Lena made Gandalf's staff (among other things); Terry decided that the group's name should be: 'Hashtag do not pass'<sup>15</sup>. This was slightly modified when other group members started to call out the same phrase, this time as it sounds in the film.

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<sup>15</sup> 'You shall not pass' is a quote from a Lord of the Rings film (2001). Gandalf bellows these words in the face of an evil demon.

*Vicky: Is that the T-shirt group name?*

*Terry: Hash tag do not pass (holds up the hash tag and Gandalf's staff)*

*Blethyn: The Gamer's Resistance*

*McKenzie, Blethyn, Lena (in unison): The Gamer's Resistance!*

*Vicky: The Gamers Resistance, hashtag what?*

*Terry: You shall not pass*

This group name became important to the story they wanted to tell as a group, through film. The films that were made are the focus of chapter six and it is possible to map the polymer in its journey across the research project. In this context, at this time it would have been impossible to answer the question, what can multi-coloured polymer clay do? However, in retrospect the lines that connect it to the film and to the onward travels of the film are visible.



*Figure 23: Terry's # 'You shall not pass'*

Judd was unusually quiet in the meeting that day. When the clay was opened, in clear sensitivity to this the group asked which colour he would like, rather than disagreeing about who got 'hot pink' or 'normal pink' like Terry and McKenzie. Judd said that he did not care, but for the remainder of the meeting, while the activism film talked about, the emoji sheets were discussed (Figure 22), music was played, dance moves established, Judd sat quietly

making his polymer 'self'. He came to speak to me three times over the hour, the first to ask me to help him with the hair, the second to ask me to prop the character up and the third to tell me what it meant and who it was. Judd was always serious and his reputation for intellectualising was well founded. The following quote is what followed from the second request to help him prop up the figure to better photograph it:

*Vicky: I'm thinking about your problem and what we can use to hold your figure up and I realise I don't have anything with me.*

*Judd: Sometimes philosophy can be heavy*

...

*Judd: And also, you have to remember that I would immediately think well everyone's going to have different thoughts on this therefore mine is sort of like a red hay in the middle of a blue hay*

*Vicky: You think, your thinking is very different to everybody else's?*

*Judd: Sort of, because come on, at a very young age I thought of this: all the shadows fade, and all the buildings turn to dust so why care about it all eh? Why? But hey, we continue on, layers pushing up other layers*

*Vicky: Layers pushing up other layers?*

*Judd: Talking about generations, generations*

*Vicky: Of people?*

*Judd: Yes*

*Vicky: Of everything?*

*Judd: Yes, even the worst parts. Survival of the fittest may have been cruel but at least it spiced up life to not being bored anymore you could actually **feel** alive.*

Layering was clearly something Judd wanted to describe, and although I think he agreed to my assumptions about what he meant, his polymer figure clearly represented some of these layers (Figure 24 below and Appendix 3). For me, the layering in and out of feeling here, the multiplicity, the aliveness that Judd is trying to express is affect, what Hickey Moody (2013) and others might call 'sad affect' (Ahmed 2010). Polymer layered Judd is able to talk, embody pushing on through layers of other people, layers of anger and betrayal, layers of shields, layers of 'suffrage'.

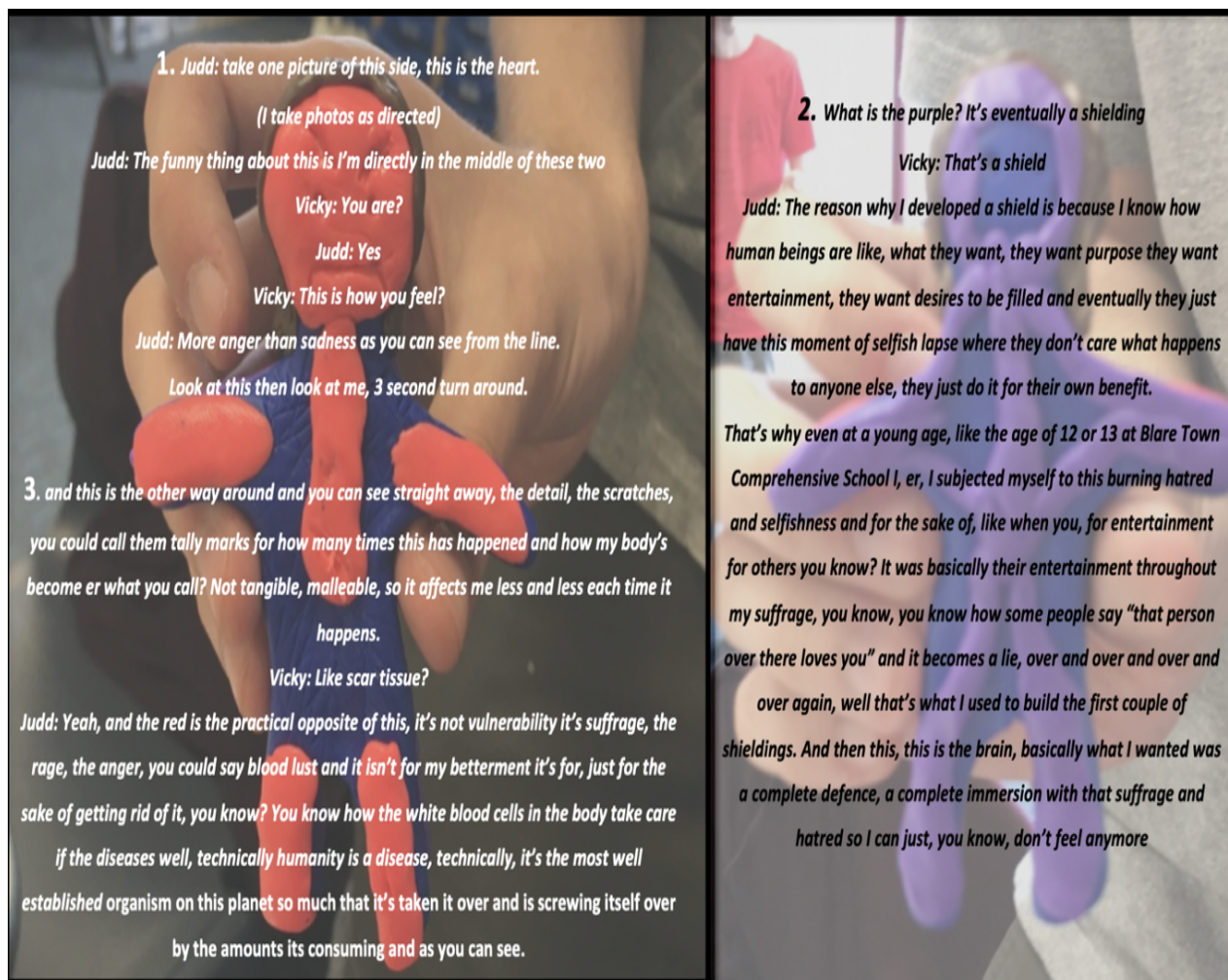


Figure 24: Judd's polymer self

Clay and Play doh have been used effectively, empirically, in feminist research. Ringrose et al. (2019) used Playdoh to craft vulvas in their feminist relationships and sexualities (RSE) research with teen girls. Wohlwend et al. (2019) worked with buzzers and Playdoh to research early childhood. Although the focus of this research was on the soundscapes of the encounter, playdough featured as a tactile component in a project investigating children's arts and makers practices, and what excesses and possibilities might arise from more chaotic encounters. Bingley and Milligan (2007) employ clay modelling as part of a suite of activities to engage teen research participants and argue that the use of such methods can work against boredom while building in time for a slower reflective engagement with the research process (see also Mannay 2015).

On this occasion it opened up a space of expressive possibility for Judd's despairing, hoping creativity. He looks back on past hurt and rage and how that enfolds into his sense of self but is also a folding outwards 'humanity is a disease' that is consuming too much and destroying itself. Judd's model shows him as both consumer and consumed, he talks about resilience as inscribed on bodies, the model tells a complicated story. But the polymer clay also has a part to play and a competency to call forth. Judd's main contribution was as a very skilled gamer (hailed by the others as 'the best') and he participated enthusiastically in gaming meetings. Something about the polymer figure called up an image of Vitruvian man for me, and this fits with Judd's self-description as a cold, rational, incisive gamer, the embodiment of the strategic, detached, objective (male) pro-gamer.

### 3.13 Dancing and drawing

In chapter two, in the section on subjectivity I talked about 'dancing with' as research praxis. Thinking again about MacLure's (2013) list of what data is and how it is experienced reminds me of Terry's floss, a dance that is considered in the ethics section of this chapter. Dancing was an important facet of this project. The context and affective registers of those dances rather than meanings or interpretations of those movements is what came to matter in this research. Hour long group meetings could pass with the Gamer's resistance group during which no one sat down. At times this was noisy, dizzying and tiring, but as the school day in general is structured around seated productivity, I took this as a positive sign. Crafting the conditions that created spaces of supportive, ethical care that make telling different stories about young people's lives possible, takes patience and trust.

Similarly, drawing was a part of the process from the start, some of the core participants (Lena, Ceri, Anna) drew as part of their daily life. Lena in particular used drawing as a way to 'occupy my mind' but also as a worlding practice. The elaborate universe conceived with Blethyn was rendered material through Lena's pen and ink creations. The empirical chapters look at this in more detail but the When I first met Anna she showed me an elaborate dragon that she was crafting for her mother's birthday. A combination of Papier Mâché wings and an elaborately drawn head and body would not have looked out of place on a gallery wall. In the early focus group stages too, participants used the small whiteboards to

draw figures or avatars and sometimes to occupy hands and shift the focus of the discussion.

Drawing in these situations provided a visual element to the encounter. In every meeting the table or floor space that we were seated at contained a large pad of A3 flipchart paper and pens. Over the course of the meeting I would note key themes and invite participants to doodle on the page. As well as providing a useful prompt for completing my scratch and fieldnotes after each meeting, creating notes in this way also felt like a way of conveying transparency to participants, around the kinds of things I was finding interesting and the kind of information I was collecting. Most of these sheets contain personal and identifying information and for that reason I am not including images here and decided to shred these sheets once the information had been transferred to my research diary. An example of this the 'familygram' a spider gram that I created with Lena and Anna. Both participants created these spider grams that represented visually the web of familial relations central to their lives. These 'familygrams' depict important relations to family, carers, animals and friends. These familygrams overlapped the work of other participants and included identifying information. So, in the empirical chapters I have created an edited digital version of Lena's (Figure 30) and provide a list of Anna's. None of the other participants created 'familygrams', describing their important relationships in more straightforward and disinterested ways.

### 3.14 Labels and labelling

During the final fieldwork visit of the project at Castlebridge, some of the Gamer's resistance group were rummaging in the craft bag and Judd found a roll of white labels. I kept the labels in the bag as an easy way to add identifying attributes to the creations that came with me when I left. Judd said he would like to use them, and we discussed how labels are sometimes attached to us and we become known for certain things. At this point Lena made me a label that said, 'Gaming Lady'. I asked what labels we would create for each other or for ourselves, the sole proviso being kindness in the descriptions we used. Lena and Judd loved this activity. Blethyn and Judd described Lena as 'artistic, caring, creative and fierce' (Figure 25 below). Judd was described as 'silent and full of wisdom'. As a group of

young people, who perhaps sometimes have felt their labels heavily, this activity imagined different labels and both Lena and Judd wore them for the remaining hour of the gaming club. I have included here an image of a label Judd wanted for himself, that he wore over where his heart is. It says 'I.V bag/ affection' (Figure 26 below). Something about this label and the image it conjured (of a heart in a state of emergency) unsettled me and stubbornly remained a wild moment of 'wonder' that I could not categorise.



Figure 25: Lena's labels

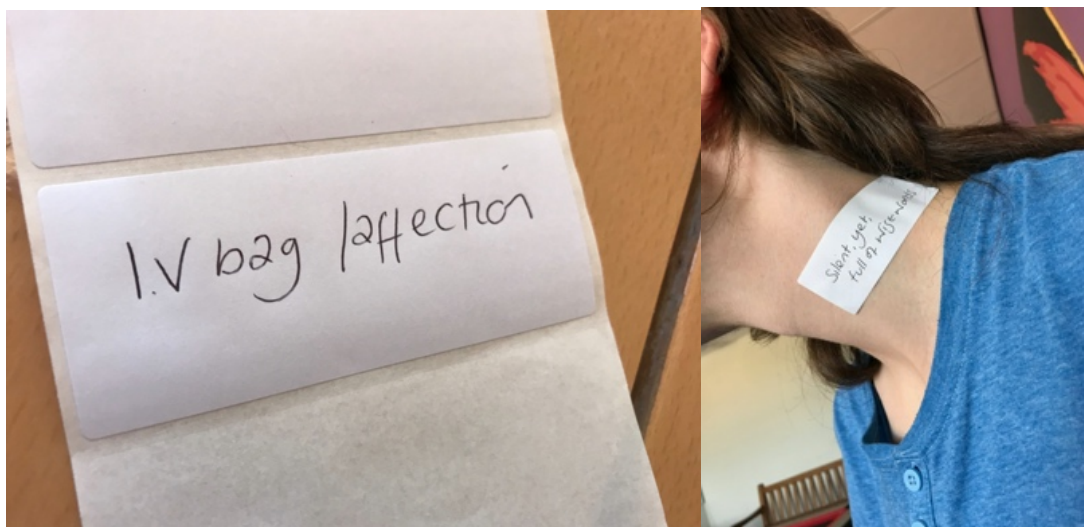


Figure 26: Judd's labels

### 3.15 Film making

The process of making the activism films (Figure 27 below) is discussed at length in chapter six. For this reason, I do not devote significant space to that process here. However, it is worth noting that all the methods outlined in this chapter, contributed to creating a space for young people to tell different and sometimes difficult stories about their lives. In many ways this is a thesis about the process of making activism films with young people about gaming. Insofar as it details the way that crafting ethical relationships can open up the possibilities for generating different types of knowledge about young people's lives. Film making was one of a list of ideas that I circulated about possible ways to contribute to a youth conference. Given that the stories told were about the importance of gaming, of the ways it makes life survivable for young people, it is perhaps unsurprising that a medium allowing them to showcase their gaming, to broadcast to a hall full of people would be the most appealing.

The films have only been screened once, at a youth conference. The young people attended the conference and participated through showing their films. At the conference I gave each of them a flash drive with the film on. I have not screened the films and they have not been presented anywhere else. This is to ensure that the link between the films, which contain identifying information and this research project could not be made. In the stills presented in chapter six I have omitted frames that identify participants. I also excluded frames that were not essential to the overall narrative to alter their presentation. These decisions have been made to protect participants and to take all possible steps to obscure any connection between the films and this research.

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Figure 27: Still for video by Gamer's Resistance group

### 3.16 Dolls and monster methods

The doll methodology developed specifically with the group from Talgarth school (Ceri and Sara). This is the focus of chapter 5 Dolls\* and it is for this reason that I do not provide a detailed description here. This arts-based practice, of modifying and altering dolls was developed by participants. They removed factory applied make-up, hairstyles and clothing and re-made the dolls. These dolls feature in the activism film produced by this group.

### 3.17 A material and mobile affective analysis

*In other words, the empiricism of post qualitative inquiry cannot be taught or learned. Instead of asking for the conditions of possible experience (What is going on here? How did this happen?), it looks “for the conditions under which something new, as yet unthought, arises” (Rajchman, 2000, p. 17).*

*St. Pierre (2018, p.603)*

While much of the theoretical landscape of new materialism and more broadly speaking posthuman research underpins the methodological and analytical explorations of this research, I work generatively with concepts borrowed and adapted from different sources,

such as the post-qualitative literature. I do so without laying claim to a post-qualitative (post-representational) analysis in the way described by St Pierre (2013), MacLure (2013) and Lather (2013). However, what I do take from this approach is the assertion that analysis and data making are enfolded in an ongoing, iterative process, rather than segmented into distinct phases. I felt with, analysed on the go, analytically imagined forwards and reflected back throughout the research process. The post-qualitative literature critically engages with the supposed linearity, compartmentalised, objectivity of research (St Pierre 2018; MacLure 2013). Ellingson and Sotirin (2020) for example, call in to question the word 'data' highlighting its links to positivist approaches, wherein data exists out there waiting to be analysed by experts. They too argue against the pretence towards objectivity. Instead the researcher is located firmly within the assemblage of the research encounter, response-able and ethically situated right in the thick of things (Coleman and Ringrose 2013; Fox and Alldred 2011; Osgood and Robinson 2019). Ellingson and Sotirin (2020, p.5) argue compellingly for the concept of 'data engagement' instead, and an acknowledgement that it is researchers ultimately, who 'make data' simply by putting whatever it may be in the frame. Therefore, departing from conventional approaches to research practices becomes something of an imperative rather than a risk. Instead of collecting, observing and finding data, Koro-Ljungberg and MacLure argue, that it can be '*wondered, eaten, walked, loved, listened to, written, enacted, versed, produced, pictured, charted, drawn and lived*' (2013, p.221). This description of data reflects the way it is conceptualised in this thesis.

### 3.18 Messy data

Necessity motivated a different approach to engaging with my data. The partial transcription of the audio and video recordings and the fragmented nature of this process is linked to the desire of core participants to play music, loudly, in almost all the meetings. So, while the materiality of the audio recorder relations remains a thread, the audio recorder functioned otherwise, most noticeably as an ethically response-able (Barad 2007) object. It was sometimes moved and turned off but was always used to remind the young people of the purpose of my visit. Beyond this it was of limited use and value. Some of the quieter recordings are perfectly audible. However, in these meetings there was always a more sombre and heavier tone, they were very difficult to sit with. Instead, I listened to those

recordings outdoors, walking, on the move, in attempt to bring lightness to the affective heaviness. The process of listening and transcribing is often presented as a self-evident, unproblematic phase of the research process. However some, like Bird (2005) bring attention this under-explored facet of research. She argues that transcription is the important beginning of analysis.

Davidson (2009) reviews thirty years of academic literature on the processes of transcription, from Ochs (1979) foundational and unchallenged work linking transcription to theory as a necessarily selective process that more or less affirms the researcher's position. The choices and framing of transcription are elided in most research that reports it in any meaningful way. In other words, it is assumed that verbatim transcription in some way replicates the reality of the encounter, in the verbal sense at least.

Davidson's argument is for transparency and an acknowledgement of the types of reasoning that inflect all transcription processes and more importantly, for the limitations of transcription. These arguments are well versed in the new-materialism literature, if less explicitly aimed at the process of transcribing. What recordings of any nature cannot capture are the affective economies of the exchange, a video camera might capture the eyebrow raise that an audio recorder cannot, but it remains the domain of the encounter to uncover the always partial meanings-in-the-moment.

However, qualitative research that does not adopt the audio recording followed by verbatim transcription method opens itself up to accusations of a lack of rigor or transparency. Although as I noted above some traditional research describes transcription as a first step in analysis (Loubere 2017; Bird 2005). However, researchers of early childhood and critical post-qualitative researchers question the foundational notions of traditional research narratives, acknowledging the messy, entangled and non-linear ways of being with and feeling with data (Osgood and Giugni 2015; Lyttleton-Smith 2015; Lather 1993). The same is also true for research that takes place outside of the Global North and in diverse languages, such as BSL, or in non-English speaking research encounters (Temple and Young 2004; Temple 2002).

For various reasons the data that was gifted, produced, made and engaged with over the course of this project lent itself, partially at best to the traditional modes of verbatim transcription. Field notes and scratch notes, scribbled in my red pad and then my black diary when this was full; texts to myself and notes on my mobile phone, audio notes recorded on my phone when I was too exhausted to sit and write in my car after a meeting, or on one occasion too nervous to write before a meeting, were supplemented by descriptions alongside the log of recording numbers. These last notes were the most helpful, where a recording is only partially audible, the list of activities and memorable moments I have scrawled alongside mash together to help reformulate what might lay within the recording. I listened to these audio recordings and watched the videos many times, making notes on interesting or at least useable sections.

For the audio I was only ever able to listen to on the move, walking outside I would photograph the time points of the quotes that might best capture the flavour of what had occurred. Gabb and Fink (2015) call this a 'telling moment', where a fragment captures something of the whole. Sticky recordings, the ones I was unable to shake off, that captured the affective registers of the research relationships, were the ones I repeated most. For over three years now not a day has passed that I have not returned to the stickiest stories of this project. I remain deeply, affectively attached to this research. I think of participants at unusual times, when I take a trolley from the bay at the supermarket, every time I see Greta Thunberg, when the debates around trans\* rage on social media. And when I spend time with animals, when my son talks to me about videogames, when an episode of the Big Bang Theory plays and when I walk the path behind my house. I do not imagine I will ever forget those encounters; each was meaningful, each could provide a topic for a stand-alone chapter. It was not difficult to choose the sticky stories that are presented here, they were the stories that participants most wanted to tell. However, this was perhaps not as straightforward as it might sound, and this is a research thesis, an analysis of the process of producing these stories and what else those stories can do is also part of the process.

Returning to the snow globe analogy that opened this chapter, it can be extended easily to encompass the entirety of this project. I visited these snow globe schools and shook things up, I looked on in wonder as things never fully settled, some fragments were shinier than

others, some balanced more precariously and undoubtedly some moved too quickly to ever be seen. This process of shaking things up and watching, noticing the ways they settle involves telling some stories and not others (making cuts). I could shake these stories again and new ones would come to the fore or settle in odd and unsettling ways. Moreover, the contents of the globe could be shaken differently by someone else, who would view any snowscape differently to me. I make no attempt to obscure my hand as it shakes the globe which, even if it could shake itself would still reveal the stories that I am implicated in telling.

### 3.19 Constructing a 'cabinet of curiosities'

Ordinarily, following an account of the process of transcription which the section above approximates, would be a description of the development of the coding framework. And I do not deny that some degree of coding is present in the curation of the empirical chapters in this thesis. This type of representational thinking is characteristic of thought as much as it is research, the ordering and sensemaking of the world we experience. However, as MacLure (2013) argues, rigid adherence to this type of representational organization, renders the possibility of 'findings' otherwise impossible. In an echo of Barthes (1977, p.44) contention that we are 'doomed to analogy', MacLure's point is that the hierarchical, arboreal, logic of NVivo coding for example, forces the replication of particular associations. Coding means we look for examples of things like identity, for instance, or gender and disability, class and race etc. Furthermore, MacLure argues,

*'within the schema of representation, things are frozen in the places allotted to them by the structure that comprehends them – in the double sense of enclosing them, and of rendering them comprehensible' (2013, pp. 168-169).*

Within this too lies an assumption of stasis that something has been captured, coded and will hold a truth indefinitely. It should be clear by now that the epistemology underpinning

this research takes issue with ideas of stasis and certainty. MacLure (2013) continues that the practices of coding aim to distance researcher from data in a dance of objectivity, where the lofty view from above is the most accurate analytic gaze. The onto-epistemology of new- materialism on the other hand, locates the researcher as 'part of and the result of the ongoing intra-actions of the world' (Nordstrom 2015, p.394). The researcher is implicated along with all the other discursive, material and affective forces that render the process legitimate, thinkable and doable. Furthermore, coding assumes that everything can be rendered intelligible to coding, that everything is explicable, everything can be made understandably meaningful. MacLure's (2013 p.169) suggestion is that researchers are guided instead by proximity, flexibility and following your 'gut'. She argues that attention should be paid to the stubborn data fragments that refuse categorisation and do not fit easily into a narrative or as an answer to a question.

My approach to engaging with the data then, was firstly through reflective writing before and after the research meetings, excerpts from this practice populate forthcoming chapters. I listened carefully and repeatedly to the audio recordings and watched the video recordings of the meetings. I spoke regularly and reflectively to my supervisor, particularly when things felt affectively intense. But perhaps most importantly I noticed, I paid attention to the inarticulable in the meetings and when engaging further with data and I made links between those intensities (and often not when sitting at a desk trying to). I noticed things growing in significance and gaining weight in further meetings or falling away to the side.

I also engaged materially with this process. In my house I gave over a wall<sup>16</sup> to thinking, relationally about the process. The wall was covered with excerpts from the theory and empirical research I was reading. I added data gifts from participants and interesting, sticky ideas, of things that I learned from participants and professionals. There was no real structure, some things remained on the wall, others were replaced over time. I have included images of the wall here (Figure 28) but obscured them to protect any possible, identifying characteristics of participants.

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<sup>16</sup> The location of this is my office/bedroom. This is not a space I share with anyone. I was mindful, always, of the need to protect participants identities. Pseudonyms were used for people, locations and artefacts at the point of recording.



Figure 28: Research-data-wall-assemblage

There was no purposeful structure or thematic grouping, and I did not try to include everything on the wall. Instead, the wall captured fragments that puzzled me, surprised me, troubled me and refused to settle. Snapshots from shared images on smart phones, unbearably sad inscriptions on plates, a picture that characterised the senses as they exist beyond our usual five (and are often used to understand young people with SpLD) doodles, copies of drawings, school brochures. Every item on the wall was accompanied by a complex affective ‘wonder’. On this MacLure says that permitting these ‘bodily intensities’ to surface in our thoughts and decision making carves an analytic pathway to, ‘embodied connections with other people, things and thoughts that are far more complex than the static connections of coding’ (2013 p.172).

There are similarities here with Haraway’s imperative that feminist researchers ‘Stay with the Trouble’ (2016). Indeed, the following quote was handwritten and pasted to my wall:

*‘It matters what matter we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties.*

*(Haraway 2016, p.12)*

Haraway like many other female scholars of the complex has a reputation for writing inaccessibly, and this quote may seem confusing, like a riddle or a tongue twister. But to me it is beautifully simple and self-evident while heralding a herculean task of ethical accountability. To do justice to the way this thinking has informed my praxis, would require the unravelling of a thousand threads and 'tentacles' reaching in visible and invisible directions. To trace the lines of thought and action, affect and mobility, would take an eternity, and would undoubtedly be inflected in myriad more ways on the journey. Thankfully, Haraway again provides a grounding direction, in her call to tentacular thinking. She elaborates, that it is not enough to see or say that everything is connected to everything. Instead it is important to highlight and make visible what makes those connections and how that comes to matter (2016, p.31). For Haraway, thinking is not the self-evident isolated praxis of the intellectual, far from it. She advocates 'thinking with' or 'composting' to conceptualise the layering and enfolding, of theories, encounters, intensities and flows of information, emotion and energy in the production of knowledge, always situated and always partial. For MacLure coding can function as a 'particular kind of experimental assemblage, namely the construction of a cabinet of curiosities' (2013 p.165). But how then to decide where to start and finish those stories? How to decide which fragment might render a more broadly meaningful whole? This process involves sticky stories and agential cutting.

### 3.20 Agential cuts

A Baradian understanding of agency underpins the following concepts of 'intra-action, 'cutting together apart and response-ability (2003). Simply put, for Barad, agency is not a possession of individuals, in much the same way as 'participant voice' is not a gift the researcher has to bestow. Agency is not a pre-existing facet of participants (or researchers) waiting to be realised. Instead, in Barad's view agency is produced, relationally in intra-action, distinct here from interaction which assumes self-contained, distinct people coming together in a situation, participant and researcher, for instance. Rethinking agency as a relational capacity, instead invites us to see that the participant and the researcher emerge through their intra-action, neither pre-existing the encounter, instead becoming relationally in-situ (Frigerio et al. 2018; Renold et al. 2011). In describing a specific encounter with these



two people as participant and researcher an 'agential cut' is made in the relational, entangled mess, at the local, situated level, but not a definitive cut apart per se. The cut refers to a boundary drawing. This idea of an agential cut illuminates the linguistic and material practices that call into being, a temporary separateness, unique to the situation. There are always other possible cuts. Staying with the example I could say, 42-year-old, white, woman, and 17-year-old white male. With the cut comes meaning, hereditary representations and it is for this reason that care should be taken when 'cutting together apart', other meanings rush towards that cut and those meanings matter. In this example I have used two people, it is important to remember here that taking materiality seriously supposes that either of these people could be substituted with any other materially real force within the frame.

These concepts are put to good use in Frigerio et al.'s (2018) work analysing the data from a mother/daughter interview, they outline the way the 'autistic child' is rendered through the processes of agential cuts. They argue that the label,

*'autistic child' is not a 'mirror/representation of the world, but an intervention in the world: cuttings are always practices/doings/actions disturbing and intervening in reality. Intra-actions create inclusion and exclusion and according to Barad we are responsible for the cuts that we help enact.*

*(Frigerio et al. 2018 p.391)*

So, where we decide to place and enact these cuts can produce exclusionary differences and inequalities, they produce 'differences that matter' (Barad 2007, p.348). Moreover, they argue, historical discourses 'haunt' our understandings. In other words, accrued knowledge and understandings of all types are always in the frame. The fragments of 'data' that are chosen to be presented in research are in themselves a cut, or a description of a particular shaking of the snow globe. The point here is to acknowledge that I shake the globe or make the cut, how and why is a matter of ethical transparency and reflexive accountability. However, I am no less relationally entangled in this research than the materials, forces and participants that 'compost' in this research assemblage with me. Cuts that I made to craft

the empirical chapters in this thesis are informed by the 'stickiness' of data fragments and stories.

### 3.21 Sticky stories

*Anxiety is sticky: rather like Velcro, it tends to pick up whatever comes near...Objects become sticky, saturated with affects, as sites of personal and social tension.*  
(Ahmed 2007 pp. 125-126)

The first sentence of the quote above from Sara Ahmed illustrates that affects circulate, relationally between people but also the more-than human materialities. It is possible to pick up and be affected by the atmosphere in a room, that a vibe, a frisson of tension, a perception of boredom or disengagement can feel like it gets inside of me. Ahmed (2007) continues that while this might be true it is not that straightforward, and people must examine too what they bring to the environment or occasion. What people bring remains important as they come to understand an occasion. Acknowledging this I engaged in reflexive writing before each school visit, to monitor what my feelings were on that day, what kind of me I was bringing to each occasion. This process of journaling also highlights key texts I was reading at the time of the project. I was keen to explore what might have prompted those feelings and if they related to previous school visits, conversations with teachers or something that had happened at home. This reflexive writing is an ongoing process, I still use it to reflect on which sections of writing have been elusive, felt too troublesome, caused anxiety or confounded the sense-making practices required for academic writing practices. The story of Laurie is a good example of this.

I have used extracts from my fieldnotes on dancing with Laurie to provide an empirical example of the way I understand subjectivities. However, Laurie's story remains 'stubbornly sticky' beyond this short example. There was an inarticulable register to that encounter that will not yield to the discursive. Law (2004, p.2) describes how the world is 'textured in quite different ways', noting that traditional social science methods fall short of capturing some of the 'messiness'. Similarly, Hickey-Moddy contends that the creation of clarity subjugates the messiness inherent to creativity (2019a, p.8). And so, some of the textures of Laurie's

troublingly sticky story remain untold. But it is towards this texture that Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick (2003) urges an analytical engagement with the worlds research crafts and creates.

Therefore, it is not the case that all the sticky stories appear in this thesis. Had they, it would have been difficult to construct even the loosest narrative flow. Cuts have been made for the purposes of intelligibility but also for political and ethical reasons. For instance, the decision to include a section which details one girl's difficult experience of schooling through observational data of her interactions with a teaching assistant in chapter four may seem at odds with the 'ethic of care' (Lomax et al. 2011; Lomax 2015) approach of this research. However, the stories of difficulty only ever include participants who wanted to participate in the research. Moreover, some of these troubling stories are included to draw attention to specific issues such as the gendered practices of education. They are included with the hope that they draw attention to the ongoing nature of these practices. Specific examples from empirical research can be used to evidence the persistence of important inequalities. It is hoped that they will contribute to processes of positive change. Therefore, including these stories is also weighed against the consequences of these practices remaining unreported. Therefore, their inclusion is in service to the groups represented. These stories also represent other similar encounters and were not chosen for any other reason than their ability to convey succinctly and impactfully, a recurrent theme. They are fragments, emblematic of a larger whole.

The contents of these chapters contain what could arguably be called 'zeitgeist' topics. As I discuss below stories of neurodiversity, trans\* and youth activism populate forthcoming chapters. Stories of the everyday lives of neuro-diverse girls are almost non-existent and they remain a hugely under-represented (but increasingly diagnosed) group within the special school system and in society (Lai et al. 2015; Egerton and Carpenter 2016; Happé et al. 2006). The everyday lives of trans teens with disabilities are also underrepresented (Duke 2011) with notable exceptions in education studies (Gilbert and Sinclair-Palm 2020; Neary 2018; Sausa 2004; Holmes and Cahill 2008). There is an increasing body of research that maps the process of youth activism in the UK (Taylor et al. 2020; Renold et al. 2011;

Runswick-Cole et al. 2018; Mannay et al. 2019) but this too, is an under-explored and increasingly important topic (for a comprehensive, global overview see Sherod, et al. 2006). I acknowledge that I am 'haunted' and inspired by feminist research and researchers (Haraway 2016; Butler 1990; Renold et al. 2011; Osgood and Robinson 2019; Hickey-Moody 2019a; Halberstam 2018). I share their commitment to telling different stories about disabilities, gender, sexualities and to mapping what those stories can do and become; 'it matters what thoughts think thoughts' (Haraway 2016). This feminist lineage informed the cuts that I made.

The second sentence of Ahmed's quote, 'Objects become sticky, saturated with affects, as sites of personal and social tension (2007 pp. 125-126) better reflects the way that some sticky stories came to matter and made the cut in the chapters that follow. Hickey-Moody describes sticky stories as: 'those that have stuck with me, like burrs to a cloth, pricking at me, reminding me they are there and have a purpose' (2019a, p.9). It is the accumulation of affect in some data fragments, the eddying and intensifying whirling of snow globe glitter around concepts, materialities, ideas that provides the adhesive force. In their study on early childhood teacher reflexivity Moxnes and Osgood (2018, p.301) describe the affordances of working with 'sticky stories' to 'induce wonder and trouble' and crucially provide a space for 'the trouble to continue to circulate'. In other words, the stories included are not foreclosures or endings, there are no definitive answers, the contents were and remain troubling. Moreover, in places I step away from concluding interpretations in this thesis. The creation of knowledge, as I have outlined over the last three chapters, does not rest exclusively with the researcher, for this reason in some of the sections that follow I offer speculative possibilities but not definitive answers.

Chapter four on neurodiverse girls is crafted to reflect the way staff told sticky stories about the very few neurodiverse girls in Castlebridge school and how those girls survive an impossible, gendered assemblage. Haunted by cultural narratives of neurodiversity and masculinity, all the stories in this chapter coalesce around the impossibility, the inhabitability of 'neurodiverse girl'. Lena's stories are the some of the most adhesive. I found this data unsettling, troubling and in places upsetting. Crafting a narrative that was not mired in my own sorrow was difficult but, engaging affirmatively in the research

process, accessing the support of my supervisor and actively looking for the joy and moments of survivability in these stories was a decisive approach.

Chapter five 'Dolls\*' crafts a story of gender trouble through the relational materiality of monstrous dolls. An impassioned and heart-rending account of fiction that was sticky for participants, of the challenges of male pregnancy, challenges that stuck Velcro like to the hair pulling transformation of dolls. Complicated stories, and dolls crafted and layered with affect illuminate a fragment of gender difference in a post-industrial south Wales valley town.

Chapter six 'filming resistance' engages with the process of how research can come to matter in the context of youth activism projects. These are the stories of crafting activism about things that matter for both the Gamer's resistance group and the Doll group, how the methods described in this chapter opened up a space for participants to tell different stories about gaming, gender, inclusion, surviving and to take those stories to a national youth activism conference. It was a real privilege to be a part of this process and the affective stickiness of this alone would be enough to warrant an analysis of this moment of wonder. But it also represents what can happen if we hold out the globe for participants to shake things up, to craft a space that can be filled with their 'sticky stories' the ones they want the world to hear.

### 3.22 Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the participants and places that feature in the project. I have described the way that I recruited participants to the study using a visual survey to introduce myself and what I hope the project would become. I have outlined the ethical approach taken to working with participants on this project. I introduced the 'Case of Ethics' and described the processual nature of becoming a participant where consent is fluid and constantly negotiated. The methods of data production have been introduced. I included empirical data to provide a sense of the richness and volume of data. I have summarised the approach taken to working with this data, primarily through a consideration of affective flows. Rather than imposing my own meaning on the creations of the participants (Rose

2001; Mannay 2015) in this chapter and those that follow, contextual information is described, and I include summaries of the affective relations of each encounter. Importantly, as should now be evident, I make no claims to truth or objective observation. Rather the cuts in the empirical chapters that follow reflect best the stories that came to characterise the project. These cuts also aim to address the core and subsidiary research questions of the project. This is an unusually long chapter however as I outlined in chapter one, a central aim of this project was to map the methodological terrain of engaging with neurodiverse young people around their gaming practices. This chapter outlines the evolving terrain, developed for answering the core research question:

1. What can a neuro-diverse teen gamer do?

And the subsidiary research questions:

2. How do territorializing forces immobilise or impede neurodiverse teen gamers' digital practices and what lines of flight are possible?
3. What happens when the territorializing forces of binarised (heteronormative) gendering are troubled?
4. What can a teen-gamer-activism project do?

Alongside the more obvious method-ing I spent hours at these schools sometimes waiting in corridors, occupying empty classrooms, accompanying classes on activities that either the young people or their teachers thought I might find interesting. Noticing carefully the practices, emergencies, urgencies, humour and palpable 'stickily' affective encounters that populate a day in those schools. I will never forget the people and places that populate this thesis, the connections that were made. I will never stop wondering at and about the participants.

## Chapter 4

### Neurodiverse girls: Making sense of sensing gender trouble

*'It's only in the past five years that specialists in neurodevelopmental disorders have widely accepted that autism is not limited to boys and men'. (Hill 2019)*



Figure 29: Buff Natsuki image from Lena's phone

#### 4.1 Introduction

*LINDSEY: (whispering) At the moment if you asked any of us we would say the girls are worse. And in my school in Ireland the, apart from one, girl, yeah apart from one girl who was a real sweetheart, who started not long before I left, the girls; one girl was on a 4:1 ratio because the behaviour could be, she was non-verbal and the behaviour was **so** extreme at different times you would have to be, when she was in escalation, you would have to be 4:1, and she was in a room on her own and we managed to transition her into a room of two.*

*VICKY: Yeah?*

*LINDSEY: So that we had, we had emergency buzzers and most of the time it was for the girl who was, and I would be called for the girl most of the time. And here, at the moment, in here it's her [Selby] and then Katya so it seems to be here that the behaviour is erratic, especially as you're reaching puberty and you've got hormones to go in the mix. Less so, I know you've got the puberty with the boys, but it affects them slightly different.*

Lindsey's is a typical example of the way that professionals in the schools describe the perceived differences and difficulties of working with neuro-diverse girls. There is a pronounced difference in the number of girls with a neurodiversity/ASD diagnosis in comparison to their male counterparts. Most studies report a 3:1 ratio of boys to girls, although this is likely a conservative estimate (Parish-Morris et al. 2017; Gould and Ashton-Smith 2011; Lai et al 2015). Gould and Ashton-Smith (2011) highlight the impact of gendered 'masking' traits associated with neurodiversity. This is the idea that girls are socialised into more docile and compliant behaviour and that this masks those traits that are associated with an autism diagnosis (Parish-Morris et al. 2017). This means that often only the most behaviourally extreme girls achieve a diagnosis and a placement in an over-subscribed special school setting. This minority group status brings its own challenges for professionals, families, peers and, not least the girls themselves.

This chapter introduces four girls from Castlebridge School. Two of them participated in the lunch time gaming club. Lena, a core weekly group member and Anna whom I met with infrequently due to her uneven attendance pattern. Katya and Selby whom I met on a couple of occasions and were peripheral to the project are also included. Katya was interested in what I was doing and wanted to be included in the research. Although this for various reasons never transitioned into a long-term ongoing engagement. This chapter maps neuro-diverse girl assemblages with attention to professionals, family, home and gaming. It explores their relationships to professionals, peers, family and loved ones and me. Due to the infrequency of their participation, there are no video or audio recordings of Katya and Selby except for where they join in with the other participants. Reflections are drawn from my



fieldnotes and from interviews with professionals from the school. There is a growing recognition of the need for research on the lived experiences of neurodiverse girls that does not focus solely on their diversity and difference (Gould and Ashton-Smith 2011). I am including descriptions of Katya and Selby as relevant contextual information to understanding the experiences of girls in this school although they did not participate directly in discussions around gaming.

This chapter situates the relational production of these young people in specific assemblages with professionals, families, peers, research encounters and finally in relation to those things that sometimes free them from the identity politics and territorializing (Deleuze and Guattari 2013) relations with significant adults. Section 4.2, below, sketches the persisting, territorializing stranglehold of the 'nice girl' professional discourse in Castlebridge school (Walkerline 1989; 1990 Raey 2001). I begin with discourse here as it creates the territorializing educational context that the I engaged with these girls in. Following this I map the way a more Dis/ordered girl is constructed in professional accounts, where neurodiverse girls fail repeatedly, to achieve 'nice girl' intelligibility. I then open this out to demonstrate how what staff call 'blips' might be moments of excess of this discourse, or deterritorializations (Deleuze and Guattari 2013). After outlining the professional, educational understandings that circulated in the girls' assemblages. I map, in detail, research assemblages with Katya, Lena and Anna, three girls in the special school. I outline the challenges of researching with Katya in the soft play area of the school. Lena's Original Character (OC) 'Crimson Sapphire' materialises in an assemblage with another student Blethyn and a rubber bouncing ball. Anna takes me on a tour of the Christmas-every-day world she has created in the game Sims. Each of these sections evidence the positive affordances of gaming territories in Lena and Anna's lives. Amid the territorializing stuckness of professional discourses I map possible moments of rupture and escape.

#### 4.2 'If you're going to be a nice girl you can come back in'

Over the course of the project when I invited professionals to reflect on their ways of relating to the young people they work with they described the crucial importance of

reading young people's non-linguistic repertoires and pre-cursors. There was a real emphasis on developing embodied modes of relating with young people who sometimes struggle to articulate their feelings. This included registering different types of bark, growl or other non-discursive linguistic outputs, reading bodily tics, noticing the relationships between behaviours, the relational impacts of classmates and feeling different types of quiet and silences. Speaking to key members of staff it became clear that, as far as they were concerned the ability to pick up on cues, antecedent behaviours and bodily registers were instrumental to the more-or-less smooth running of the day. Over the course of the project the affective registers, the feeling of the school became increasingly perceptible to me. For instance, on arrival, the reception area often served as a barometer for the whole school. The posture of the receptionists, the frequency of telephone calls, the ambient noise levels, the visibility of staff and students and sometimes the feel of the air all carried a general flavour of the mood that continued throughout the areas of the school I visited. The fieldnote extract below is a good example of this:

*Fieldnote Castlebridge School 14/06/18*

*The school looked weirdly quiet today. The receptionists are increasingly familiar with me and I recognise a lot of the staff and kids that pass by as the traffic of the school. Everyone outside had their heads down to the ground, no one was making eye contact, things felt a little bit off.*

*The young girl who I first came across when I was in doing the Spectrum workshops – who got very angry while having her hair done is behind a closed door to my left as I am sitting in the foyer. I can hear her screaming with rage behind the door. It's clear that she feels misunderstood but is shouting at a male member of staff so loudly it can be heard throughout reception. Clearly, given the total lack of disruption, this isn't unusual. Through a small square window in the door I can see her picking up a maroon armchair sized chair, failing to upend it she begins to punch it and then pull it backwards before slamming it repeatedly into the wall. She is puce with rage; her eyes are wild and as she scream/shouts you can see saliva all around her face. The*

*male member of staff says calmly, 'If you are going to be a nice girl you can come back in'.*

*During this period the receptionist phones two parents, the first to report that her son has been assaulted that it is 'not his fault' that he has been 'we don't call it assaulted at this age' but 'hit' by another pupil. The call is brief in duration and clearly not unusual for either party. She then calls the parent of the child who has assaulted the other child and then phones to arrange transport for him to his 'other school'. The undertones of violence and anger make no impact on the general quietness of this area. Through the small section of reinforced glass in the fire door to my left I can see the girl attempting to ascend the cupboard in the foyer via the chair she has been hauling around and the bookcase. She is still screaming wildly and trying to claw objects to throw at the staff member who looks only marginally more fed up than he did a minute or two ago.*

Turbulent behaviour is a common enough occurrence in the school for it not to draw the attention of the staff in reception. But it is not without its affective resonances, the quiet is not relaxed or easy. It is comparable to the quiet that breaks out around a fight or argument in public. The school must carry on around it, but the force of the eruption demands acknowledgement, and it would be weirder still for an effusive cheerfulness to surround distress. On many of my visits to the school I encountered staff doing their best to emotionally and physically contain extreme behaviour. The ethical decision to include this extract (as I have outlined in chapter three) was weighed against the importance of making sure that girls' experiences, struggles and stories were told. Both the staff member and the girl had participated in earlier stages of the project and this fieldnote is one among similar others.

The terminology of the 'nice girl' in educational research is all too familiar for feminist researchers (Hey 1997; Kehily 2015; Mac An Ghail and Haywood 2007; Raey 2001; Paechter and Clark 2016, Walkerdine 1989; 1990; 1997). The nice girl is synonymous with docility, obedience and well-mannered diligence. In most of the studies listed here, 'nice girl' functions as a category desired by educators, not peers. What is

interesting in the fieldnote extract above is the highly gendered nature of the appeal in the face of what counts, on those terms as the most subversive form of femininity. What was also astonishing at the time (and now) is that there was any hope of his request being met. So, the more likely explanation is that the statement functioned to let the young girl that she was not being a 'nice girl'.

#### 4.3 What if you're not a 'nice girl'?

A professional discourse of dis/ordered girl as the flip side to 'nice girl' (Walkerdine 1990; 1997) was also evident in the attitude of staff towards girls. Staff described the difficulties they experienced in working with girls in an intuitive, predictive way. This professional discourse posits girls as unknowable and unamenable to the kind of predictability that would make them somehow relatable; it materialised as a more generalised sense of not being able to understand the girls. Arguably, the bargain being made in the extract to the young girl, who would be allowed back in if she were a 'nice girl' renders a particularly simplistic understanding of the kind of recalibration needed to restore order.

This somewhat limited repertoire of femininity was persistent, even among staff who were clearly deeply committed to improving the lives of the young people in the school. This included staff who were informed and educated on wider, progressive discourses surrounding special school provision, who talked about best practice and participated in groups and clubs beyond the school gates. In the opening quote and the one below, Lindsey a member of staff with decades of experience, personally (she has a son with neurodiversity) as well as professionally who has worked across the UK and advises on government strategy, lays out plainly the problems faced when only the most disruptive girls are present in the system. Lindsey's sentiments towards understanding girls was, unanimously, shared by every member of staff I spoke to.

*LINDSEY: Erm, in this class it's really varied we can go we can have; it seems like weeks and certain people are antecedents, they make the behaviour almost, you can guarantee that if someone comes into the mix there may be a behaviour incident then. It's funny how if we change groups for instance Katya's quite a catalyst for this group, if she comes, because she used to be in his classroom, erm, so she can like aggravate the boys, the noise level, [interruption approx. 15 seconds].*

*VICKY: Who's that?*

*LINDSEY: That's Katya*

*VICKY: Ah that's the girl that was talking to him [Laurie]*

*LINDSEY: Because she can, yeah, she varies [interruption again, approx. 30 seconds] So it depends if they [girls] come into the environment sometimes because they're quite verbal, they can verbalise the boys, that can start. And like yesterday with Laurie as I said he's been excellent and it was just that Selby was in escalation and it was big and it had been continuous and that then set Laurie, set Laurie, so it can be varied. We can have weeks where we have nothing at all we had quite calm behaviour for a long while and then you'd have the days where you'd have your blips. At the moment we have, Selby would be the behaviour first and if it's going to be it's usually on a certain day of the week it's usually on a W, at the moment it seems to be on a Wednesday, it was on a Tuesday now it's on a Wednesday.*

*VICKY: Why do you think that is?*

*LINDSEY: We dunno, we think a change of environment. Not here.*

The first and most noticeable element of this exchange is the enthusiastic and fast-paced delivery of Lindsey's knowledge about the class dynamics and the contrast when I ask her to reflect on what might be behind Selby's 'behaviour'. Lindsey is talking here about 'behaviour' as a synonym for physically violent or aggressive outbursts by the young people in the class. She directly implicates the two girls, currently accommodated between the two dedicated ASD classes (other classes are comprised of young people with a variety of SpLD),

Katya and Selby, as the escalators of undesirable behaviour in the boys. Notice how the girls can 'verbalise' the boys by being 'quite verbal'. Again there seems to be an assumption that if the girls were quiet (nice) everything would be fine. There is little concern for Selby in a 'big' and 'continuous' restraint incident and instead the anecdote is filtered through its impact on Laurie. This is reinforced again at the end when it becomes clear that there is not the same energy for understanding what is happening in Selby's life on a Tuesday or Wednesday. It is the girls themselves rather than the gender relations of the classrooms that are couched as the problem. Arguably, it is the girl's inability to render an intelligible performance on these occasions that makes their behaviour so unfathomable. This behaviour remains opaque while it is situated in discourses of traditional femininities, as Lindsey's equivocations in the statement show, there are some patterns there but there is no real appetite, enthusiasm or perhaps vocabulary for understanding further.

#### 4.4 Boisterous boys and not nice girls

In mainstream school classrooms the reverse of this gendered dynamic often plays out where girls are interspersed with the boys to have a calming effect (Iverson and Murphy 2007; Kenway et al 1998; Dale 1974; Foster 1998; Walkerdine 1990; Jackson 2002). In some places, the boy, girl, boy, girl seating distribution is a deliberate tactic by education staff to tone down the boys' behaviour. However, there was no talk here around how the boys could be instrumental to producing a calmer classroom. Instead, Lindsey says: '*certain people are antecedents, they make the behaviour almost*'. It is clear that Lindsey believes that the girls' presence has a detrimental impact on the boys. While I certainly saw some of this disruption, such as Katya sitting for a whole class under an upturned desk, refusing to make eye contact with anyone; within the context of the many other incidents I saw in the school this was mild. From under the table she asked about my shoes, asked about me, what my favourite colour is. During this meeting a member of staff was positioned to the immediate left of Katya and one was seated right in front of her. I had met these two staff members several times, they were welcoming, tired and over-worked but generous with their time and advice. With Katya there was a much more confrontational interaction style, the teaching assistant opposite her told her that she smelt, that she needed a shower (this

information was delivered with a face wrinkled in disgust) that she was holding the whole class up and that no one could leave until she finished the task.

Of course, I was not at the school every day and I am grateful that I missed some of the violent incidents that were relayed to me. However on those occasions that I was there, what I did see was the professional relationships to these girls and it was never the same degree of benign indifference afforded to the boys. Of course, this is a gender dynamic that has decades of well-documented history, the 'boys will be boys' discourse (Hilton 1991; Walkerdine 1990). This is the idea that boys are boisterous and violent and that this should give little cause for concern. Girls on the other hand are expected to be nice and well-behaved. So, it is unsurprising to find a repetition of these historic, educational, gendered discourses here. However, in this context, it seems to do a particular injustice to the girls. Their failure to embody the 'nice girl' (and it is a very embodied discourse) which retains its stranglehold in this school renders them unintelligible. In the following section I open up some of the assemblages to demonstrate that 'blips' might be considered as moments of excess, ruptures of this stranglehold.

#### 4.5 Blips

Arriving one morning in early May I was greeted by Nicole, (Judy's classroom assistant) with a summary of the previous day as 'bad'. Katya had bitten through the skin of a member of staff, after throwing a sandwich at Phil one of the most popular and well-liked members of staff. Nicole described Katya as 'completely unpredictable', while shaking her head in a way that suggested she had no idea what to do next and could not quite believe what had happened. On that day a student in Judy and Nicole's class was restrained, and the police had to remove him from the school. There was a certain sense that the ripples from the original incident with Katya had spread across the school. On another occasion Katya had punched Judy in the face, she also pulled out a large handful of her class teacher's hair by the roots. Violent and explosive behaviour what Lindsey calls 'blips' are far from uncommon in the school. What seemed to be the main issue with the outbursts, for the staff, was the unpredictability of the 'blips'.

*LINDSEY: Finley will tend to get a bit silly; silly is his pre-cursor and then usually when he's silly he can't bring it back down. And you will find that when you have the giggle behaviour you can guarantee he will probably have some kind of behaviour where he gets upset in the day, where he gets angry because it's almost one leads to the other. Selby, probably more difficult [voice changes tone here, more high pitched and straining as if it's difficult or a stretch to think about] erm, to read, because her behaviour doesn't seem to have any antecedents so we can kind of cross the board for whereas one day it will be fine doing something and the following day it will be different so it's not the same pattern*

*VICKY: So, you can't predict it?*

*LINDSEY: It's very, she's very difficult to predict. We can see a few things that we know but then there's part of it as well when you have to push isn't there? And you have to go through barriers.*

*VICKY: Yeah?*

*LINDSEY: But it's a difficult one (half laughter in voice) so probably for me she would be quite difficult to read. Even though she displays quite obvious behaviour when, when she does have an escalation, she is quite obvious but it's the beforehand, you get to a point and to know which way to go on it is difficult.*

It is not clear what Lindsey means when she says you must push through barriers but there is a tension in the way Lindsey acknowledges that actually some of the pre-blip behaviour is readable. She says that they can 'see a few things' and that it can change across days, this is no different to the accounts given around any of the young people. I would argue that the struggle here is to understand that a girl is behaving in this way. Twice in this paragraph Selby is described as 'obvious' in relation to her behaviour but something for Lindsey remains difficult. The antecedents and predictability are both valued as ways to head off physically aggressive incidents, so it is unsurprising that those who evade those types of



understanding, who do not offer up easily readable bodies are characterised as exceptional in the school.

To be clear none of the staff suggested that the girls were involved in 'behaviour' more frequently, given how outnumbered they are this would be difficult, it is that they are perceived to be unpredictable. The normalisation of Finley's silly or giggly to violent trajectory is a good example of this. Both Katya and Selby were described by the staff as wild, unpredictable, violent and dangerous and several of the staff made connections to this being symptomatic of girls in the special school system more broadly rather than particular to their school. Compounding this the girls were implicated as Lindsey says, in inciting behaviour from other students. It is for this reason, I think, that these two girls were often absent from or excluded from school. Their wild, unruly presence was somewhat uncontrollable and their very presence in classroom upset the equilibrium. The framing of these girls in this way is reminiscent of Mary Douglas' account, in Purity and Danger (extended by Judith Butler), of how, that which falls beyond the realms of categorisable, recognisable and predictable, feels dangerous and threatening and people do their very best to put away from them. I argue that what Lindsey is wrestling with in the account of Selby is the gender trouble (Butler 1990) I introduced in chapter two.

#### 4.6 Staying with the gender trouble

On different visits varying reasons were given for the unsuitability of Katya as a research participant. Based on the reports by staff during my time at the school these reservations were well founded. I was grateful that it was my personal safety driving their circumspection, but disappointed too. A fieldnote from May 18<sup>th</sup> reflects my disappointment that Katya had been removed from a conversation I was having with Laurie, noting that the teaching assistant had advised me:

*Katya gets fixated, one time it was the idea that Judy's pink top and jeans meant that she was going to a wedding, all day she kept on about it and wouldn't be told otherwise. The teaching assistant felt that if Katya was left to talk to me and Laurie, she would become fixated, particularly as she is currently 'not taking her meds'*

The staff's concern here is that Katya would become fixated on me or on talking to me and Laurie. Beyond being annoyingly persistent it is not clear what the implications of this fixation are, but I assume a complete inability to focus on anything else.

On one occasion, however, I did have the opportunity to spend some time with Katya. There was an extended lesson during which young people could choose their own activities and the staff felt that this could be the right time to see if Katya wanted to talk to me. The following is a summary of fieldnotes and diary entries from that day. However, I still remember this clearly, it was an odd meeting with a participant. Although Katya had indicated her knowledge of video games in previous encounters I left our meeting with no clearer picture of if she played or liked videogames. I had no clearer picture of if she liked anything. I have included the data around her in this chapter because there is very little documented evidence of this kind of research with neurodiverse girls. Several teaching assistants were positioned across the two classrooms and the adjoining soft play area. This part of the school was a dedicated area for pupils with ASD it had its own bathroom, a room that young people were put into in escalation that had padded walls, a small library area, an area with sofas and bean bags and a foyer. It is light and warm, chaotic and busy. I meet Katya in classroom and again she is sitting under a desk in the dark. I ask if she will show me around, show me the areas that she likes. She emerges from the desk and leads me out of the room. Katya is very slightly built, around 5.4", she has large brown bouncy curls and very big brown eyes. She constantly looks around and her gaze is not focused on any one thing for long.

#### 4.7 When it is too hard to play in the soft play

Katya waits for me at the entrance to the soft-play room, a boy comes bowling out as she stands there, and she shouts, 'watch it', the door narrowly misses her as it is flung wide. We have to take off our shoes before we go into the room that is about ten feet square, padded, with a padded raised area and a tunnel. There is a small ball pit at one end. The most noticeable thing about the soft-play room is the smell. The ammonia smell of urine is almost overwhelming, it is hot too and this does not help. The other strong smell is feet. It

almost takes my breath away and I feel instantly nauseous. Katya grabs my hand, and her aim seems to be to get me to go as fast we can through the obstacles in the soft play. Then she runs away and hides. When I call out, she does not answer and while it is a small area there are several places to hide. I start to feel a little bit frightened and then I hear Katya say, 'in the tunnel, go in the tunnel'. I crawl along the floor space to the tunnel, 'go in' she says. It is hard to describe the smell, the heat, the confined space and how it feels. I have no idea what I am expected to do next, so I wait. I ask several questions, wondering if this is Katya's favourite place or if she likes to play with others in here, what kinds of games she likes. Katya does not answer. After what I imagine is three or four minutes (I have no idea how long it was) I start to feel very uncomfortable. I can hear the noise in the room outside and I wonder how long it will be before the staff wonder where we are. I wonder what Katya is doing. I try again to talk to her. She does not reply. In the end I feel so claustrophobic and nauseous I have to get out and leave the room. As I emerge from the tunnel Katya rushes past me and out of the door. I try to find her when I leave the room but she no longer wants to talk to me. It feels like that was some kind of test and I failed it. I am relieved however to be out of the room, out of the oppressive sensory environment. I wonder what the test or the lesson was.

It would be easy to turn this into a metaphor for Katya's own experience, a world of overwhelming senses, of fear, of calling out and not being heard. At the time though it felt more like a test of if I would play along and I was disappointed I could not hold out longer. This was the only one-to-one time I had with Katya and she said very little. She asked me a lot of questions about my shoe size, where I live, what I was doing, more questions than any other participant. There was a definite transference of power in the soft playroom. Katya was completely at home and I felt increasingly out of my depth and uncomfortable. In this sense my earlier simplistic metaphor makes sense, I could experience for ten minutes what Katya seemed to be experiencing every day. What is clear is that if girls like Katya are to participate in research projects, radically different notions of research and participation need to be considered.

#### 4.8 Constructing neurodiverse girl subjectivities in assemblages

This opening section has mapped the professional discourses that create the neurodiverse girl in this school. It has shown that the boisterous boys and nice girls discourses that proliferate in educational discourses (Raey 2001; Paechter and Clark 2016; Walkerdine 1990) can be found here too. Special schools like this are characterised by an absence of cis-girls. There are several obvious considerations here, firstly that staff meet fewer girls. Secondly, who these girls look to when modelling their own behaviour, what peer-based relational webs are they entangled in? Popular young people in the eyes of the staff and other students are boys. In a more gender balanced mainstream setting, girls have other girls to relate to, older girls to imitate. Beyond that in the streets where they live in leisure settings, family environments, there are other girls. For Katya and Selby this is not the case. Furthermore, they are never left alone, they do not have access to spaces of unstructured, unobserved play.

In this school the two girls in the ASD classes are separated between the two classes so that the staff can cope. They are positioned as problematic and disruptive to the boys by the staff. I have highlighted that in Lindsey's view, which reflects the way all staff in the ASD classes talked about the girls, the girls are unpredictable, 'if you asked any of us, we would say girls are worse'. The data extracts above outline the way the girls are clearly unintelligible to the staff. I have also shown that this same confusion is not described in relation to the boys, although their 'behaviour' (remember this is used synonymously with violence) was the same. In this environment which aims to provide educational and social experiences for children and young people who have complex educational needs, limiting girls to this gendered terrain does them a particular injustice. In the next section I will outline the more subtle continuation of these moments of unintelligibility in the post-16 area of the school. The staff in this area describe the same difficulties in taming gender trouble.

#### 4.9 Taming gender trouble with post-16 girls

In the post 16 area violence casts a less common and omnipresent shadow. There were around five girls across the department, two of them wanted to participate in the project. Although I spent time with those other girls, I have not included their stories here as they

were not involved in the project directly. During an interview with one member of staff they described Anna, aged 18 as 'improving' following a diagnosis (and presumably medication) of schizophrenia. Over the course of the project Anna's mental health made her attendance in school infrequent and occasionally, while she was in crisis, staff intensive. On one occasion towards the end of the project I was asked to 'look after' her, and integrate her as part of the regular group, as she was having suicidal thoughts. Anna had told staff that she felt that she might be ok in with us. The regular group members all shared a class with Anna, they knew her and in this meeting the group, after initial inquiries as to the degree of participation Anna felt comfortable with, carried on as normal. So, the only real sense that Anna was constructed as significantly problematic in school related to the resources to meet her needs.

Similarly, Lena was described as a bit of 'a madam', as bossy and wilful rather than a disruptive force like the younger girls. This idea of 'bossy little madams' as a way to describe assertive or outspoken girls is not new and was outlined in detail by Raey (2001) in her educational research. One obvious explanation for this is that post 16 education is non-compulsory and therefore there was an element of choice in attendance for Anna and Lena. There are also limited places in the post-16 setting and within the borough more generally. It is therefore unlikely that anyone who was not able to attend peacefully would secure a place. Consequently, the post-16 area in general felt like a calmer environment than the ASD setting described above.

Descriptions of Lena were all variations on a similar theme: 'She just doesn't get it; we were supposed to be perfume shopping and she was really grumpy because she was missing one of your groups. She just doesn't get it'. In this quote, the 'it' that the teaching assistant is referring to is arguably normative femininity. In a school that is resourced with provision for personal and social development alongside formal academic education, teaching assistants are sometimes tasked with socialising young people with the aim of helping them to fit in. Alongside Lena's family she has three support workers who also provide guidance and assistance with her personal and social development. At this stage I had built up a comfortable working relationship with Lena and was more surprised that anyone would be shocked that she had no interest in perfume. The exchange that prompted the comment

was an inquiry to the success so far, of my research and what I wanted to know. I expressed my interest in gaming but also working with the girls in particular, the teaching assistant's response was a way of describing the differences one might experience in trying to understand the girls.

This analysis is not a criticism of the staff whose commitment and dedication to the young people in their care, was matched only by their indefatigable optimism and enthusiasm. Instead, it is worth considering this from a leading Autism expert and perhaps the best-known UK name in autism research; in an academic publication and an Independent newspaper article Simon Baron-Cohen (2011) characterised autism as 'extreme male brain'. His argument follows that for people with a diagnosis of ASD there is a general tendency towards more 'masculine' traits, in their example a lower capacity for empathy (called Theory of Mind) and a higher preponderance of systemising thought patterns. Not only is there an uncritical stance towards the notion that these traits are in some way essentially masculine but there is little critical attention paid to either socialising effects or what it might mean more broadly to gender behaviour and call it 'a brain' (Ridley 2019). What is important for the purpose of this section is that these ideas, along with others circulate in teacher's knowledge of the young people in their care.

In what can be a very chaotic and unpredictable environment professionals (myself included) draw on knowledge from wider esoteric and cultural understandings, in order to negotiate and navigate a path towards a more predictable working day. And of course, those behaviours that people are accustomed to reading from male bodies cannot be read in the same way from girls. Even if that knowledge is intellectualised and called excess 'masculinity', the materiality of the action remains unintelligible, firmly again in the terrain of gender trouble (Butler 1990). Perhaps, in spaces with time and capacity for reflection, the written page, the research centre, the university there is time to understand this. However, in an environment with high stakes, high pressure and stress, the challenging affective relationality between bodies might be read, instead as an absence of cooperation, an absence of the expected and requisite docility and compliance in an institutional setting that aims to discipline bodies, academically and socially.

In dangerous and chaotic situations, where other young people are at risk as well as staff, it is an understandable survival tactic to fall back on social scripts and normative identity categories. Why then would I expect those affects, feelings and understandings to evaporate once the more extreme situations are over? Why would I expect staff members to understand gender, a concept so slippery that academics avoid definitive definitions? These registers of confusion and suspicion were obvious across encounters of staff interacting with the girls, from a perceptible absence of softness, through impatience and annoyance. The girls were related to in a perceptibly different way and it always felt less generous and authentic. Difficulties in negotiating relationships with adults was not limited to the classroom or school setting. Over the course of the project talk inevitably turned to descriptions of family and home, as a place that videogames are played, where adult permission to play them is sometimes negotiated. The following exploration of these family dynamics is presented, as with the section on staff relationships above, to give a sense of the everyday lives of the girls in the project. It provides a sense of why gaming spaces might be so vitally important for the girls.

#### 4.10 Family trauma: 'He's got a normal family, why can't I have that'?

Lena, talked about her family, she described living with her grandfather with support from three social care workers and an aunt (see Figure 30). The extract below is part of a long discussion with Lena and Blethyn before lunch one week:

*Lena: I was born in Wales but my mother (hmmm) but moved me over to, moved to America. But she couldn't afford to look after me, so I got put in foster homes and Amy was, and my sister Amy was such a pain in the arse, she got, her attitude got us moved to tons of different homes. We finally got stuck with one home at the end it was quite nice.*

...

*Lena: So, these homes were a, this last home of which we stayed with for quite a while was a bunch of drug dealers but, hey!*

*Vicky: Oh Lena.*

*Lena: They did look after us well but, so it wasn't that bad. Erm but yeah after that, about, my grandparents, well, my non-biological grandparents, because my mother was adopted too so*

*Vicky: Okay*

*Lena: Those were her adoptive parents, came over to fetch me so, yeah*

*Vicky: And your sister Amy?*

*Lena: Yes, and me my sister Amy but they already got (?) for her so you know because they had to a pay a LOT of money and go round social services to get us and it was a real struggle.*

...

*Lena: Yeah mum's adoptive parents, they you know took me in, so I lived with them for quite a while, yeah and that's until now, you know. And here I am the cringey child I am.*

*Vicky: You're not cringy Lena, you're lovely.*

*Lena: Have you seen how cringey I am human? Even he (Blethyn) can't deal with me half the time.*

*Vicky: You're not cringey. So, you still live with your grandparents now?*

*Lena: I am a living cringe. Yes, well, one of them.*

*Vicky: Okay*

*Lena: **I'm depressed** (loudly)*

These types of loud, shouted interjections “I’m depressed, at times felt like a summary of the thing Lena was describing or trying to describe and at other times they erupted into conversations with no warning and no post-eruption qualification. The other group members mostly ignored it. However, looking at the start Lena has had in life it is easy to understand why she might feel depressed, and have low self-esteem. There is a well-documented link between the prevalence of other conditions that may ‘mask’ the symptoms of neurodiversity in girls (Parish-Morris et al. 2017; Egerton and Carpenter 2016) where severe depression, ADHD, Tourette’s are the more obvious diagnostic markers. In Lena’s case it is not hard to see that, given the circumstances of her life, she might suffer



with low moods. Understanding these different diagnostic labels out of context is unhelpful and the reality for Lena (and doubtless many others) is much more complex. Simply treating the 'symptoms' of these things almost denies Lena the opportunity to process the experiential reality of her past. Every time this history is overlooked, understanding Lena becomes more difficult.

*Vicky: Do you ever speak to your mum?*

*Lena: Well I did try, I did try to speak to her you know I wished her a happy Mother's Day since, you know, she never visits me, so I text her it*

*Blethyn: She never replied*

*Lena: Er, she never replied, no.*

*Vicky: Is she still in America?*

*Lena: Nope! She's moved over here and made herself a drug dealing dick.*

*Vicky: How long's it been since you've seen her?*

*Lena: Er well my father's not allowed within a 100 metres of me and,*

*Vicky: Blimey*

*Lena: Do you really want to know why? (Laughs)*

*Vicky: Only if you want to tell me, not if you don't want to say*

*Lena: No, if you don't want to know then it's fine. Eurgh, he's a weird guy, Um and my mother really just can't be bothered with any of us because actually, I; how I know she can't be bothered with me is she was up, the street from the house, not long ago and she didn't even bother to enter the house so the only time she actually came in the house for like two years was now was to pick up her phone that was being delivered there. All her mail, crappy mail comes to our house, so we have to deal with that and we have no idea where she is to send it to her, every day down the mailbox because my grandfather's writing on the front 'does not live at this house'.*

*Vicky: So she doesn't have a great relationship with your grandparents either.*

*Lena: Eurgh to be honest they've basically disowned her at this point. But hey, I live with my*

*Vicky: You live with your grandparents*

*Lena: Yeah I live with my grandparents. Well my grandfather, yeaahhhh. My life's depressing.*

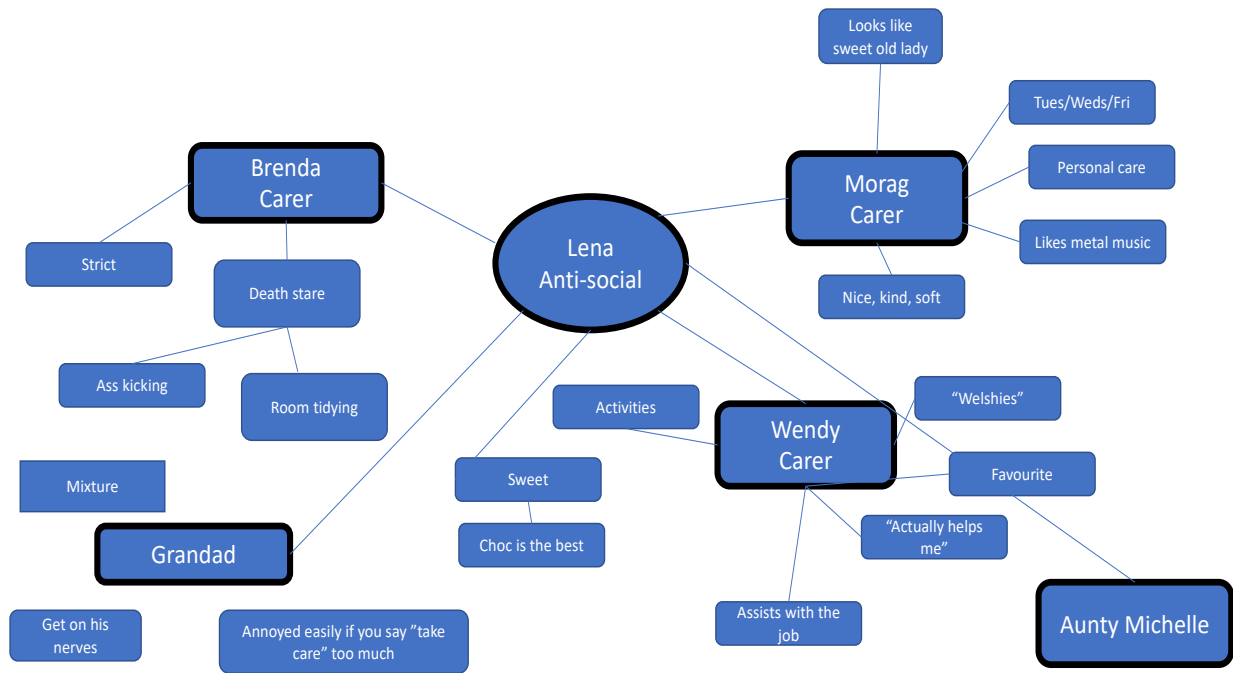


Figure 30: Lena's familygram

The familygram above is taken from one of the A3 sheets that were at the centre of most group discussions. I have described this process in chapter three. The original was drawn by Lena but the sheet contained other information that could identify Lena and where she lived. I constructed this digital version to protect Lena's anonymity. Although Lena could be quite negative in her descriptions of the three carers that helped at home, it was clear that she had support. Her grandfather was old and not in the best of health. I could imagine that care of a teen girl being tiring for him. I also wondered, more than once, what would happen to Lena when he died. The description of Lena's mum is damning. Although I reflected on the circumstances of her life too, adopted, substance misuse issues, a new start in America, a daughter with ASD. Lena is understandably angry at her mum, but not quite ready to give up (a Mother's Day text). It is also not difficult to imagine why Lena's father may be subject to a restraining order from his daughter and I let Lena guide the flow of information on this topic. She mentions him briefly, disjointed from the narrative of her mum, almost as a comparable awfulness (her mum is not *that* bad) the nervous laugh when we touch on the topic, the change of topic again.

#### 4.11 Feeling all your feelings: 'I fear a lot of things'

What should be clear from these data extracts is the sense that Lena feels rejected and let down by her parents. Life has not been easy for Lena. This complexity features in the affective terrain outlined by Lena below. Taking seriously what Lena describes the value of those spaces that afford some respite from her fears and anxieties becomes apparent.

*Lena: Constant fear of being alone. The um constant anxiety of people being near me for it annoys me and irritates me so, because I also have claustrophobia. The fact that anywhere, at any time at any moment, the people in your family could die and you could be left alone. That's a fact because, the fact that*

*Vicky: You feel a lot of stuff!*

*Lena: I generally fear the people around me. Yes, I'm obnoxious and yes, I pick fights, but I fear those around me. As much as I maybe angry and I may annoy people by saying "fight me" and they can all be idiots, I do still*

*Blethyn: Just occasionally for a joke*

*Lena: Yes, but I do still fear, I do fear that the people around me will die. I fear of being alone I fear that I won't be able to see anyone. I fear a lot of things. Let's just say that.*

*Vicky: You do feel all your feelings*

*Lena: Yeah*

This extract goes some way to demonstrating the intensity of an affective landscape that at once, simultaneously does not want people near and is terrified of them leaving. The personal history outlined above contextualises some of these feelings. There is no contradiction here, fear of being alone and simultaneously with people, of them being near but losing them co-exists. This is not a confused statement at all, it shows the holding of competing, contradictory affects and also makes it easier to understand the way that Lena expresses something non-literal when she threatens violence, it is directed towards people she feels an overwhelming fondness or affection for (Blethyn and Terry) – on the other hand when she feels threatened (such as Judd making sexual innuendos) she says very little.

This fear of losing loved ones could be linked without controversy to the relationship between Lena and her parents. The moments of self-deprecation and self-reflection about picking fights are informed by the peer culture relationships. Lena has a combative and unapologetic relational style. Her tone can be clipped and harsh sounding and she often verbally spars with other participants. I can imagine, but do not know, where the idea that she is obnoxious has come from, this would not be out-of-place in a description of Lena by any of the staff that I met. When I say to Lena that she feels all her feelings I am trying to describe to her the intensity of thinking-feeling a lot of things, how exhausting it can be. I try to steer the conversation from here on to less intense terrain. I ask Lena to reflect on the things that bring her joy. Because there are spaces that afford proximity without the claustrophobia of the nearness of physical bodies, gaming territories.

#### 4.12 'You can create a world you can fit your emotions': Lena and gaming territories

Alongside the sometimes-bleak descriptions of family history and family circumstance are joyful strides towards a world created beyond the limits of bodies, schools, gender and fear. In this first extract the creative productivity of the anger and fear described above are considered in relation to gaming and drawing:

*Lena: Everyone has something to be angry about I mean there's bound to be something that upsets you in life and gaming is something that some people find a way to let their anger out. But some people just can't confined their anger to the game. Such as, many things upset me, for my for my constant fears of which I will not go through the giant list but, I think it's easier to have a way that suits you best to let your anger out. If it's not just a game. Like the reason that I draw 24/7 is that it calms me down, you know it might, my count, anxiety, so this is something that I can confine myself to, ignore reality and just concentrate on. Gaming is not something you can quite concentrate on because well when it comes to me because it's not a still picture of which I can create with my mind.*

*Vicky: Yeah and you can just do it in solitude can't you?*

*Lena: Yes, well*

*Vicky: I guess with gaming even if you're only playing with a computer there's something else involved isn't there?*

*Lena: Yes, yes! Because there's always noise and people on voice shouting wailing and all that.*

*Vicky: Mmm*

*Lena: Which is why I'm not really online that often when it comes to games.*

*Yeah, I mean drawing something you can let your emotions out in to it. And like games, drawing is a world, you can create a world you can fit your emotions*

*Vicky: Yeah*

There is an absence of research and literature on neurodiverse girls and gaming. I could apply an analysis of submersion in video games, the idea that they present a totalising landscape that blocks out reality, and therefore offers an escape into the world of your choosing, away from the material messiness of everyday teen lives. However, what Lena is highlighting here, is the continuing material realness of these digital landscapes. Online gaming in particular is a chaotic and perilous social milieu (Sarkeesian 2012). The key advantage of those gaming spaces is the ability to control game play, offline modes of play are always an option, for example. However, it is not as clear cut as it may seem. For instance, if friends know you play a particular game, there can be pressure to play or at least consequences if you do not. Consoles, apps and games themselves alert players when their friends are online or active.

Additionally, Lena is not really talking about enjoyment here, instead she is talking about letting out anger and escaping. Lena also talks about 'still pictures in my mind'. This, Temple Grandin (2010; 2014) argues is a key heuristic for explaining the difference between the way Grandin thinks and the way she is told everyone else thinks. Grandin explains that her thinking landscape is pictorial, that when she thinks she does so in images. Instead of the dialectic, linguistic based thought that is posited as the main mode of westernised thinking. Grandin (2010) credits her ability to empathise with animals to this type of thinking, mental pictures accompanied by affect. Grandin has been able to revolutionise slaughterhouse practices across the world by, she says, thinking and feeling like a cow.

While linking any corpus of thought to a more animalistic way of being has a controversial history, Grandin argues that this different way of thinking has many advantages. In Grandin's case it allows her to create complex architectural and engineering models in her mind. Lena spoke several times about her own thinking in pictures. She once, from the classroom window, asked me to describe the view: travelling cars, green fields, a building site with a digger driving through it. Her view was different, she said, it was still and the scene in her head was more like a painting. She described to me that the stillness let her see the colour and the detail. Lena is also an excellent artist. But it would be a mistake to imagine that this thinking in pictures somehow erases the complexity of the things Lena sees. Her drawings for example are accompanied by intricately woven stories of the characters.

During the following conversation Lena and Blethyn talk animatedly, in detail about the kind of world that can 'fit your emotions'. In contrast to the heaviness of the way Lena describes her history and her family, here is her description of her original character (OC), Crimson:

*Lena: Yes, and we have Crimson that, yeah one boy we got*

*Blethyn: The rest of them are girls*

*Lena: Yes – Sapphire, Noir and crimson.*

*Blethyn: Um*

*Lena: Because girls are more fabulous and way stronger.*

*Vicky: Laughs*

*Lena: Plus, Crimson can wield a giant Scythe and her hammer and? too. And he [Caspian, Blethyn's OC] wields just two-gun blades.*

*Blethyn: Woah*

*Lena: I could beat the shit out of you (tails off towards the end and does a half laugh)*

*Blethyn: But you forget that he, Caspian's semblance can erm, de-buff.*

*Lena: er yes, his semblance can give buffs and de-buffs too*

*Blethyn: Whoever he chooses.*

*\*Lena: Well buffs for his team*

*Lena: Debuffs to his enemies*

Vicky: Ok

Blethyn: So basically, I could decrease your strength by a large amount

Lena: Yes, also I've been working on the strength thing since, since you know the name, things changed, and I've been going with the original ones around an actual concept. Since I found twenty runes of which, of which I found really nice so they, maybe her strength could come from a rune carved in her arm or something?

...

Lena: Because Crimson's strength is, her strength is a bit not, is a bit yeah, a bit obnoxious. But that I find funny about a character I mean if she wanted, she could just literally pick Caspian up and lob him into a mountain – **laughs**. Wait, would a debuff affect a rune?

Blethyn: I wouldn't die though because of using the aura

Lena: Yes

Blethyn: Which is a manifestation of their souls.

Lena: And they can use their aura, er, to heal themselves

Blethyn: And defend themselves

Lena: And yes, and they can also use their auras and a combination of their beings to create a semblance.

Blethyn: Which is the manifestation, a physical manifestation of their aura which gives them unique abilities for example, Ruby Rose's semblance is super speed

Lena: and you know Crimson's semblance is, well, adrenal activation. She can activate

Blethyn: It's basically like Yan's

Lena: She can activate, **no it's not** (to Blethyn) Yan takes damage and then she'll

Blethyn: Oh yeah

Lena: And then she deals out the damage of which she has taken. So, she's

Blethyn: [Tries to talk, can't really hear him.]

Lena: But Crimson has adrenal activation meaning that she can activate her adrenaline glands allowing her to become numb to pain it increases speed, strength and basically buff, but there is a huge downside of which comes with this, you know increased overpowered-ness. If she feels pain while using her semblance since it numbs out all pain.

*Vicky: Yeah*

*Lena: She will instantly equal, she will instantly feel the (here her voice escapes her, and she can't say the word) \*coughs\* the original pain she was supposed to feel.*

*Vicky: Ohhhh*

*Lena: Meaning it would be either crippling, it would be crippling pain, so she's be curled up on the floor dying. Hopefully one of the team SCNN has? weird ability.*

*Blethyn: yeah. Um so Ruby Rose's semblance allows her to have super speed*

*Lena: (In a swishy, whispery, onomatopoeic voice) sound speed.*

There is a lot going on in this description. At the beginning of the section Lena is keen to emphasise loudly that, 'girls are more fabulous and way stronger'. Beyond a simple reading of post-feminist discourses of girl power (McRobbie 2004) the almost invisibility of the neurodiverse girl should be considered. For me, in this opening section Lena is *becoming* Lena. Many of the things that Lena is describing find purchase in my experiences of Lena. The physical aggression, body strength, and warrior like exterior are good descriptions of the way Lena participates in the project. And on the other hand, there is the almost immunity to pain which manifest as an 'aura' or 'semblance'. These unseen facets of the characters manifest as a way to heal them. In view of what I know about Lena's past there is an obvious link to experiencing pain and adversity and surviving. Or perhaps Lena is constructing here, to some extent normative masculinity. That is not to say that these are not desirable subjectivities for all girls (although they are unanimously pathologised or misunderstood) or that this experience is unique to girls with a diagnosis of neurodiversity, rather that this desire should be taken seriously.

#### 4.13 Wild because unnameable, beyond order

*As I have written before under the heading of "female masculinity", and, more recently, "trans\*", the gender-queer subject represents an unscripted, declassified relation to being – s/he is wild because unnameable, beyond order because unexplained; s/he has no place in creation (Halberstam 2020, p.23)*



As I have outlined above in the discussion of Katya, neurodiverse girls are constructed through recourse to wildness and unpredictability, as opaque and unknowable, to the professionals in this school at least. For girls submerged in these highly gendered spaces, peers are almost always boys and the boys have very little trouble being understood; their behaviour even at its extreme is subsumed quickly into cultural and professional understandings of what neurodiversity is. It should come as no surprise that girls who are socialised and live with these gendered understandings would desire the relatively easy relationships that the boys have. Here I understand Lena's moves towards these types of subjectivities in assemblages as driven as much by a desire to be understood and accepted as it is to occupy spaces of physical domination over others. A gamer and a young person with a diagnosis of neurodiversity emerging from a turbulent and traumatic childhood, it is not at all surprising that gaming, digital and character driven story spaces of Original Characters would be vastly more appealing.



Figure 31: Lena's drawings

Above (Figure 31) is a sketch from one of our weekly meetings, Lena is constantly engaged in the practices of materialising the world-others. The territorialising, gendered spaces of educational settings and to some extent Lena's home environment can be side-stepped and an experiential, material reality can be created that is capacious enough for this version of Lena. Lena is not the only girl in the study who prefers carving out these spaces. In the following section Anna is introduced and a similar picture emerges.

#### 4.14 'She's got all the problems I've got': Anna and kinship

*Vicky: So, in the last week have you played this game much? [the game is Star Stable]*

*Anna: Yeah, I haven't stopped*

*Vicky: Every day?*

*Anna: Yeah, I made a friend,*

*Vicky: Ahhh, tell me?*

*Anna: She's got all the problems I've got. And she lives in er Manchester*

*Vicky: Nice! So when you say she's got all the problems you've got tell me about that?*

*Anna: Suffers with depression*

Anna is eighteen years old; she lives with her mum and six siblings. The local authority has allowed Anna's mum to occupy the house next door to theirs to enable the family to live together. The quote above is the only time Anna spoke about having a friend. In school she prefers her own company or that of her teachers. This was also a rare description of what Anna believed her 'problems' to be. In the only other similar discussion she described how a boy on the school bus was bullying her and how he needed to 'be careful'. When I asked her why she said she had 'anger issues' and was likely to 'batter him'.

#### 4.15 My animals and other family: Anna's kin

Anna's youngest sibling 'the baby' is three. There are other brothers and sisters too, Anna has fractious but loving relationships with them all, she described her family as 'not-human'.

When I asked Anna to tell me about her family, she drew a similar familygram to Lena. However, over the twenty minutes we were talking Anna filled a sheet of A3 flipchart paper with the names and species of a dazzling array of animals: two horses, six rabbits, a Gecko, a snake, four dogs, three cats, there are guinea pigs and gerbils too. As well as her 'not-human' family, Anna loves animals. I want to pause for a moment here to consider what might be being declared in distancing herself and her family from the 'human'. Lena adopted a similar turn of phrase, and as describe in Chapter five, this is also the way that the girls in the mainstream school described themselves publicly on internet forums (Figures 33 and 36).

#### 4.16 Who counts as human?

Theorists such as Braidotti (2013) and Wolfe (2009) argue that a key justification for adopting a post-human approach is an ethical one. The 'human' is a narrowly conceived subject, implicitly white, male, able bodied and an active participant in neo-liberal capitalist societies. This ring-fencing has always excluded much more than it has allowed, marginalising whole populations of people. The neurodiverse or autistic person provides an exemplar for theorists and researchers who highlight the diversity and multiplicities of ways of being, and the value of non-normative modes of being. Both Lena and Anna at times call me (and others) 'human'. This categorisation never feels positive and it is never expressed as a desirable term more likely an expression of their own awareness of the territorializing effects of counting as human. I wonder too if human functions as in some way synonymous with 'adult'. Most of the participates in this project have good reason to be wary of adult humans. Being human incurs expectations of normative behaviour that the girls in this study have failed to construct.

Like Lena, Anna's dad is not allowed to see them. She tells me that he once turned up in the night and took the children, in their pyjamas, out in his car. He drove fast enough to scare them all and none of them were wearing seatbelts. Terrified, none of the children wanted to see him again. There is an active restraining order forbidding him from contacting or approaching the family. Social services are involved with the family and Anna has various

workers who try to help her cope with the symptoms of her depression. She has recently, the teacher from her class tells me, been diagnosed with schizophrenia.

When Anna refers to her frequent and prolonged absences from school, she describes catatonic states, she does not move, wash, rarely eats and the only thing that she does continue to do is game. Anna can talk at length about Sims (2014) updates, how much expansion packs cost, the breed history of every horse that features in her favourite game Star Stable (2020)<sup>17</sup>. Anna is consistently rated in the top two players of the Star Stable game. Although the game was free when Anna started to play progressing beyond level five now costs money. Anna showed me an impressive array of every type of horse the game has to offer. She talked about the commitment required to maintain all the horses who have the same feeding and care requirements as real horses, they must be regularly exercised or they become depressed and disobedient. The game has horse schools, agility courses and weekly challenges. There are many islands that can be unlocked and travelled to as the game progresses. Anna has achieved about as much as it possible to achieve in the game. Other players approach her for help and to ask for gifts of the many rare prizes that accompany achievements in the game. When I ask Anna about friends in the game, she explains that it can be tricky as the target audience and key demographic is 8-11-year-olds.

#### 4.17 'You can make everything new again': Anna's Christmas gaming territory

Anna also plays Sims offline; she says that she can spend days constructing and populating villages. Her favourite content involves the seasonal expansion packs:

*Vicky: What is it about them that you like so much?*

*Anna: You can make everything new again. So, when you, you don't have to feel hot and miserable in the summer, every day can be Christmas day, like.*

*Vicky: Would you want Christmas every day, like the song? (Laughs)*

*Anna: (Looking very serious) Of course, everything is ok at Christmas.*

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<sup>17</sup> Star Stable (2020) is a free to download game. Players build a collection of horses and in-game accessories. The currency of the game can be earned by completing challenges and accruing hours of play or can be purchased through the app.

During this exchange I realised that my laughter, although not directed at all at Anna was not welcome. The last line is telling, 'everything is ok at Christmas', or, eleven long months of everything not being 'ok'. But this is not the idle wish of a Slade song, if you want it to be Christmas every day, in the Sims it can be. When Anna showed me around I was astonished by the level of detail. Anna's avatar in the foreground is going to check her post-box for Christmas cards (Figure 32 below). She shows me that everything in her town is festooned with lights and Christmas decorations, a thick blanket of snow covers the ground and even the (many) pets in Anna's care have Christmas outfits. I could feel Christmas, not just see it and although Anna had been playing and creating for months it was clear she could too.

*Anna: I wish I could just go there, just go and live there. I would take my family of course and Miss Chandler [Anna's form tutor]. You could come too if you want?*

*Vicky: This is pretty amazing Anna; it must have taken you ages?*

*Anna: No, not really, I don't know, I just like it. I want to really go there though.*

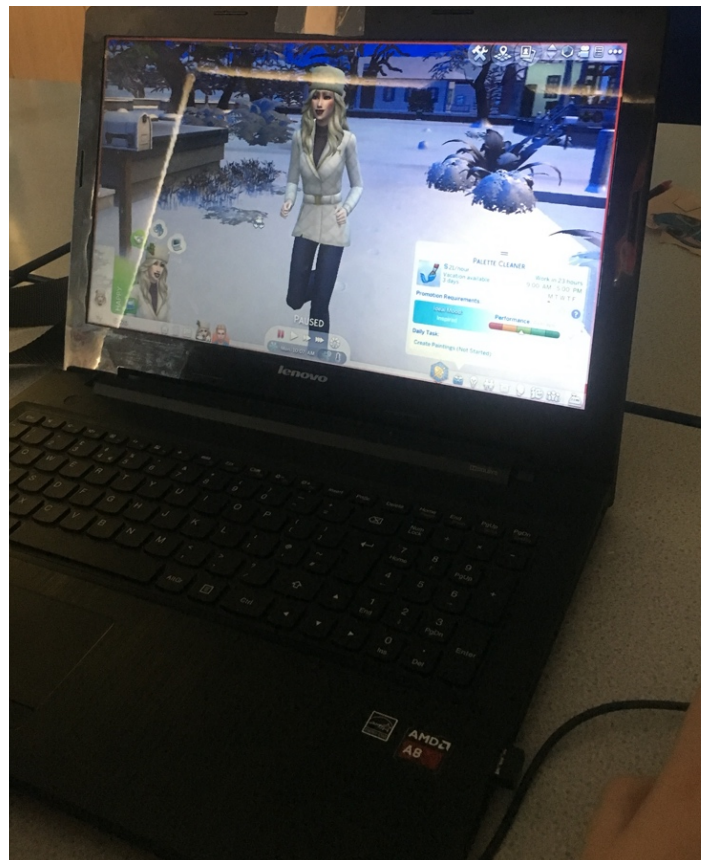


Figure 32: Anna's Sims Christmas

There is a hint of desperation in Anna's final assertion that she really wanted to go the world she had created, and I completely understood. The things that, neo-liberal<sup>18</sup> capitalism<sup>19</sup> tell us that we need to be successful and happy are not abundant in Anna's life. Her family are poor, she has a number of health issues and it is no longer clear if the college place lined up for Anna will still be available, she says. And as she explained, the affective weight of her unhappiness sometimes renders Anna unable to move and function.

This game and this world offer her a way out of that inertia; when Anna cannot do anything else, she can play games. Anna can materialise a world of Christmas where everything will be 'ok'. The contrast between the digital lives of Anna and Lena and the world of school and family are constantly held in tension (each intra-acting and creating the other). There are some significant similarities and differences between Anna and the other girls. Anna seems to have much easier relationships to the staff, for instance. Anna does not have a diagnosis of neurodiversity and instead it is because of her severe depression that she was placed in the special school. This depression that is evident through the inert, silent and withdrawn behaviour, is only remarkable or commented on when Anna reports feeling like she wants to hurt herself. Arguably, in this sense, Anna is performing an extreme version of the types of normative gender that I introduced earlier, she is quiet and easy going in class, she is silent.

When they talk about Anna the staff say simply that she is a good artist (she is). No further comment is made about the difference between the selves and worlds that Anna creates on her laptop and the heavy, sorrow laden, withdrawn member of the school. It is possible, of course, that no one has ever asked about her digital gaming, that the staff at the school have no idea where Anna goes when she cannot bear to be anywhere else. The types of games that Anna plays are also those that are commonly associated with 'girls' games'

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<sup>18</sup> Neo-liberalism is characterised by an emphasis on the agency of the individual in society and a rejection of state intervention. Private markets and the private domestic sphere are the source of welfare in neo-liberal societies. Success, wealth and health depend on the individual's ability to maximise the opportunities available to them (Lister 2010, p.32).

<sup>19</sup> 'Capitalism usually refers to a type of economy or society characterized by the pervasive commodification of property, labour and knowledge' (Andermahr et al. 1997, p.29).

(Shaw 2014; Kafai et al. 2011). House building and animal care are often associated with games that girls might like to play. Lena on the other hand likes Halo (2010), an army style shooting game and Overwatch (2015) another battle game. Anna never describes herself as obnoxious, she speaks about good relationships with teachers, and loving her family and animals. I am not going to guess at the unseen forces that immobilise Anna's body, her past is complicated, and I did not ask probing questions about her depression or schizophrenia. However, whatever these intense, disturbing and troubling forces are they seem to be turned inwards. Unlike Katya and Lena, there are no 'blips' or eruptions from Anna. There is instead an incredible sense of stuckness. Where Katya and Lena are understood through discourses of wild unpredictability, Anna is only really discussed when she expresses suicidal thoughts.

#### 4.18 Assembling the assemblages of un/intelligible gender trouble

A key finding of this project relates to research question three 'what happens when the territorializing forces of binarised (heteronormative) gendering is troubled'? The analysis in this chapter has highlighted the almost impossibility of the neurodiverse girl subjectivity in assemblage. Neurodiversity or Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a gendered medical category (Baron-Cohen et al. 2011; Silberman 2015; Murray 2011). The 'symptoms' or characteristics have been historically linked to 'excessive male brain' (Baron-Cohen et al. 2011). That is, a lack of empathy, increased rationality (whatever that might be), an aptitude for maths and logic, organised systematic thinking, repetitive behaviours, poor social skills and a frustration at being misunderstood that is commonly manifested through violent behaviour. When staff working with children and young people encounter this set of traits or behaviours in girls, confusion, marginalization and pathologization unfold.

As I have outlined above the girls are described as wild and unpredictable with the power to 'verbalise the boys'. So, not only are girls in Lindsey's description both predictable and unpredictable at the same time, but their mere presence is also enough to violently upset the equilibrium of the classes they participate in. I spent time in these classes with those boys and there was often a powder keg feeling to the room. If lesson instructions were difficult to understand or execute the boys would start to hit themselves and their desks or

to slap the arms of the teaching assistants. In one lesson two boys started a Lego throwing fight, another class member started to cry, and then to pace, before putting himself in the padded timeout room. So, on the one hand it is very easy to understand how a wild and unruly extra person may well be the catalyst for further unrest. Yet, on the other hand it was very difficult to relate to the idea that there was ever a sense of calm and predictability to that environment. However, I am aware that I spent relatively little time in those classes, and I am certain that there were flows of tacit, embodied noticing that I never perceived.

#### 4.19 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the difficulties that the girls in Castlebridge school faced. I have mapped the way that neurodiverse girl subjectivity in assemblage is created by staff, always in reference to their ability to confound. I have outlined the complex family assemblages described by the girls. This context is important because it situates the vital importance of their gaming spaces, digital and soft play, in relation to their ability to become otherwise, to tell different stories about themselves beyond the intra-acting, immobilizing categories that congeal and define them within educational territorialising assemblages. In the following chapter I introduce Ceri and Sara, the core participants from the mainstream school. This next chapter situates some of the ideas that have been explored here in relation to an emerging doll methodology research assemblage, where creativity, again, opens up spaces of movement and potential.



## Chapter 5

### Dolls\*

My name is [redacted] and I am not as you say your odenry 15 year old as I am not human well not fully because I am half demon



Figure 33: Ceri's WhatPad Bio

#### 5.1 Introducing the wild card \*

This chapter introduces the doll methodology created by Ceri, a trans\* young person and Sarah a cis<sup>20</sup> gendered girl. They were the core participants at Talgarth, a mainstream secondary school in the South Wales valleys. While there were similarities in the use of creative and participatory methods across sites things took a different methodological turn at this school. It is in relation to the situated complexity of the doll methodology that I notice and become entangled in the processes of these stories. As such this chapter is a good example of the need to think differently in regard to maintaining the distinct borders and boundaries of research and writing as I explored in chapters two and three (Lury 2020;

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<sup>20</sup> 'Cis is the Latin prefix for "on the same side." It compliments *trans*, the prefix for "across" or "over." "Cisgender" replaces the terms "non transgender" or "bio man/bio woman" to refer to individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity' (Schilt and Westbrook 2009, p 461).

Stengers 2019; Barad 2003). Rather than viewing the methodological innovation described in this chapter as separate to the data produced, this process is the data.

Over the course of the project Ceri defines themselves initially as a 'lesbian young woman' then 'gender fluid' before trans male. Ceri is fifteen years old, and has been diagnosed with dyspraxia, dyslexia and mental health issues. A young carer, Ceri lives in a flat with their disabled parents and a changing group of step- siblings. Ceri is incredibly creative and has a good online community. Sara is fourteen, has dyslexia and mental health issues which she describes as 'anxiety and depression'. Sara lives with her mum and dad and does not have any siblings. Sara is fantastic at playing videogames. They both live locally to the school, in a post-industrial mining town. The area has high levels of unemployment and is characterised by the economic deprivation that has come to be associated with valleys towns. Although they are not friends who socialise together inside or outside of school Sara and Ceri know each other and know each other's friendship groups. The chapter begins with an introduction to the participants and the artful communities they create. Ceri's online communities are explored in relation to their fluid gender identity and as the starting place for the doll methodology. As the dolls become with the project Sara explores the positive relationship she has to videogame play against a backdrop of discord and unhappiness in the other areas of her life. Ceri's becoming with doll crafts a space in the research for stories that materialise queer desire and create links to global digital communities.

## 5.2 Queer gaming communities: male pregnancy, 'the laws of physics don't apply'

In our very first meeting I learn that Ceri's mobility is limited, that they are reliant on crutches as a result of a reparative knee operation that 'went wrong', leaving little hope for recovery. The rhythmic, metallic, monotone clunk of the crutches hitting the school corridor signals Ceri's arrival in advance of their explosion into the room. A wrist support on their right arm, frayed, stained and well-worn is a result of a different recurring injury. Ceri's accounts of bodily betrayal evolved over the course of the project, sometimes their knee, sometimes the wrist and at other times back problems. There was contrast between the

heaviness of a life of physical limitations and the lightness, the possibility and creativity of their generosity and creative energy.

Ceri talked enthusiastically and fondly about their connections with queer, online communities from the beginnings of the project. Alongside a conversational knowledge of most popular videogames Ceri is deeply knowledgeable and invested in fan art and fan fiction. Ceri and I discussed, with familiarity and ease, the digital communities who share creative expressions of other ways of being. The preference for digital making communities stem, Ceri says, from the poor representation of LGBTQI in gaming forums. In search of a community more reflective and empathic of their experience Ceri described the importance of participating in these networks:

*Ceri: And I have honestly felt like I've wanted to die as well.*

*Vicky: Do you think that this kind of stuff [creative digital spaces] has helped you through that?*

*Ceri: Yes, because you get like comments as well about people saying like how this has helped them, and you can also talk to people in comments they give, like, really good things like that: "Please stay with us", "You're so caring", and that.*

*Vicky: So there's a community on there?*

*Sara: Yeah*

*Ceri: On fan fiction, oh yeah.*

This account emphasises the affective and literal 'deadness' of depression. Despite the matter-of-fact description of online communities as a literal life force (Renold and Ivinson 2015), the spectre of severe depression, self-harm and anxiety flowed through many of the research 'events' noticeable, instantly to anyone with experience in the area (Chandler 2012; Hughes et al. 2017). Although, in the above account Ceri talks about those feelings in the past tense, these affects were in the room. These creative communities are the spaces for Ceri to craft their stories, relationally through, self-publishing, comment sections and forums. In each of our meetings Ceri's effervescence bubbled from the wellspring of those creative endeavours. As I argued in Chapter four, the importance of these places cannot be overstated. Living in a house of intermittent internet connectivity, the making of objects,

digital stories, fan art and fan fiction forged and maintained a link to the community they would come to be shared with.

Ceri talked about the praise of friends in those spaces and the feelings of contribution to a social space that was being created by these crafty architects. The anarchic freedoms of these spaces; when bodies are painful and a site of inescapable relations to the world, perhaps present opportunities to exceed the betrayals of the physical and psychic. In the descriptions they shared, Ceri and Sara's favourite genres amongst these communities 'M-preg' (male pregnancy) is singled out. M-preg stories, emancipatory, queer and tragic of boys and men being pregnant:

*Ceri: I've got loads of things, so you can get like M-preg.*

*Sara: Aw, I haven't got internet*

*Ceri: I'll show you now basically like it's a bunch of stories, you can save them and it's **like the laws of physics doesn't apply** you got like M-preg which is male pregnancy and well*

...

*Ceri: I had it [What Pad] last year and I've just been getting way in to in my M-preg*

*V: Tell me about that?*

*Ceri: Male pregnancy **it defies the laws of physics** (laughter in voice) a lot. The male is born with both female and male parts he has sex with a male either his boyfriend or he's got raped. That's the times in my story when I felt like crying. And then when the time comes to deliver the baby, they can either: A have a C-section or B, push it out through their butt (giggles) and, what else they supposed to do push it out their buff?*

...

*Ceri: I only read it [What Pad] because of the M-preg, I just like it, I'm weird. Only child.*

*Vicky: So, what is it about the male pregnancy thing that you find so captivating?*

For Barad (2013) this queer imagining of male pregnancy might constitute a 'lightning bolt', an intense, electrical imagining otherwise, what I have called in earlier chapters a Frankensteining. Analytically, this might also figure as a moment of de-territorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, p.22). The gendered male body rhizome here is stretched beyond 'rules physics' and another mode of being becomes visible.

Coleman (2008) argues that images produce possibilities for embodiment. For Ceri, at this time, the possibilities of trans\* as a flight away from the heaviness of an existence that carries legacies of, normative gender, poverty, homophobia, these are imaginings of what more a trans body can do and become (Deleuze and Guattari 2013). Via the process of Ceri's 'I'm a lesbian woman', through genderfluid/non-binary/trans we can glimpse the movement, the monsters (Shildrick 2002; Mittman 2013), described as an imaging otherwise, in excess of what a body can do. Instead of understanding this process as a linear journey towards a fixed endpoint, as a measurable progression towards stasis, I understand the process itself as becoming (Braidotti 2011). Becoming with fan fiction, with dolls, with film making. As I argued in the previous chapter these assemblages are materialised in the research space and produce subjectivities in assemblages in different ways. Through the examples above a picture emerges of the imbrication of phone, the digital places, the digital relations as the publisher and the reviewer, the significant recogniser of Ceri's process of change and it is this process rather than an end product which is constantly on display.

Instead of settling upon trans\* male as an objective or an identity to be realised, Ceri is already asking what might a journey towards trans\* masculinity limit and how can those limits be imagined beyond?

*Ceri: It's just defying the laws of physics and like they say males can't get pregnant in real life the thing they can be born with is very, very rare but it can happen in real life and that. Like there was one man who actually gave birth*

*Sara: Yeah, considering that in his, his girlfriend she couldn't do it*

*Ceri: Yeah so he done it for her*

*Sara: Yeah, considering he was transgender*

*Ceri: Yeah and most men and that but sometimes in male pregnancy it does get really sad sometimes either the man kind of passes away or the baby passes away. So, like*

*Vicky: Do you like the sadness?*

*Ceri: Sometimes it's good but sometimes I have to walk into my room and just cry into my unicorn pillow. It's like sometimes it gets to me.*

In m-preg stories the practices of gestation, and birth are untethered from their gendered determinacy and integrated into Ceri's story of what a becoming trans\* body can do. 'The laws of physics no longer apply' for Ceri. This refrain electrifies the monsters Ceri wants to create and is materialised through her publishing practices.

The m-preg stories imagine beyond the normative laws of physics for sure, but they are also akin to the cyborgs described by Haraway in the 1985 'Manifesto for Cyborgs'. Her descriptions of monsters, as always inhabiting the perimeter vanguard of what it might be possible to think summarised the popular feminist science fiction of the time, where similar re-imaginings of the male reproductive role were taking place (1985 p.62). Here the conceptual leap was one of 'male-nurturing' by Tiptree jr, who also wrote about male gestation (1978). So, beyond the potential physical limitations of what female-male trans\* becomings might (if only psychically) foreclose, the affective capacities for what might commonly call maternalism are being reimagined as well.

It is not my place to speculate on what Ceri might be implying or feeling, but I can reflect on the role of normative genders in their self-understanding. Ceri talks about the impossibilities of these stories, that for the protagonist or the monstrous child are often deadly. This sadness is sometimes an enjoyable release and is sometimes overwhelming. I wondered too at the significance of the 'unicorn pillow', as the unicorn has become something of a symbolic battleground. Jordan Peterson a psychology professor from the University of Toronto held up a photograph of the 'gender unicorn' at the Ottawa senate committee hearing on the Canadian trans rights legislation bill calling it 'reprehensible' (Ling 2017). He claimed that the unicorn is used to indoctrinate children into trans ideology. The 'gender

unicorn' is a visual aide developed by Transtudent.org to highlight the distinctions between gender identity, gender expression, sex and emotional and physical attraction. It builds on the familiar 'genderbread person' (itspronouncedmetrosexual, 2018) that they claim presents an overly westernised view of gender (transtudent.org). Peterson has become something of a figurehead for the anti-trans movement (Ling 2017) and brought the gender unicorn into the spotlight.

However, while anti-trans activism is doubtless on Ceri's social landscape this thesis is instead interested in what else bodies can be and become, and for this reason I do not want to get mired deeply in the debates that position some lives as contestable. Judith Butler's interview in the New Statesman (2020) outlines the way that the minority views of some feminists are being represented in the media as a war between trans people and feminists. It is hard to ignore the media hyperbole particularly as the figurehead of the movement in the UK, JK Rowling attracts so much attention (Ferber 2020). Broadly the argument is that one's biological sex (assigned at birth) cannot, under any circumstances, be altered. Trans woman are denied access to women-only spaces on the basis that they may be threatening to the women there.

This debate rumbles on and it shows no signs of stopping. Butler argues, however, that the relationship between feminism and anti-trans activism has been conflated and that the majority of feminists remain committed to the principle that 'the social meanings of what it is to be a man or a woman are not yet settled' (Ferber 2020). Butler, cogently and coherently, distances her own work from the anti-trans activist movement and highlights the many fantasies that sustain it. The spectre of the penis bearing woman of the changing rooms, whose sole mission in life is to enter women's spaces and harm women is, she argues, a gross misrepresentation of the lives of trans people. Pointing towards the harassment trans people experience, Butler outlines the dangerous implications of allowing fantasies to be circulated as fact by the media. Indeed, the description above finds no basis at all in Ceri's life where, as Butler indicates things are not yet settled or ever likely to be. Furthermore, the trans hate debates are mired in a particular western trajectory of colonial violence, imposing gender binary systems on various indigenous ways of being that were never binary to begin with (Driskill 2018). Therefore, the naturalisation of binary gender links to the wider imperial project (Phipps 2020).

In one of our early meetings Ceri shows us one of the practices that have emerged from their entanglements with online communities of creativity, where normative bodies are reimagined: doll modification. Both Ceri and Sara were incredibly keen that in our meetings the unmaking and making of dolls to tell stories was their preferred methods of production. This was an important consensus that brought together two painful and complicated pasts, and this is the focus of the next section.

### 5.3 Trans\* and monstrous doll bodies

*The term “trans\*” uses the asterisk to hold open the many histories of variant bodies and the many ways those histories have been deployed... My use of the asterisk, like theirs, embraces the non-specificity of the term “trans” and uses it to open the term up to a shifting set of conditions and possibilities rather than to attach it only to the life narratives of a specific group of people. Gender variance, we might say, is both the history of difference and the history of how difference has been deployed within a commitment to the status quo.*

*(Halberstam 2018 pp.51-52)*

Halberstam’s topical and timely exposition of the multiplicities, meanings, politics and language of trans\* charts a conceptual course through the shark infested waters of descriptions of gender variance, that I have outlined briefly above. Halberstam (2018) navigates through the linguistic dangers many feel in negotiating descriptive categories and argues that this is a time of emergent flux in the field of gender studies, where the protean nature of naming is so slippery as to never quite be pinned down. This slipperiness, Halberstam argues can be thought of as a liberating rather than a perilous time to be talking about these things. Everything is changing at such a rate that those people seeking out new modes of description and expression are ‘collaborat[ing] to name their understandings of contrary embodiment’ (Halberstam 2018, p.11). While bigotry and prejudice remain intolerable to most of us, attempts to engage respectfully with people’s preferred modes of embodiment and pro-nouns should not flounder for fear of formulating the most up-to-date descriptive terminology. This is what Halberstam means when they describe how the ‘new’



non-pathologising terminology 'emerges from trial and error, everyday usage, and political expediency' (Halberstam 2018, p.10). One key strategy in this regard is acknowledging the futility of estimating or speculating about where trans\* is headed, and retaining a focus instead upon its historicity, and what it can do, be and become (Halberstam 2018, p.21).

Halberstam's (2018) position, to remain speculative and hold open spaces for possibilities aligns with the process ontologies outlined in chapter two. Halberstam too emphasises moves away from stasis, towards fluidity and movement, while the 'sticky affects' (Ahmed 2007) of the contextual remain in the assemblages. Deleuzo-Guattarian considerations of the 'always already relations' (Puar 2008) are considered to 'trace' the terrain *and* 'map' the movement. In other words, where is the stuck-ness and where is the excess? The following sections explore this. I introduce the origin of the doll methodology. Sara's story follows this, and I sketch the way that through the process of modifying the doll Sara introduces her complicated relationships with family and friends. I then explore the power and pleasure Sara feels when she engages in markswomanship, in gaming territories and days out with her grandma. This section is followed by the way dolls connect Ceri to a supportive online creative community. These communities contrast with Ceri struggles for recognition in their family life. Both of these sections touch on the painful consequences of bullying in these young people's lives and the power of creativity in surviving them.

#### 5.4 Dolls: 'The laws of physics don't apply': in excess of the normative



Figure 34: Modified gamer dolls

*The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born. In these circumstances, I find a deep affinity between myself a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster's as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must exist' Stryker (2009 p.245)*

In the Nurture space one lunch time, following a traumatic crisis for Sara, Ceri shows us the 'monsters' she is making. Having seen a clip of the process on YouTube Ceri has been finding Monster High dolls (they never say where from) and removing all their factory applied make-up, clothing, hair and some limbs and re-making them. Clothes are torn and refashioned, body parts are removed and sometimes refashioned, eyes are replaced, and the dolls are reimagined and enlivened, destroyed and reborn (Figure 34, above).

The parallels here with Frankenstein hardly need drawing out, but it is worth pausing to reflect on Braidotti's contention that 'monstrosity and non-humans have often been interconnected as figures of devalorized difference', and that 'the feminist classic Frankenstein is the emblem of this alliance' (2019, pp.75-76). These doll-based meetings certainly had the affective quality of the disquieting 'weird' that Braidotti is describing. That is, that monstrousness through the centuries has, particularly in Science Fiction been an ally to those seeking escape from the molar and territorializing (Braidotti 2019). Similarly, Donna Haraway (2016) argues for thinking with Science Fiction or Speculative Fabulations: 'I imagine Chthonic ones as replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair' (2016, p.2). For Haraway, these are the best kind of monsters, eschewing easily readable understandings, the realm of 'material meaningfulness'. These are the complex webs of unique, digital and non-digital intra-active relations through which Ceri and Sara emerge.

Ceri and Sara are, very keen to include the doll modification process in our project, to tell their stories with the dolls (Figure 35). They are excited and this enthusiasm registers reciprocally with me. In my field note for that day I note too my relief: *'It feels like a breakthrough today, these meetings have veered towards the confessional, and given the amount of trauma both Ceri and Sara describe it feels like the doll project might be a way to get things moving.'* And in the next meeting the process begins with violent determination.



*Figure 35: Ceri's doll before*

## 5.5 Pulling your hair out: Sara's doll

Heya! My name is [REDACTED] and I write stories (obviously), play on my Xbox daily, watch YouTube daily and have no life! I'm just a confusing thing, yes thing not human being, that needs to get better at Engrish. I enjoy gaming and writing, as I said before, but I'm not good at either honestly. There's not much to know about me since I'm not special in any way but here's a few little things for ya to know. |

*Figure 36: Sara's What Pad bio*

Sara is a year younger than Ceri; she lives with her mum and Dad but does not have any siblings. On the second visit to the school, I was greeted by a teacher who said that Sara was staying in at break times following a traumatic weekend. Sara's boyfriend started seeing her best friend and the bitter disagreements that had unfolded over social media had caused concern amongst the teachers. Sara had attended anger management sessions before and was also already engaged with a councillor. Sara's anger bubbles over sometimes and on at least two occasions she has hit other (male) students. During the first meeting that Ceri was absent after the dolls have been introduced Sara begins to tell a story about a recent falling out with her mum. Her mum and dad have taken her phone and find messages to her friends. In one of these messages Sara calls her mum a 'cunt' for limiting her Xbox time. The result of this is that she loses all her digital devices and is effectively cut off from her sources of pleasure and community.



*Figure 37: Sara cutting hair*



*Figure 38: Sara's doll in process*

During the meeting where we unboxed the dolls, Sara talked about her desire to pull out the doll's hair. And throughout the unfolding of the following story, she determinedly and sometimes violently attempts, using various tools and all her strength, to pull out the doll's hair (Figure 37). As she is pulling and yanking Sara tells me that she has seen a counsellor and has tasks and objectives to reach as part of this work (Figure 38). She must: 'wash more, eat more regularly and healthily, limit her game play time to two hours per day', and, as an extension of this she should aim to go to bed earlier, cut out her naps and just sleep at night instead.

It is not my aim here to draw a perimeter around normative femininities nor to draw down a value judgement on Sara's lifestyle or body. Having said that there are important aspects of her story that relate to her struggles to feel good about herself in the world. And also, to the simplistic assumptions of her counsellor that somehow, these recommended practices of self-regulation will result in a more psycho-socially adjusted relationship to the world (Cruikshank 1996; Foucault 1982).

The types of messages young people receive around the project of self-improvement and gendered selves are far from under the feminist radar (Paechter and Clark 2007; McRobbie 1991; Hauge 2009; Allan 2009). If as Jack Halberstam says embodiment can be thought of as a 'fluid architectural project' (2018 p.24), young people are constantly compelled towards renovation. And the language of the telos towards a blissful (unattainable) normativity founded on the pillars of clear-skinned, thinness has found its way into contemporary psy discourses, bound up in the 'wellness' movement (Braidotti 2019). To be happy a self-imposed regime of socially valued behaviours are the key strategies (Anderson 2017; Rimke 2000, Riley et al. 2019; Rose 1998, 1999). Meanwhile the role of and value of videogames and gaming communities in Sara's life is relegated to that of problematic behaviour to be rationed and modified. It is through the processes of modification that the following stories emerge, and while the dolls are stripped down and re-built, conversations flow.

#### 5.5.1 Dolls, guns, power and pleasure

I ask Sara about the things in life that feel good. Gaming and her many achievements in those spaces are one of two activities that she feels bring her pleasure. As she pulls the strands from her doll's head, she tells me that she is looking forward to the forthcoming scheduled social care visit to remove some of the excess of possessions accrued by her mum in the family home. Sara's mum is a hoarder and the volume of belongings and the level of household cleanliness has been flagged as hazardous enough to require industrial cleaning and social care intervention. In this context I wonder how the advice of the counsellor sits and fits with Sara. In the context of this mess, Sara is tasked with imposing order, routine and boundaries. Sara's mum works full-time in a local social club and is often at work when Sara gets in from school. Her dad is a delivery driver who works early in the morning but is

often there with Sara in the evening. Sara's stories of home, however, relate mainly to her gaming. She comes in, goes to her room, naps and then plays Overwatch (2015). The game's designers Blizzard entertainment bill the game like this:

*The World Needs Heroes*

*Choose your hero and clash on the battlefield of tomorrow. Bend time, defy physics, and wield extraordinary powers in the ultimate team-based shooter.*

The leitmotif of the doll group, 'defying physics' seems to be working in a significantly different way here. The game 'blurb' read on the day that Sara described her love of the game prompted an affective response from me. The promise to 'bend time' had some very real implications for Sara whose immersion in the game often resulted in her 'losing track' of time (as her councillor noted and attempted to modify). Defying physics in this instant could very well be linked to the possibilities of a body otherwise for Sara who, amongst a range of options drew pleasure from playing as characters very different to herself, a deadly healer, lithe and fast and a chain-smoking stubbly cowboy.

The other obvious affordance of gaming spaces is their self-imposed order. While queering or disrupting games, 'modding' is a common practice, games also afford spaces of predictability. The contrast between the landscape of Overwatch (2015) and Sara's home environment is stark. It is possible that the order of these landscapes might be preferable to a home bursting at the seams, to a school environment that is increasingly characterised by peer conflict. Sara's game play sequences (the best montages and victory sequences are saved on her phone) are astonishing. The battles and pace of play happen so quickly that it is hard to imagine developing reflexes this fast, and sometimes Sara wins in a blur that I have been unable to follow. I pick up on this again in the following chapter on the doll group's video activism, Sara's gaming features heavily and it is evident there that she is very, very good.

Every participant in this project, at one time or another was linked to the idea of loneliness. Sara was no exception and like Ceri she valued the online communities that positively



endorsed her game play in the 'team-based' shooter. Sara has two school friends who offer support. These friends play Overwatch (2015) but Sara also plays online with strangers:

*Sara: and last night at ten to twelve in the night um, I was playing Overwatch I just felt an urge to play Mercy who's a healer and um when the game ended he messaged me saying that, that made me smile that made me happy that [shows me on her phone ] he said "you're a good Mercy" and I hadn't played her for days, months actually I don't think so, so that's my first time playing her in a good long while, for, for someone to message me saying you're a good Mercy, I was just like "thank you" [smiles and then does a nervous laugh.]*

As perhaps is evident in the weighting of this chapter Sara was the quieter of the two participants. Her interjections and her enthusiasm coalesced, mainly, around her victories, successes and friends in online gaming spaces. These contributions often came right at the end of the meeting, after the recorder was turned off or when Ceri had turned their attention to packing up. Ceri's absence, due to illness also meant that sometimes Sara had the opportunity to attend by herself (I always offered to postpone and rearrange the meeting). In the following section Sara talks about another source of pleasure in her life, shooting.

#### 5.5.2 Guns and Grandma: power and kickback

The only other time that Sara spoke with pride was when recounting a story about shooting. At the start of this meeting in a hot Information Technology (IT) room she had told the story of another stressful, traumatic and miserable week. She had cried in class seeing her best friend and her boyfriend sitting together as part of their new romantic relationship. Although they had been in a relationship Sara's boyfriend had asked Sara to keep it a secret from everyone, except her best friend. The double betrayal left Sara feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope. She has had to absent herself from school on occasions and particular lessons frequently. There was the argument with her Mum (and her Dad who weighed in to support her mum), the loss of her gaming console, the supportive but labour-intensive meetings with the counsellor, and she had been sitting determinedly but

unsuccessfully trying to pull the hair from the doll's head. The glue was proving too effective and prevented even that small success. The air was muggy, and the mood was low. Ceri was absent from school, problems with their leg meant attendance could be patchy. As part of a conversation about possible, positive familial relationships I asked Sara about her grandparents. After reflecting for a moment, she says:

*Sara: My nan, yeah, I'm pretty close to, I used to go shooting with her, a shotgun, 12 bore (laughs)*

*V: You shoot Shotguns?*

*Sara: Yeah*

*Vicky: Oh my god that's cool, like clay pigeon shooting.*

*Sara: Yeah clay pigeons, that's what I do*

*Vicky: Wow!*

She goes on to say that they have not been for 'quite a while' and that every time they plan to go, something comes up but that she wants to go again. The success of her last visit is still a source of joy and pride. A simple reflection on this exchange as a discursive encounter would elide the change in the affective resonances in the room. Sara's posture changes and when she smiles it completely alters the timbre and tone of her voice, her eyes shine. She recalls the last time she went:

*There was an ex-professional shooter there and he shot for Wales in erm, the yeah, so like he was like a professional at it and he said I've got an eye for it and I could actually do really well with it.*

*Vicky: Wow*

*Sara: If I ever wanted to do something as a job, I could do that or something*

*Vicky: So, are you a good shot?*

*Sara: Er, yeah, my first time going um I did really well, um, I had to go for a smaller gun at the time, because at the time I wasn't strong enough to hold it up, I'm pretty sure, I'll have a look if I've got internet considering my Dad posted a video of me shooting.*

*V: How does it feel?*

*Sara: Considering it's in the shoulder, when the kick happens at first it was like, it hurt, and as I finished the next day it was really sore but it's only sore if you have it in the wrong place*

*V: Okay, so it's technique?*

*Sara: So yeah where you place it looking down the sight, when they're flying across the sky you need to aim it so where you shoot it, it hit it so instead of like having the pip which is like at the end of the gun instead of having the pip directly on it by the time you shoot it will have passed.*

*Vicky: And how does it feel to hold a gun?*

*Sara: It's kind of scary when you think about it um, but it is fun*

*Vicky: Do you feel a bit powerful as well?*

*Sara: Yeah definitely (with a full and laughing voice, you can hear the smile and the happiness).*

My question about powerfulness reflects the feeling in the room at the time that Sara was almost growing and glowing in her seat. In school Sara is repeating parts of her GCSE preparation. She talks about being an unenthusiastic learner and she is not an academically high achieving student. In previous discussions about imagined future selves Sara has remained silent. The comment about getting a job is the first time she has ever mentioned possible aspirations. I sketched out the contexts in which this research took place in chapter three, but it is worth bearing in mind that unemployment levels in this area are high. And it is interesting that beyond the gratification of being told that she had an aptitude and skill for something new, by someone with a recognizable expertise in this area, 'he shot for Wales' the idea of having a job is circulating. Possibilities and potentialities, outside of gaming, are thin on the ground in Sara's talk. The language of anxiety and depression are more familiar ground, so for the purposes of an analysis concerned with affective registers this exchange is important and significant. She goes on to say that the man was so impressed he gave her his wife's old shooting waistcoat and told her that he recommended she keep it up. While recounting this story Sara is smiling, she speaks more quickly and, rather than pulling the hair of the doll she starts to pull it through her fingers as if styling it.

What might not be apparent throughout this Chapter is that Ceri and Sara were a group, together. Silences are difficult to reflect with data 'evidence' for obvious reasons, but their significance less so. In each meeting Ceri's descriptions of becomings were situated within our group of three. Sara never commented or exclaimed and never importantly, gave any signal verbal or embodied that she was surprised, shocked or could not relate to the things Ceri was saying. In the What pad descriptions and discussions, she would occasionally chime in with a parallel reflection on her own preferences of 'Overwatch X readers'<sup>21</sup>.

Sara was keen for the most part to take the back seat. I struggled to match up the Sara of our group with her descriptions of her violent outbursts with male students, for in every meeting she was quiet and more often than not seemed quite sad. The failure of two of her closest relationships and the problems at home are enough to account for this, but I was always impressed by her generosity. Perhaps it is the case that new descriptions of the complex multiplicities and fluidities of genders and sexualities are less surprising to young people in contemporary society. I also wonder if the silences and quiet acceptances are in many ways reflective of what might be called 'normative' femininity being produced, in-situ, alongside trans\*. Perhaps Sara's enjoyment of gaming, shooting and violence position her within the school environment of a post-industrial mining town (characterised in the popular imaginary as less-than-cosmopolitan in its outlook) as less invested in normative gender. Thinking back to chapter two, this perhaps reflects Butler's (1990) performativity. Sara invested in the 'iterative citationality' (Osgood and Robinson 2019) of docile and quiet femininity. While it also reflects the Baradian performativity of 'iterative intra-activity' (Osgood and Robinson 2019). Sara is not at pains to display her heterosexuality and does not need to overtly distance herself from the non-normative. In the context of the room with Ceri and I, the territorializing forces of normative gender are perhaps felt less keenly? Whatever the case her cis-gender, heterosexual life was no less complex.

This may read as an attempt to gender Sara. However, Hemmings (2018) argues that the only time gender is rendered visible is when it is unremarkable and, in those instances, an opinion of what it is we are talking about can be hazarded. In other words, it is only when

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<sup>21</sup> Readers are fan fiction, where characters from popular culture are used to populate stories.

gender performativity is in some sense intelligible that people can approximate what it might be. When gender is troubled it becomes increasingly difficult to describe what is being discussed. Of course, Sara's role in our group could be indicative of many things and it is not my intention to fix her through a gendered discourse. Instead, this is an attempt to understand why one voice, Ceri's, might be more audible in the research. Both Hemmings and Halberstam argue that 'gender continues to do very important work for people' (Hemmings 2018) and perhaps those who might feel that they have the most work to do are most visible in every sense. This was certainly the case with Ceri as the following sections demonstrate.

#### 5.6 Ceri's creations: Dolls, shipping and incest

*Ceri: Right my doll's a skeleton inspired doll because I like, I really like skeletons and I thought I'd make her eyes to compliment her hair in a heterochromius style so as you can see you've got one red and one blue and I thought I'd match that as well with her shoes and it's a like, where the chips are in the paint it also adds like the decaying-ness and, and I created the skirt myself. And all that [laughs] and I still got to sort out the hair but that's it so far*

The doll in this account has been fashioned with a skirt and shoes picked out to match her (the doll) eyes but the doll is a skeleton and the femininity is decaying. Over the course of the project I provided dolls for Ceri and Sara to modify in the meetings but also provided dolls and arts materials for them to continue making the dolls at home. Both Ceri and Sara talked about the lack of resources at home curtailing their creativity and so this felt like a good way to say thank you for their participation. Although Sara never provided any updates on the dolls that she took home, Ceri was keen to share these developments. Additional dolls posed in embraces were photographed at different angles, some of these creations feature in the video produced by this group others are included below (Figure 39).

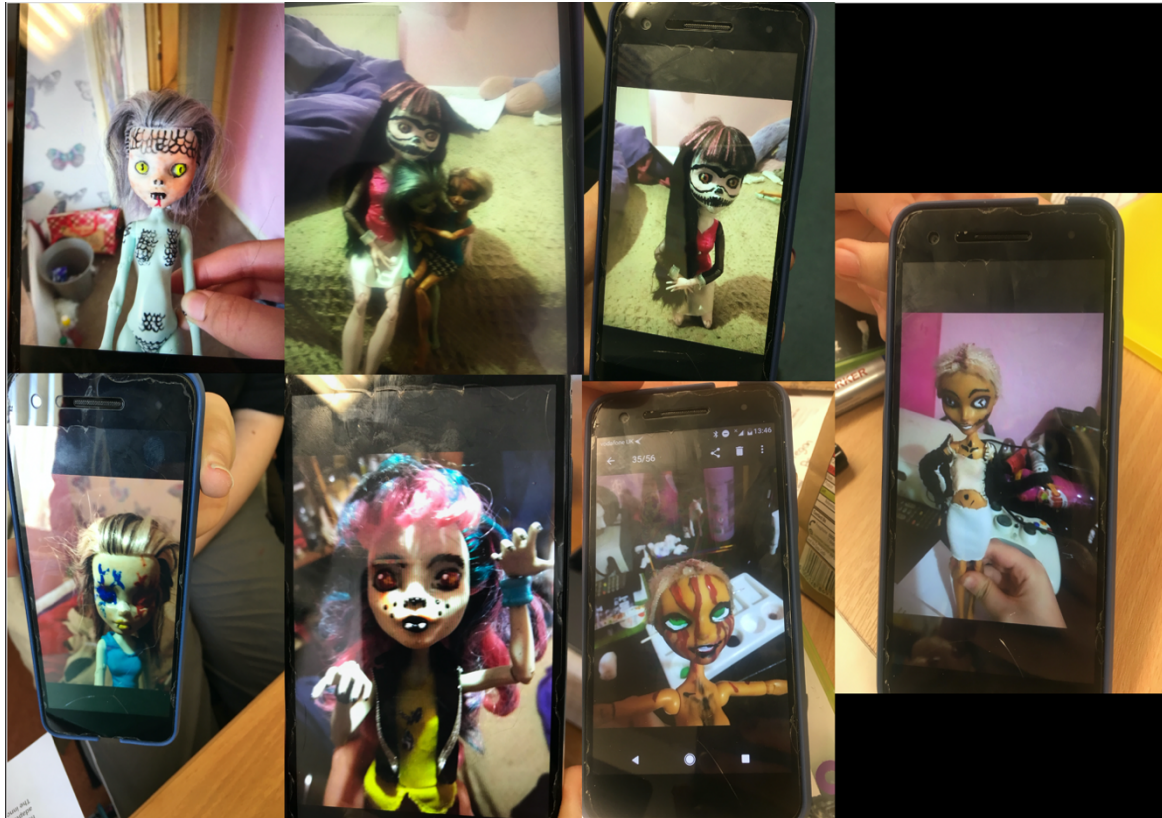


Figure 39: Ceri's dolls

I asked every time one of these images (Figure 39) was introduced, what was your inspiration or how did you do that, where did you get the idea? Ceri never wanted to say very much about these doll modifications. They speak directly however to Ceri's description of themselves at the start of this chapter; they are in no sense human. They are creative, productive and materialise different ways of being. They are also affecting and evocative of a multitude of stories otherwise. One of the great values of creativity, in this case materialised through monstrous dolls is its capacities for side-stepping linguistic descriptions. However, this can feel somewhat perilous to the researcher. I do not want to impose my meaning making onto these creations and their creator was disinclined to do so verbally. What these dolls materialised within those research assemblages was the beauty and multiplicity of difference, the possibilities for bodies to be reimagined, improved and bewildered. Perhaps, my enthusiasm and agreement to engage in these practices as part of the project signalled both the practices and imaginings of these dolls were valid and interesting. Perhaps this opened the space for the stories that followed, which I share below.

### 5.6.1 Keeping it in the family: monstrous stories

Ceri is a fantastic artist, they are talkative, creative, curious and lively in our meetings but also embattled, physically and mentally on several fronts. In a fieldnote from our second meeting I describe how they arrived with the appearance of a veteran, limping with crutches, bandaged, dishevelled and tired. At times their physical well-being was an expression of the emotional turmoil that they refused be down-beat about. Ceri was bullied, often. Ceri struggles academically with dyslexia and dyspraxia. Ceri came along with a history of self-harm, anxiety and depression that they talked about willingly and openly. Ceri talked about rage and anger and crying, often. And while Ceri's candour and alacrity for sharing stories of their life was abundant throughout our meetings, it was clear that a more complicated picture better reflected their familial dynamics, a point I will return to below. The physical pain and the emotional pain were lightened a little through immersion in online spaces. Much of the creative drive, ideas and inspiration that imbued this project came from Ceri. A lack of resources had curtailed some material expressions of creativity and the project provided an opportunity to pick some of that up. Each of the different twists and turns described by Ceri in our research encounters were accompanied by a story, an object, a making from their life. In other words, these were not self-referential accounts but pointed outwards, always folding outwards into the world, doing a worlding in the making (Haraway 2016; Osgood and Anderson 2019). And stories published online, were brought in to the doing and making of new things, in their turn.

Each of Ceri's solo book publications, for example, via the online self-publishing forum 'What pad' featured complicated and life-threatening relationships to family. At the same time these stories present queer narratives that Ceri is animated and excited to share. In the first, 'Love Conquers All', alongside fairly self-evident accounts of gay relationships a more complex story of the affective urgency of finding and maintaining those relationships emerges:

*Ceri: I haven't finished it, I'm doing it, but it was basically about my mother, about a girl who died, her father is now the devil and she's got this rose which is basically her*

*heart. And, if it dies, she dies, and so basically, she has to find her girlfriend who she loved before she dies and she has to pick up, back, that love because otherwise if she doesn't find that love she dies.*

At one level this story is queering the classic Disney tale Beauty and the Beast, the beast's rose is in a glass jar, expiring slowly and if it dies before the Beast finds true love he is doomed to live out his days in the beast form (rather than his previous human incarnation). Ceri has been in a relationship with another student in the school for one year, they described it first as a lesbian relationship. None of her partner's friends knew. A year is a long time to sustain a secret relationship. Throughout the project Ceri moves across multiple self-descriptive categories, never fixed, never coherent and always on the move. It is never suggested that Ceri's partner is less than supportive of their journey. Perhaps, the story is one that recognises the value of being loved, that it can be sustaining. As Puar (2008, p.3) contends, the mapping of Deleuzian inspired assemblages involves reading the 'always already' relations, (such as historical legacies of heteronormative discourses situated in post-industrial locations) but 'prioritize encounter and movement over positioning and location'.

Throughout the project, while making the dolls and discussing the fictions, a narrative of uninhibited sexual curiosity was introduced and explored through the characters Ceri created. In this way the story maintained some distance from its author, and the complexity of the Ceri's ideas were rendered visible. The following story introduces incest perhaps as an indication of the value of relationships over social convention.

*Ceri: Mine mainly consists of Eyeless readers, 'Let's help each other' which is Drarry – Draco and Harry.*

*Vicky: Draco and Harry – tell me about that?*

*Ceri: BOYFRIEEEEENDS*

*Vicky: Ooooh, I see*



*Ceri: Sorry, it's kind of a 'for the ships'<sup>22</sup>, you've got the two of them together and I just like want a new one, and even if it's incest (changes to a breathless, whispery, growly voice) I don't care. Like, I ship Hiro Hamada and Tadashi Omada, from Big Hero Six, and that. Incest does not care. And now for the new ship is Captain America and Tony Stark from the Avengers.*

So, although it is tempting to reductively read these two, story snippets as at-a-distance narratives that explore identities. Instead, however, I speculatively reflect on what this narrative can do. This research emerged through the prism of an unsettled and turbulent geo-political climate. A resurgent right-wing politics is unsettling the hard-won gains of previous politically progressive groups. For instance, organisations such as the English Defence League (EDL), Britain First, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) have ascended to political legitimacy. Their popularity rode on the coat tails of the Islamophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric employed throughout the referendum and subsequent decision to leave the European Union, known widely as 'Brexit' (Shankley and Rhodes 2020). The success of these campaigns founded on racial intolerance, Islamophobia masquerading as anti-terrorism and the demonisation of migrants has rendered the national intolerance of most kinds of difference visible (Shankley and Rhodes 2020).

Additionally, the mainstream and feminist battles over trans\* people's rights to existence populate contemporary media, stories of sport and crime bring all of the turbulence of the 'terf wars' I outlined at the start of the chapter (Phipps 2020; Ferber 2020) to the daily fore (Ferber 2020; Ahmed 2020). It would be a mistake to think that 'othered' young people in the post-industrial South Wales valley are distanced from these debates. Through my work with the AGENDA resource (2016), described in the opening chapters of the thesis, it is evident that young people are often more aware of these issues than adults. Therefore, crafting online spaces that circulate stories of incest, queer heterosexual characters from

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<sup>22</sup> 'Shipper, short for "relationshipper," is a person who is invested, even in a small way, in a romance between two (or more) fictional characters or public figures. And it's been an important aspect of fan culture for decades' (Bromwich 2017).

popular fiction, and provide a counter-narrative that is appreciated and shared amongst online communities carves out a different space with a more accepting less perilous terrain.

The more proximal context is one of deepening financial hardship and inter-generational unemployment in a post-industrial town that has seen little in the way of capital investment since the 1980s (Walkerdine and Jimenez 2012). Educational reform and local authority budgets have seen the closure of Sixth Form provision across boroughs. The message seems to be that higher education is not a realistic trajectory for many young people in these areas. Ceri's status as a young carer, however, provides access to other opportunities. Ceri has attended summer schools at a local University with the aim of refining film-making and digital platform skills. Ceri never talks about the value of these skills to the everyday classroom practices of the school but Ceri's interest and confidence in working with 'new media' are evident. Through digital, social spaces Ceri connects and intra-acts with others. And these globally shared digital spaces are carried into the spaces of the school. These threads of connectivity to wider discourses of genders and sexualities materialised through a discussion of colour in one of our meetings. The following extract starts with Ceri's explanation of the colours they have chosen for their doll's eyes and spreads out into a description of gender fluidity through nail varnish (Figure 40).

### 5.7 Fluid as nails: Bowie and global identities

...

*Ceri: "Heterochromia, basically it's a, um, a condition in the eyes where one of them's a different colour. Most common ones are blue and green and brown and all that but, I thought. I did, just gonna go for blue and green but I changed it to go blue and red because it creates... And I painted my nails as well because it goes with my gender flag, which is a gender fluid flag.*

*Vicky: Wow: it's cool, shall we take a picture?*

*Ceri: [Splays out hands for photograph] Because it means I can um I can be a girl one day, a boy the other, and then one day I can just be no gender, so I've got pronouns*

*like he/she and then days when I feel like I'm not going to be a gender it's they, and stuff. So, I did my nails inspired by gender fluid*

*Vicky: And how, how does that make you feel on the days when there's not a pressure to be either, how does that feel?*

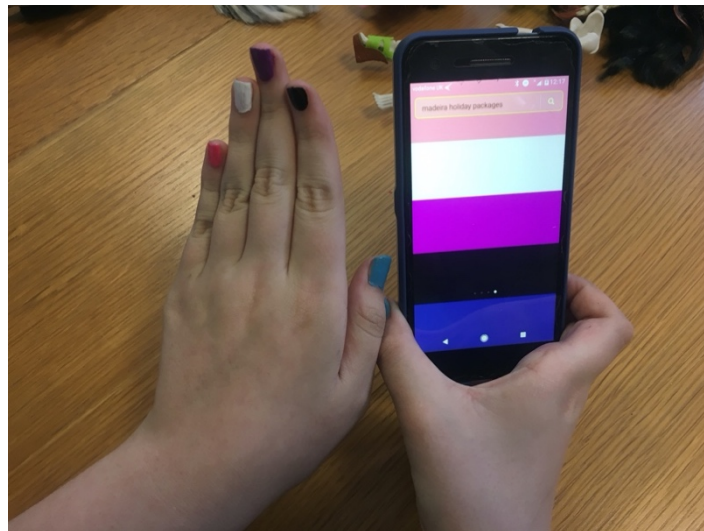
*Ceri: It's um, it feels like really easy when I don't literally have to force myself to be the gender that I was born with. It's like I said to my father, I said that some days, I said it's like it sometimes it all depends on how you wake up like today I'm feeling like a boy. So, like, if people like, it does trigger me when they mis-gender me but really not a lot of people know and that. So, like my pronouns for today would be he and him.*

*Vicky: OK.*

*Ceri: But it doesn't really matter if you misgender me by accident but it's like, I thought I'd let you know and that.*

*Vicky, NO! I really, really appreciate it.*

*Ceri: And like, because this month is pride month and all that and I got each days of the pride days and so my day, the gender fluid is the 16th which is coming up on Saturday!*



*Figure 40: Gender nail colours*

Puar (2008, p.3) provides a conceptual language for imagining away from identity categories that might simplify the account above as either a confusion on the way to fixity or a resistance away from normativity:

*Categories — race, gender, sexuality — are considered as events, actions, and encounters between bodies, rather than as simply entities and attributes of subjects. But assemblages, as theorized by numerous philosophers, are not inhospitable to intersectionality. Positioning is temporally double, understood both as a retroactive fitting, a tagging of where the body once was as it continues about its perpetual motility, and as propelling forward of forces of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, acts of enunciation amidst lines of flight.*

This 'temporally double' position of 'where the body once was and its potential motility' is exemplified perfectly when Ceri describes their multiple positionings, day-by-day across all gender categories. This meeting included an application of nail colour, a resource that provided the spectrum of colour options. Taking this bodily inscription, it is possible to zoom out to internationally recognised communities, with significant days across the globe. It is possible to imagine the feelings that accompanied the application of colours. Equally, zooming in materialises the conversations that moved away from the inter-personal account to Ceri's fingertips that hold an account of variance that might sometimes feel difficult to articulate. The point is not to pause and wonder at what 'feeling like a boy' might mean but perhaps instead to marvel at the mobility across and beyond those categories in one 30 second exchange.

Halberstam (2018) echoes Puar's thinking when they write about how 'embodiment as a series of stopovers in which the body is lived as an archive rather than a dwelling, and architecture is experienced as productive of desire and difference rather than just framing space'. What difference *is* for Ceri remains unresolved, and why would it ever be otherwise? But what seems to be coming through in their account is their understanding of everyone else's struggle to keep up, as they say themselves:

*'But it doesn't really matter if you mis-gender me by accident but it's like I thought I'd let you know and that'.*

*So, like, if people like, it does trigger me when they mis-gender me but really not a lot of people know and that.*

Or is it everyone else's struggle to remember that, as Halberstam (2018) says, before the gendering practices of family and society have done their territorializing work, we were all free to occupy 'a space of experimentation'. Perhaps, it is possible to think with the bodily affects of ten fingertips of alterity and difference, to see that for this young person there is no contradiction or conceptual difficulty in holding all of these global identities, alongside the heterochronic difference of eye colours whose most famous figurehead, David Bowie (Bowie, famously, had one green and one blue eye) had much to say about queer identity in his lyrics and his interviews. Although Ceri never mentioned David Bowie it is not difficult to place his legacy in the mismatched eyes of this generation's monstrous creations:

*And these children that you spit on*

*As they try to change their worlds*

*Are immune to your consultations*

*They're quite aware of what they're going through*

*(David Bowie, Changes)*

The complexity of the ever- evolving language provided an opportunity for Ceri to be inclusive of the other members of the group too. Rather than being defensively tied to categories of self-description Ceri would joke that they thought 'pan-sexual' indicated an erotic attachment to kitchen equipment. This un-defensive openness for discussing and exploring new gender and sexual terminology enabled Sara, along with me, to enter into a space that can at times feel linguistically perilous and tense with the burden of ignorance or knowledge. The creation and sharing of these stories then, forge a material link to Ceri's evolving narratives and the final one is the repetitious cycle of coming out.

## 5.8 Coming out: again, and again

Within Ceri's family they describe a struggle for recognition and to be taken seriously, primarily by their brother and father:

*Ceri: And I told them like 'I read gay books'. Like my little brother, fan fic and like I've told him, I've said, I am the sexuality I am, he does annoy me he says, 'ah you're experimenting'. [In a different growling, whispery voice] I'm not, I know what I am.*

*So, it's like and I try*

*V: That takes courage*

*Ceri: And I just give him like subtle I'm just like ah all the gay stuff and like (sings) subtle hints like that, (louder) RECOGNISE THEM.*

Thinking with Grosz's (1994) concept of 'corporeal registers' of affective flows I connect the changes to Ceri's voice as moments of affective abundance. As discussed in previous chapters, affect takes us in to the realms of the inarticulable; how can a body express those extra registers, convey the intensities of these flows. I took the manipulation of the vocal register, the constriction of the vocal cords, as a co-participant in these events as both an emphasis and a growl of protection, when abundance, uncertainty or confidence tripped up the usual running of the conversation. It was in these moments that Ceri's body rescued them with an embellishment. In the following extract Ceri is turning their doll over and over in their hands:

*Ceri: Ah, you can tell she's a rebel, can't you? And that's what Ceri means as well, rebel.*

*Vicky: Yeah?*

*Ceri: Yeah.*

*Vicky: Well I didn't know that.*

*Ceri: Well me and my mum went looking for names. I said when I do choose the male gender I feel like, I'd feel like my name doesn't fit me at all. We found another one called Takashi, I was gonna say, that's gonna cause so much trouble getting people*

*to spell Takashi and I got the and I sent the meme in to my friend of what it meant and (sings), erm ,right (reads from phone): "Ceri means an absolutely amazing person with a great sense of humour he will make you laugh until you are crying he will make you happy and make you feel like you are invincible. Ceri is always trustworthy and he's always the first person you will talk to about if there's anything you are worried about and he always sorts it out and makes the world seem right it doesn't matter how bad you are feeling he always cheers you up, he always puts a smile upon your face, he will frustrate you when he says he isn't good enough because you'll know that isn't true and that he is the best." And that's basically me because I always think, oh I'm no good and all that.*

*V: I think it's a great*

*Ceri: And that describes me to a T.*

Over the course of the project Ceri paints a picture of their parents as mostly supportive, if a little confused as Ceri moves across the categories of gender and sexuality. Both parents have long-term chronic illnesses. Their mother is severely visually impaired and Ceri cares for them both and is a registered young carer. Although, it seems that Ceri sometimes struggles to be taken seriously and their father becomes exasperated with the unfamiliar and increasingly voluminous nature of Ceri's self-descriptive categories. The family including Ceri's brother live in quite a small flat and the internet is not always available. The above example is one of many that involve a kind of coming out story (Tony 2005; Hines 2007; Marques 2020). The reiterations of gender and sexuality at home are clearly reflective of Ceri's fluidity. However, within the slippery family context it seemed to be a struggle to get anything at all to stick. Ceri described how the narratives of trans\* and 'gay stuff' needed constant reiteration, as they say in the quote above, 'RECOGNISE THEM'.

In our initial meetings Ceri talked about years of bullying by peers. The negative educational experiences of children and young people with diverse gender and sexual identities are well evidenced in the research literature (Jones et al. 2016; Meyer 2009; Pascoe 2013; Payne and Smith 2012; Boldt 1996; Bragg et al 2018; Charmaraman et al. 2013; Renold 2002). Ging and Neary (2019) highlight the importance of shifting educational bullying and anti-bullying

discourses away from their emphasis on the individual. They argue that to understand the relationships that are often characterised as bullying and therefore fall within the remit of anti-bullying policy, a consideration of the social context is essential.

Gender and sexuality are often introduced to school students through bullying discourse. Ging and Neary argue that 'LGBTQ' is often introduced to children and young people in this way. For example, children are taught that it is not okay to tease someone based on their gender presentation or sexuality. For Ging and Neary (2019) it is only when education around gender and sexuality is improved and contextualised within the wider cultural context of patriarchal power relations, that bullying can be understood as socially distributed practice that implicates us all. In other words, it makes little sense to single out individual children and young people for reproducing behaviours that are commonplace in wider society, what Ringrose and Renold term 'normative cruelties' (2010).

These individualizing processes vilify and pathologise individual children and young people who are in all likelihood embedded in local and global cultures of, sexism, misogyny, cis-normativity and transphobia. It is the victims of bullying who are most likely to be aware of this complexity, and Ceri's experience certainly reflects this (for a comprehensive and detailed engagement with the experiences of trans young people in secondary education see, McBride 2020). So, while it is tempting to over emphasise the importance of the impact of bullying, on the one hand; or to optimistically accept that this is a perceived near past for Ceri, on the other, it was instead, affectively always in the room. And again, the dolls were the doing of the damaging story:

*Ceri: Can I say I don't know if we can, I done a stop-go thing with one of my dolls, she had no hand so I writ a like a half the things I would on paper and made it as presented as like the dolls being bullied, and all I did, is such a powerful thing, I didn't post it and that, but all you see is the dolls legs dangling down, I used my headphone wire for this, so what you see is the string and the headphone wire. So just all you see is the string and the headphone wire going down and this other doll picking her up and this 'bullying costs lives do your part to help stop it.' And all that.*



In many events, these 'sticky-affects' (Ahmed 2007) materialised and the violence of the bullying was palpable. It would be a mistake to polarise the upbeat, joyful creativity against narratives of death and suicide. Participants across the project materialised complex and contradictory narratives on every topic. I am not arguing that this is unique to the project rather that is probably the case for all of us. Instead, I am arguing that to materialise these different stories of complex movement, creative methodologies particularly those conceived by participants might provide a space for research to include them. Indeed, this project is in conversation with a wider field of research that acknowledges that everyone is playing catch up on the protean topic of contemporary youth gender and sexualities (see for example, Bragg et al. 2018; Payne and Smith 2012; Renold 2013; Francis and Paechter 2015; McBride 2020)

## 5.9 Conclusion

*“It’s not a cult,” she says. “It’s feminism”. Women, Soloway said, are naturally suited to being directors: “We all know how to do it. We fucking grew up doing it! It’s dolls. How did men make us think we weren’t good at this? It’s dolls and feelings. And women are fighting to become directors? What the fuck happened?”*

*Ariel Levy (2015)*

Ariel Levy is describing here the struggle for the gendered practices of childhood to be figured into adult lives. The experience with dolls she argues, serves as an apprenticeship for orchestrating and directing the relationality of life. In this example she is talking about film directors and the gender inequity of the film industry. It is not a huge stretch however, to place the imaginative and creative capacities of the doll methodology in the feminist, critical appraisal. Instead of positing 'dolls and emotions' as an overlooked resource available primarily to girls, in the context of this research the generative capacities of doll modification are a distinct advantage to the gender practices of participants and a rich resource that materialises the possibilities of gender trouble (Butler 1990).

This chapter has introduced the core participants from Talgarth school. It has presented the development of their doll methodology and how the dolls materialised difficult and complex stories. The chapter mapped the productive and affirmative forces that digital spaces materialise for these participants. The analysis has demonstrated that the territorializing forces of binarised, heteronormative gender operate across narratives of trans\* lives, and through the wellness discourses of counselling. However, I have also shown that movement is possible, that creativity, digital and online communities can create opportunities for different stories of gender, depression and emerging from stuckness to materialise. These practices, places and spaces matter for the young people in this chapter and their stories, materialised through the doll methodology continue to matter, as the next chapter will show.

## Chapter 6

### Filming resistance – teen gamer activism projects

*'You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say we will never forgive you. We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not'*

*(Greta Thunberg, speech to the United Nations 23/09/19)*

*'Their ontology is about engagement all the way down. Also, the possibility to regenerate destroyed practices should not be a matter of critical pondering, from a safe distance. Activist practices, recovering/reinventing what has been devastated and expropriated, demand engagement, involving partners for whom such practices matter, not choosy, off-ground, theory-armed onlookers.*

*(Stengers 2019, p.19)*

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#### 6.1 Introduction:

This final empirical chapter presents the description and analysis of the research activism strand of the project. Activism is theorised, in this thesis, as intrinsic to research praxis. The quote from Stengers above frames this position and its relevance to those working with process ontologies. As I outlined in chapters two and three, working with concepts such as intra-action, assemblage and becoming emphasises the ethical response-ability of researchers who are always imbricated in these processes of change. More broadly this project is situated within the research landscape of youth activism on gender and sexualities (Renold et al. 2020; Puar 2018; Leavy 2019; Leavy 2020; Schefer et al. 2018; Kezar et al. 2018). In previous chapters, I have described how the two groups, The Gamer's Resistance

and The Doll group were both keen to produce videos that would materialise their messages in a youth conference.

This chapter starts by situating the research within the global-political vectors that infused the project. Greta Thunberg was a regular feature in the news during this time. Increasingly, her climate activism found its way into everyday conversations, all the young people knew who she was. The school strikes and climate rallies inspired by her protests were the backdrop to this project. My own connections to youth activism projects are also instrumental in the development of this phase of the research. Primarily through my connections to the conference organiser and as a researcher with experience of supporting young people on other projects through my work with AGENDA (Renold et al 2020). The remainder of the chapter introduces both videos: 'The Gamer's resistance# you shall not pass' and 'Felt with Monsters'. Description and analysis of this process accompanies the presentation of stills of the videos; demonstrating what more a participatory research project can do. These lively creations are presented in detail because their creation was an event, not a beginning or an ending, but a process. This process did not culminate in the showing of the films at the conference and the chapter closes by exploring the way these creations have travelled, using Haraway's concept of the tentacular to cut together-apart what otherwise is imbricated in the same affective, material flow.

This is the mapping of activist assemblages that shake the participatory globe. In chapter three I described the way that the emerging field of disabled childhoods studies is characterised by participatory, creative and activist research (Runswick-Cole et al 2018; Curran and Runswick-Cole 2013). Although none involve neurodiverse teen-gamers there are some parallels here with existing research. In section 6.5 I reflect on the possible points of similarity between the recent 'turn to co-production' (Bell and Pahl 2018), participatory approaches (Mannay et al. 2019) and the film activism that evolved in this project. The films are introduced through a series of stills that are presented in chronological order. The Gamer's resistance film is accompanied by contextual information to map the relations surrounding the film production. The Felt with Monsters production is presented as a split screen and accompanied by the lyrics of the song that provide the soundtrack to the film.

These lengthy sections aim to present some of the affective dynamics and resonances of the films. An analysis of these films is followed by the presentation of two 'tentacles' that map the onward journey of this research as it continues to matter in new spaces with new audiences.

## 6.2 Thunberg the War Machine

There is no doubt that in contemporary Global and national contexts a surge of youth activism and direct-action are changing attitudes to democracy and childhood, while simplifying the visibility of this change. As the young people featured in this project were planning, speculating, formulating and crafting the video activism that will be introduced in this chapter, Greta Thunberg was planning her first school strike day outside the Swedish parliament, poised to become one of the most vilified, celebrated, recognisable, neurodiverse young people in the world. Greta Thunberg has become the figurehead of the global climate crisis and youth activism, it would require an additional thesis to analyse the political, public and media responses to Thunberg who carries and embodies, publicly, many of the arguments I have sketched in the previous two chapters. Arguably Greta Thunberg's commitment to climate-based activism has seen her exceed and eschew, without denying, both her gender and her neurodiversity in the most high-profile way imaginable. In every sense Greta Thunberg troubles the categories that would mark her as lacking and the backlash has been predictably strong (Moore 2019; Strom et al. 2019) In Deleuzo-Guattarian terms Thunberg is the war-machine (the smoothing, moving and non-subjectified, context specific) and the geo-political leaders are the state (space-striaters, subjectifiers specifiers of prescribed interiority) (Hickey-Moody 2019, p.15). What can a teen gamer do? Change the world.

Greta's neurodiversity and gender resonated with the participants in this study. However, Messiah-like media portrayals of her as a lone activist, single-handedly changing the world are symptomatic of what has been identified as the problem of whiteness in climate

activism (Thirunarayanan 2019; Beeler 2019; Bowman 2020; Nowshin, 2020; Gilliam 2021). As Thirunarayanan (2019) argues, ‘When you talk about Greta Thunberg, make sure to mention that she is building on the work of activists of colour who have been speaking up for decades’. For example, Sáminuorra the indigenous Sámi youth organisation based in northern Sweden, have been campaigning on environmental (as well as other) issues with little or no press coverage (Sáminuorra.org).

Further examples of the deliberate white washing of youth environmentalism are evident in the relative anonymity of Licyprya Kangujam and until recently Vanessa Nakate (Gilliam 2021). Eight-year-old, Indian Kangujam’s climate activism pre-dates Greta’s rise to global celebrity. And yet, the media have called her ‘the Indian Greta’. Her response to this association succinctly articulates the problem with this lazy association: ‘If you call me “Greta of India”, you are not covering my story. You are deleting a story’ (Gilliam 2021). This editing out of people of colour by the media was undeniably on display when Vanessa Nakate, a Ugandan climate activist was cropped out of a photograph. The remaining four youth activists in the frame were all white. While the press refuted the deliberate editing of the only black face in the picture, Nakate and her many supporters were not convinced.

In relation to Greta’s neurodiversity, she has famously described this as a ‘superpower’ (Murphy 2020). The media have capitalised on this as a reason for her supposed exceptionality, describing her as single-minded in her pursuit of justice. She has been described as immune to the niceties of flattery and the conventions of niceties, channelling her focus unwaveringly to her cause (Murphy 2020). It is here that the similarities between her and the participants of this study are misaligned. As the preceding empirical chapters have detailed, existing and surviving are struggle enough. Moreover, it is hard to imagine these young people going on strike from a school where places are hard won and scarce. In some instances school functions as the sole source of permanence, acceptance, routine and nourishment in their lives. However, it remains the case that Greta was seen to some extent as someone like them making a positive change.

Across the world, women, people from across the political spectrum, from every demographic, are standing up, making connections, joining together, intra-acting (Barad 2013) and mobilizing. Activism is on the move. Who would have predicted that a lone, neuro-diverse girl would become the global vanguard of civil unrest and disobedience? There is a sense, in her speeches and her movements that she is propelled by forces unseen, forging forwards, embodying the impossibility of standing outside of the world. She is an impassioned orator but also a doer, her activism is completely embodied, from obstructive placement of her body, outside the parliament to the long boat journey across the Atlantic.

The tentacular reach of this movement is visible stretching outwards, the global zeitgeist around plastic waste, the polar bear: totemic Thunberg companion species (Haraway 2016) at large. The world, as she says, is waking up, moved by Thunberg the war machine and forces felt but not always seen. As Greta's activism moves into educational spaces, the affordance of her media presence to spark tutor room conversations around environmentalism is utilised. In one of the classes I attended, where participants were making upcycled kitchen aprons by melting together 'bags for life' with irons, the teacher was joining the connective dots between a young person with neurodiversity and the members of his class. Greta the war machine was in the school. In Wales, the increasing commitment to embedding children's rights in the curriculum can perhaps account for the increased visibility of the national Children's commissioner (Welsh Government 2020). In the next section I introduce the national picture here in Wales and consider the landscape more broadly in the UK.

### 6.3 Activating activism and feminist academia

Closer to home on a smaller but no less meaningful or impactful way, youth activisms on a range of issues have been slowly intensifying. This work has been supported and facilitated by feminist researchers in Wales (Renold 2019; Renold, et al. 2020;) and more broadly in the UK (Renold and Ivinson 2019; Renold and Ringrose 2016; Mendes et al. 2019), politically

engaged youth advocates such as The Children's commissioner for Wales, parents, teachers, youth workers, social care workers; politically bolstered by documents such as the UNCRC (1989), Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (2015), Equality Act (2010), Disability Discrimination Act (2005). And sometimes, as in the case of Greta Thunberg, alone, because the pain of silence outweighs the fear of action (Renold 2016).

Inspired by feminist research (Hickey-Moody 2017; Quinlivan 2018; Osgood and Robinson 2019 Lenz-Taguchi 2009) and thought (Haraway 2016; Puar 2015 Braidotti 2019; Stengers 2019; Manning 2016; Jackson and Mazzei 2012) while building on my own research praxis (work on AGENDA) this project from the very beginning aimed to open up the research process to the possibilities of different stories about gaming, gender and the cyber-social relations of teen gamers. The ethical imperative driving this research calls on researchers to adopt what Stengers (2019, p.16) terms an:

'ontology of engagement' ... 'a form of experimentation which implicates ourselves in our present, requiring that one allows oneself to be touched by what the present presents... and allowing what touches us the power to modify the relation we entertain in our own reason (Stengers, 2019, p.3).

Drawing on Foucault's later theory Stengers argues that the epistemological limits of our thinking and acting are our own, that what will engage us in our praxis is what is 'already rumbling, calling for a transformation that might become possible' (2019, p.3). In other words, working with generative and affirmative possibilities can provide productive, fruitful encounters and new ways to explore sensitive topics while opening up possibilities for thinking otherwise about things. These things might already be troubling and calling our attention. It is an openness to different modes of expression, the commitment to 'staying with the trouble' (Haraway 2016) to being 'response-able' (Barad 2007) that might create conditions amenable to moments of movement, glimpses of the complex messiness of everyday lives. Importantly as I have outlined previously, the researcher is always, ethically implicated in this process of knowing-being where, 'knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself intelligible to another part of the world' (Barad, 2007, p.185). Puar



(2012) rejects the false dichotomy between activism and academic work, arguing that drawing distinctions between where one ends and the other begins is an impossible project. Attention, instead, would be better spent on ‘how to frame and discuss the multiple spheres of impact, influence and labor’ (Puar 2012).

The introduction of a planned activism in the project was carried along on the optimistic wave of my previous youth engagements as part of the creation of the AGENDA resource. As I outlined in chapter two I had an awareness of disability rights activists (Ryan 2018; Runswick- Cole) and the global Zeitgeist that was ‘in-formation’ (Renold 2018) as the project was drawing to a close. The modest ambitions of this research were to recognise affective forces in the gamer research assemblages, and to value the capacities of participants to act – again, what can young people who play digital games do? As Braidotti (2019, p.4) contends, ‘despair is not a project, affirmation is’. The focus here is not on what is and what structures prevent change, rather it is geared towards ways of knowing that change is constant and movement inevitable. Amplifying stories of difference and possibilities otherwise can create affirmative spaces for participants, ourselves and all the audiences that can never be known. This project was geared, from the outset, to *doing* alongside and generating possibilities for exploring capacities. Rather than what does a teen gamer think or feel, who are they? This project aimed to engender a process for discovering what a teen gamer can do? What territorializing forces might seek to immobilise or impede them and what lines of flight are possible?

I prioritise the ethical imperative outlined by Deleuze, and frame research in terms of what it *can do*, rather than what it knows. This ethical move towards valuing capacities (Hickey-Moody 2019) aligns perfectly with activist projects aiming to create spaces of possibility (Taylor et al. 2020; Renold and Ivinson 2019; Renold et al. 2020, Hickey Moody 2017; Mannay et al. 2019; Liddiard 2018; Machonochie 2018; Runswick-Cole 2018; Abbott 2018; Tyrie 2018). What is more, mapping the ways research continues to affect different communities and publics beyond the research encounter can enliven the way that those vectors of feeling are carried into new spaces and new milieu’s (Manning 2016; Renold et al.

2020). This process, the journey, should be more important than an imagined end point, that in actuality, as I will show, does not ever knowingly exist.

#### 6.4 Co-production and creative dissemination

The recent 'turn to co-production' (Bell and Pahl 2018) is relevant here too. Much of the literature stems from the large scale ESRC funded co-production project 'Imagine' which funded collaboration between community organisations, academics, artists to explore civic engagement. Of particular interest here is the focus on research dissemination in collaborative endeavour (Brown et al. 2020). A key tension in this research was around anonymity (Teffry-Goatley et al. 2017; Fink and Lomax 2016). These young people were, rightly, very proud of their creations. There are identifying characteristics of these young people in their films. I respected their formatting decisions. They travelled with teachers to the conference to present their films, the films are in every sense their own. However, I have taken the decision to protect their identities here. While we had many conversations about what I was doing with the data we created and what my thesis hoped to do, I am hopeful that I can faithfully share the messages those videos contained. The cost of being unable to share some of the affective impact of these videos, I believe, provides a layer of protection from any future engagements with this thesis that I would not have control of. As I have outlined previously these films were shown once as part of a conference where participants attended representing their schools. The conference itself was not an extension of the project. While I attended the conference to facilitate the running of the day, as a member of the AGENDA outreach team, this research was not a part of the proceedings or any discussions.

Bell and Pahl (2018) situate the 'turn to co-production' in the social sciences in the context in the parallel fields of action research and participatory action research approaches which share the aim of collectively producing knowledge in the midst of action' (p.106). Methods commonly recruited to these projects include theatre and filmmaking (Bell and Pahl 2018, Escott and Pahl 2019; Mitchell et al. 2015; Mandrona 2016). Like participatory approaches co-production has varying degrees of collaboration, from engaging collaborators at every

stage, to consultation and co-production during distinct phases (Pahl and Bell 2018). Issues around research dissemination are at the fore here too and creating outputs that are accessible to those co-producing the knowledge is a central concern. However, Bell and Pahl (2018) argue this can create difficulties for academic partners. Despite the turn to co-production, academia continues to overwhelmingly privilege peer-reviewed academic publications. However, as Mannay et al. (2019, p.210) contend, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 'impact agenda', where academic research is measured through 'demonstrable contribution to society' (Economic Social Research Council 2017) provides further impetus for thinking creatively about the reach and extent of research.

In their participatory research with care experienced young people in South Wales Mannay et al. (2019, p212) collaborated with creative industries to produce a range of 'multi-modal, accessible' engagement materials. Four short films, artwork, magazines, graphic art postcards, all carried the central research themes in creative and visually stimulating ways. Participatory and co-production approaches share a concern with the same problems of power, knowledge, ethics and complexity (Brown et al. 2020; Mannay et al. 2019; Lomax 2015). In Mannay et al.'s (2019) study, issues arose around which of the young people's messages produced through the research to carry over to the arts-based outputs. Some of the research findings cast professionals in a negative light and decisions around including all messages created ethical tensions around whose voices are heard. In this research project the positive and generative approach to researching with these young people seemed to be reflected in their own messages. However, the Gamer's resistance film contained almost ten minutes of game play footage in its original format and I had to negotiate a shorter clip with the young people to meet the parameters of the youth conference. Beyond this I had the luxury of taking a facilitatory role and did not direct either production.

As chapter three described my introduction to two of the research sites came via my long-term involvement with the AGENDA (Renold 2018) resource. These schools had engaged AGENDA outreach services to see what work could be done around positive relationships. AGENDA is, at its core, a youth activism resource (this was outlined in chapter three). I

brought the accumulated skills from this work to my own research. Moreover, my involvement with AGENDA has continued alongside my own research, those networks have continued to enfold in my praxis. When an opportunity arose to feed into the annual 'AGENDA youth conference', I invited research participants to think about the kinds of things *they* wanted people to know. Every participant that I engaged with in each school was invited to participate in this way. Two groups, one from Castlebridge and one from Talgarth stepped forward. The doll group decided that making a video would be their preferred mode of creativity and after relaying their progress and sharing ideas with the lunchtime gaming club in Castlebridge they decided that they, too would rather engage creatively in this way. Below I share the processes and productions of the two, very different youth-led, collaborative, art-ful engagements. Rather than inscribing my own meanings on to these productions the video narratives are presented through texts and still pictures extracted from the video footage. These sections are accompanied by tentative analysis of what more these creations can do. Finally, a tentacular, speculative and optimistic mapping of where these creations have travelled to and what they might enable us to do/think/feel is explored.

## 6.5 Diffractive storytelling

Both films aimed to tell a story or deliver a message to the audience of the AGENDA youth activism conference (Renold et al .2020). This is an annual event that creates a space for young people to share and celebrate the ways that they have been speaking out on issues of gender and sexuality in/equality. The theme in 2018 was 'inclusivity' bringing gender and sexual diversity with near-diversity. The conference was attended by the Children's Commissioner for Wales, along with representatives from Stonewall<sup>23</sup>, Mencap Cymru<sup>24</sup>,

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<sup>23</sup> Stonewall is an LGBTQ campaigning and lobbying group founded in 1989 by a group of people who were active in the struggle against section 28 of the Local Government Act (Stonewall 2015).

<sup>24</sup> 'Mencap Cymru is the voice of learning disability in Wales' (Mencap 2020)

The Women's Equality Network<sup>25</sup> (WEN) and Hafan' Spectrum project<sup>26</sup>, as well as teachers and young people from across Wales. The first film that is introduced below, from the Gamer's resistance group, starts with a white board story and I describe this in more detail below. I then present stills from the film of video game play, drawings and a dance by a participant. The message of this film is one of inclusivity and the importance of gaming spaces in the lives of young people with additional learning needs. The second film, 'Felt with Monsters' is the focus of the latter half of the chapter. This film uses dolls, felt and clips of game play and a song to tell a monstrous story about the gendered dynamics of gaming. Rather than assuming that these images can in some way speak for themselves, particularly given that they have been abstracted from moving video productions, I employ what is elsewhere called a diffractive analysis or engagement with the data (Jackson and Mazzei 2012; Osgood and Robinson 2019; Lenz-Taguchi 2010; Lenz-Taguchi 2012). In doing so, I implicate the materialities that surround the films productions, the selection of the soundtrack, for example, to draw attention to other modalities, beyond the discursive (Lenz-Taguchi 2012).

## 6.6 What can The Gamer's resistance do? Films and layers

The Gamer's resistance group comprised the regular, lunchtime gaming club from Castlebridge school: Lena and Blethyn who were introduced in Chapter two and Terry and Judd whom I introduced in chapter three. Occasionally we were joined by two others Anna (introduced in chapter four) and Phillip who was often absent caring for his parents. Although they participated less than three times Anna and Phillip's names appear in the film credits. Lena, Blethyn and Judd decided that they wanted to tell a whiteboard story about gaming. The 'draw my life' format has circulated on YouTube for several years now as a story telling method. A phone or camcorder is used to record as the narrative is written on a white board in wipeable pen (Figure 41). Filming continues as each time the whiteboard

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<sup>25</sup> The Women's Equality Network Wales is a coalition aiming to end gender discrimination in Wales (WEN 2020)

<sup>26</sup> Hafan's Spectrum project is whole school approach to tackling domestic violence through healthy relationships education (Hafan 2020)

(approximately A5 or A4 in size) is filled with words it is wiped clean for the next passage. When the video is edited the footage speed is increased to (roughly) reading speed and the story unfolds. This format is familiar to most of the young people in this project and was a method introduced to me by one of the participants in my Masters project. As I already had them the whiteboards were in the bag of arts materials that accompanied me on my school visits, potentially as a way for those who do not enjoy speaking to participate. The Gamer's resistance group liked the idea of conveying their message using this format.

Blethyn volunteered for the main production role and did all the video editing. He also found and added the soundtrack and crafted the titles. This was a long and labour-intensive process and consequently for many weeks he sat quietly in the corner editing and modifying the video. The whiteboard was used as the method to narrate their story, rather than a voice-over of the video. The story telling materialised in-production for several reasons. My attempts to sit and plan carefully what we would create always dissolved unfruitfully, and my attempts to do a mock story board using printed sheets or hand drawing on flip chart paper were wholly unsuccessful. I let go and handed over the process to the young people. Consequently, there is no linear easily comprehensible narrative to unfold here, not of the recognisable democratic negotiations on content nor expected spats on artistic differences. Instead, when I explained that the time available was running out and we needed to get started the group decided to do it then and there. The decisions about what to write and the words to use were shouted out. Lena picked the things she liked the most and wrote them out, while the other group members took turns in filming.

The whole process took several weeks although the whiteboard scenes were recorded in a single morning meeting. This meeting was noisy, chaotic and, as ever, included other activities. In the background, Blethyn was playing heavy metal covers of Disney songs. The audio recorder picks up the music and the shouts of really high-pitched chatter over the music. By this stage of the research this was the typical level of ambient noise. The meeting was loud and chaotic. Group members move in and out of the whiteboard's construction process, become distracted and these distractions lead to contributions. The film, amidst the chaos, takes shape. There is little in the way of argument, each group member is

listened to and while sometimes this does not bring about a change in direction, other times it does. No one in the room, except Lena, attempts to impose order. Occasionally when Lena wants to know what to write next, she will yell, 'SHUT UP' and then point a pen towards a member of the group and ask: 'what did you say'? These were often the things that were written down. What follows below are stills from the video that present each frame in chronological order.

## 6.7 'You shall not pass': crafting a film narrative

This section presents the stills from the video in chronological order. These stills are accompanied by descriptions, observations and reflections on the contextual dimensions of their production.

### 6.7.1 video still (1) 'We stand and fall in the name of gaming'

'The Gamer's resistance' starts with a whiteboard illustration (Figure 41).

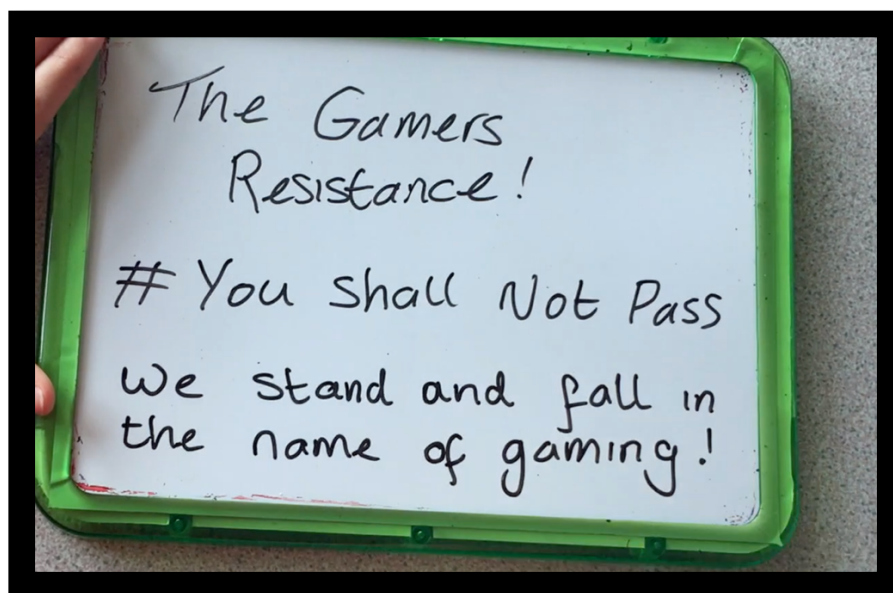


Figure 41: Video still 1

In the classroom we used for gaming, Lena laid out the pens and found the small sponge rubber eraser, while the others shouted out words or phrases. I suggested a title for the

film: The Gamers' resistance. This was the name the group had given themselves during the t-shirt design activity (See chapter three). Blethyn, usually very quiet in group discussions boomed: 'You shall not pass'. This was his imitation of Gandalf from Lord of the Rings. In a scene from the film where he defends the other key characters in a David and Goliath style battle, Gandalf blocks the path of a large fire Demon. He successfully defends the others on the quest but appears to sacrifice himself in the process. It is a very dramatic scene; the phrase is quite well known, and the group used it successfully here to convey their depth of feeling. Blethyn repeated the phrase two or three times and it was adopted by the group as a worthy, totemic catchphrase. As Gandalf stood and fell for what he believed in, Judd suggested that this is the way they could finish the message on that slide. Lena wrote quickly and excitedly but became exasperated with the noise levels. The group were issuing rallying battle cries and it was very loud in places. The opening slide (Figure 41) heralds the group's protective stance towards gaming spaces. In its combative language the broadly perceived (media discourses) and materially realised (within the school) negativity towards gaming is a territory that these young people, and doubtless many others want to protect.

#### 6.7.2 Video still (2) 'Sending out an expression of gaming'

The second slide (Figure 42) reiterates this struggle and subjugation. However, it also forges links to the globally connected gaming network surrounding their gaming practices.



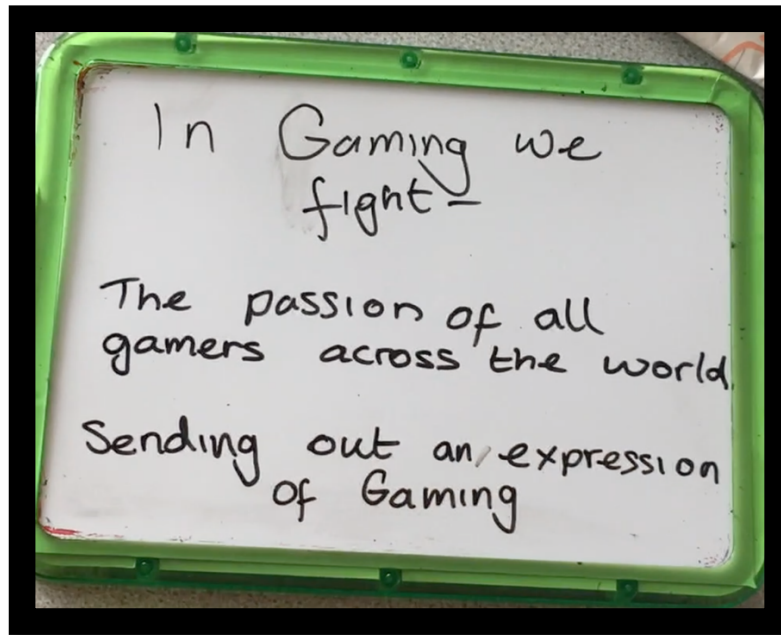


Figure 42: Video still 2

This community of sameness is a source of strength, and one that perhaps feels absent from their everyday lives, characterised by difference and sometimes (Lena's story in chapter four) isolation. It becomes easier to understand then, that if this digitally mediated landscape provides a space of similarity and solidarity how it might mean so much and what an injury the pejorative stances and negativity towards it might be.

This slide, also, was a reaching outward, but not to just anyone. While Lena wrote the words the emotive and impassioned language was shouted out by the other group members who were all on their feet circling the table where the writing and filming was taking place. Young people, as Hickey Moody (2019) outlines integrate those external, critical narratives, enfold them inwards and in some cases modify themselves accordingly. The next section of the film is a good example of this.

### 6.7.3 Video still (3) flossing



*Figure 43: Flossing, video still 3*

Terry (Figure 43), as I highlighted earlier did not want his voice or his face to appear anywhere. He was very, very keen however, to be included as a headless flossing body. The floss is a dance from the near ubiquitous and incredibly popular game Fortnite. Terry loves videogames and he has an infectious and sometimes boisterous enthusiasm for talking about games. When I first met him, he told me he had ‘communication difficulties’. Over the months that I worked with him I can only assume that he meant that his excitable, loud and effervescent interpersonal style was not always appreciated by other people. He is very quiet in situations where he does not feel comfortable and this contrasts heavily with his style. When he is enthusiastic (I would hesitate to describe it as relaxation), I can see how teachers and other students might find it a bit overwhelming. For me, Terry was often pure affective joy. He could not sit still for long, his words seemed sometimes to burst out of their own accord and his pitch would rise and rise until either another member of the group

admonished him, or a teacher appeared to ask us to keep the noise down. It strikes me now that some of his reluctance to have his voice recorded might stem from the repeated messages that he is 'too loud'. It is hard to say and while it is not an unjustified characterisation to say that he is loud, I valued his enthusiasm and the lightness he brought to the group. The section of the video where he flosses perfectly reflects the energy and on-the-moveness of Terry. It is worth noting too that this dance is not easy, I tried many times much to their amusement and it requires more coordination and timing than I possess. It is a little like being asked to rub your tummy and rub your head. Terry can do the dance and he can also do a much faster version of the dance than anyone else. He laughs or makes an ascending 'wooooooah' sound while he does it. So, it both looks and sounds like he is about to take off.

#### 6.7.4 Video still (4) 'Anyone can game'

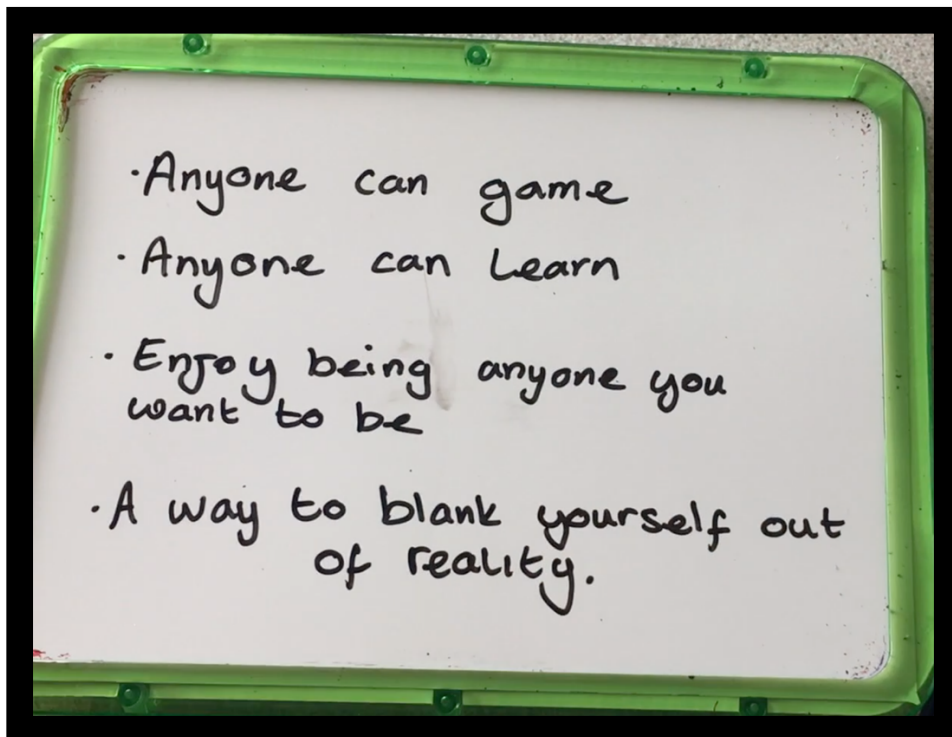


Figure 44: Video still 4

This next still (Figure 44) offers a readjustment to the opening slide, instead of, 'you shall not pass' this slide reports on the democratisation that is possible through gaming but also with a nod to the painfulness of reality. The opening statements are a reversal, arguably of the experiences of this group of participants. The emancipatory language of 'anyone can' is linked primarily to the positive regard held by the group of gaming spaces. In some of the other gaming meetings a sense of gaming hierarchy was invoked and the way that some players ruin things for others. In this sense, 'anyone can game, anyone can learn' felt at the time more like a plea. In other words, this is the ethos that holds true for gaming and the continuation of this logic means that all can participate equally in this space (Shaw 2104). Rather than an invitation it was expressed more defensively. While the final two statements are more telling of the nature of the liberating effects of gaming spaces and why they might be so vital. 'Enjoy being anyone you want to be' rather than 'be anyone you want to be' or 'try being something different for a while', illuminates their unequivocally positive stance towards not feeling like themselves.

The final statement is perhaps the most telling and 'sticky' (Ahmed 2010, Hickey-Moody 2019a) of all. Each of these young people had shared over the months, episodes and stories of their lives that they would like to blank themselves out of. Lena in relation to her family, Blethyn who is unsure if he will be able to finish school as the financial hardship faced by his family means that they may rely on him getting work instead, however low-paid. Judd struggles with his diagnosis and place in the school. He does not feel he needs to be there and rejects any notion of sameness with his classmates. Terry's communication problems revolve around his inability to manage friendships. Over the course of the project he has relationships with young women, but these often falter before a face-to-face meeting. He has had a relationship with a girl in school that ended confusingly for him. Terry is often in trouble for loudness and boisterousness for his exuberance and sometimes excessive energy. He talks bitterly about his biological mother. Nevertheless, he always full of life and when he talks about his relationships it is mainly with confusion and bafflement rather than anger. Lena and Terry's care experiences are disclosed with sorrow. There are family tensions for Judd and Blethyn. School and other people are tricky things, challenging on

many fronts. So 'blinking yourself out of reality' (Figure 44, above) is perhaps more than simply a welcome respite for these young people. It is a way to cope and to survive in a world that is more often than not very hard to negotiate.

#### 6.7.5 Video still (5) 'Games don't limit us'

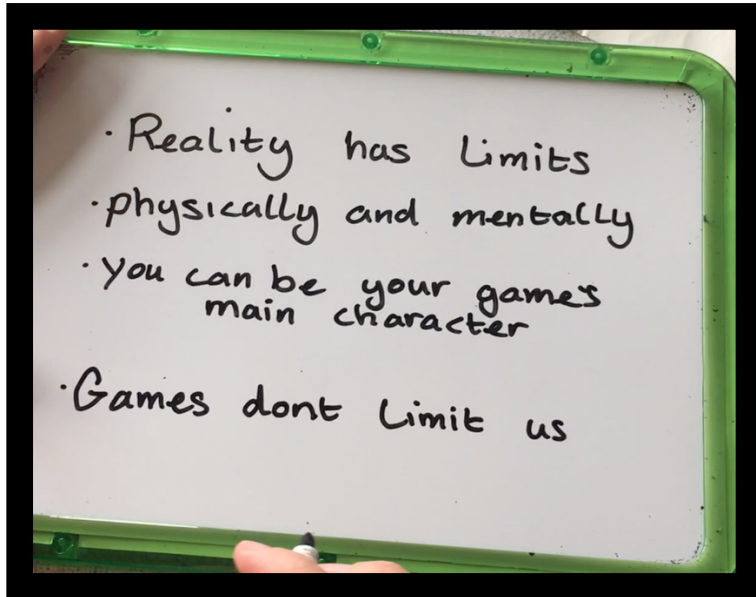


Figure 45: Video still 5

This last whiteboard slide (Figure 45, above) provides the other key visual message of the film and one of the reasons that gaming and digital formats might be popular with young people (particularly those with additional learning rights). Existing research has couched those limits in terms of the social. Joyce Davdison (2008, p. 792) highlights the continuing relevance of Singer's (1999, p.64) contention that the internet has been for the neurodiverse what sign language was for deaf people. Davidson invites us to think about the levelling affordances of digital spaces for those who experience the pace and construction of situated day-to-day interactions, challenging, confusing and sometimes upsetting.

For example, another way of thinking about the perceived limits of reality, physically and mentally for these young people, and ways to exceed them are the digital characters developed by these young people. They might help aide an understanding around their perceptions of their limitations. The battle dress of the Original Character Lena has given

herself (Figure 46) and the invincible powers she describes having (which are outlined in more detail in chapter four) are focused on creating an indestructible warrior. Lena is physically strong but beyond the stifling bear hugs meted out to convey the very strength of feelings that are impossible to articulate, her strength goes unseen and is certainly not valued by those around her.

#### 6.7.6 Video still (6) Crimson

The whiteboard scenes are followed by a still of one of Lena's drawings, her original character (OC) Crimson because, 'it should be in there' (Figure 46). I introduced Lena's 'original character' (OC) Crimson in chapter four and outlined the way that the processes of film making materialise Lena-Crimson.

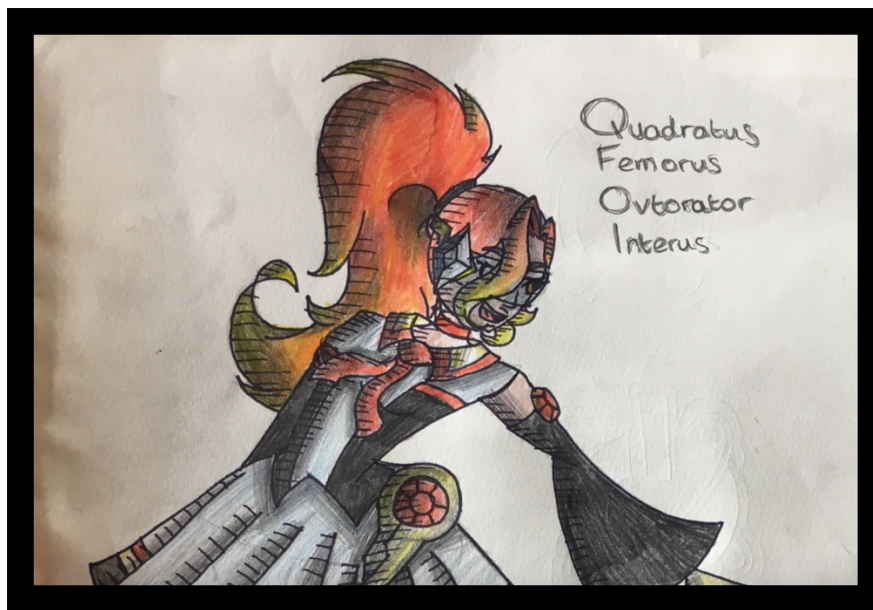


Figure 46: Crimson video still 6<sup>27</sup>

#### 6.7.7 Video still 7 Halo (2010)

Crimson is followed by a clip of footage of the group playing the video Game Halo (2010). This section runs for approximately two minutes and 35 seconds (Figure 47 below).

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<sup>27</sup> I asked Lena what the significance of the words next to Crimson were. She said they were 'just made up words'.



Figure 47: Halo (2010) video still 7

This does not sound like long but when playing the video to audiences who could be assumed to have little interest in gaming, never mind the complexities of a three-player battle in a limited arena, it feels like slightly longer. However, it would have been longer still, and it was a struggle to edit down the whole video to seven minutes. As the video was in-production for the annual AGENDA youth activism conference we were aware of the timetabling of the day. Ensuring all those attending the conference who wanted to present could, meant editing the video to five minutes in length. But there was more they could have included. This section feeds back into the earliest conversations I had with this group, that the only way to understand about gaming is to play. However, the mastery and expertise that is evident to someone who knows what they are looking at in this clip will be lost on someone with limited understanding. This clip includes quick scope shots, stakeouts, long fly-bys of the amazing landscape, the way two players tactically line-up for a shoot-out, the difficulties of assassinations. And all of this in real time, it took me an hour to get to grips with the scope and sight of my weapon.

When the project finished, I was still only marginally better than useless. When you are there, watching it, it is very difficult not to be slightly awed by their expertise and amazed at the short step necessary to hop and drop from one textural universe to another. In this clip, screen becomes hand, becomes actual, virtual landscape, the shouts, grunts, groans and laughter are of the becoming- gamer assemblage, what has elsewhere been called immersion, is here, much more than that. Each material body, in the room, runs a commentary on the first-person avatar, scanning and anticipating, prehending the moves of the person/soldier/controller/assassin next to them. This analytical abstraction elides that pace of the finger on the keypad, the shortened breathing, perspiration, tics surges, all happen together. The Gamer's resistance film is accompanied by a soft rock, rallying and rousing track 'For the Glory' would not be out of place on the Top Gun soundtrack. It works particularly well alongside this section of the film.

#### 6.7.8 'The spirit of any game is with the players'

The long gaming segment described above fades to a section the group called, 'philosophical stuff' a one minute and fifteen second piece to camera by Judd. Judd is an 18-year-old neuro-diverse 'male'. There are recognisable similarities with the stereotypical savant autistic discourses that have come to prominence over the last decade (Murray 2011). He talks sometimes about his desire for a girlfriend. His vocabulary is in a mixture of sophisticated and technical language that he sometimes seems to struggle to keep up with. He is heavily invested in discourses of objectivity and rationality. For Judd the pinnacle of gaming excellence is embodied in the professional esports players who compete, playing games in an annual televised event.

*Judd: Do you know what makes a good esports person? People who play esports? (Loud interruption of the volume increasing on a cover of the Lion King song 'I just can't wait to be king' by a death metal band and laughter)*

*Judd: Anyway, people who are good at esports have three things: one, patience. Two, reaction times, like half that of a normal person. Three, a lot of strategy.*



Throughout the project Judd was sometimes engaged and determined to have one-to-one conversations, starting always with, 'so what is it you hope to achieve here'? At other times he was withdrawn and depressed. Sometimes he was bored and often despairing and felt he should not be in the special school setting. Rather than conveying a feeling that he did not belong he sometimes had a haunted look, that there had been a mistake in diagnosing him. Whatever they were saying he had in his diagnosis, 'they were wrong'. His contribution to the film reflects the way he contributed to the project more broadly. He did not want to participate alongside everyone else and instead wanted to be filmed, delivering his monologue separately and the other members of the group happily accommodated this. This is what Judd says looking directly, intensely into the camera at the end of the film:

*"When it comes down to it, games, they're all about entertainment and it's been such a long, long while since we've had games, whatever form it takes it just brings us together, you know? And I think that's the main spirit of any game, hell any type of fun! Because fun can only be had for a short while by yourself. Games, they can bring you together in marvellous ways now, even long range, across the entire world. If I was in the 1950's no one would believe what I'd say, but now things are flying, truly. When I mean that I'm talking about drones. So, when it comes down to it games without cooperative play don't have the spirit, and that means, the spirit of any game is with the players. So, you do with that what you will and have a wonderful afternoon, morning, night. Have an excellent day alright".*

While Judd was delivering this soliloquy, I was reminded of Walkerdine's (2007) description of the way that, for her, the affects of wider gender discourses are enfolded into ideas of the self. Judd starts with his contention that games are, 'entertainment', and many would not argue with that. But, for Walkerdine, a crucial declaration must be made by the proto-adult-gamer-boy that he understands it is, 'just fantasy', that he is rational and detached enough from the game to not take it too seriously. So, while the game must be meaningful

enough to invest hours of time and this is the prerequisite for being good, a simultaneous disavowal of the importance of gaming spaces is also required.

Judd then goes on to say something very poignant, to me at least about the sense of connectivity inherent to gaming. Where aloneness is not, 'fun'. Judd, like Lena referred often to his loneliness and sense of isolation. As you would expect he articulated this estrangement in different ways and talked about the inadequacy of people in his school to understand him (the implicit and sometimes explicit inference being, that he was not 'like them'). He was also at times very, very keen to have a girlfriend. But throughout the, fidgety, hair flipping, leaning in, for around one and a half minutes Judd conveys the affirmative, connectivity afforded by digital gaming, the shared affective 'spirit' of gaming. He seems, also, to gesture towards the freedom and liberating capacities of digital game play, 'things are flying, truly'; 'you do with that what you will'. This emancipatory language is what we might think of as a Deleuzo-Guattarian (1987) 'refrain' across the two videos that I discuss in this chapter. As Anna Hickey Moody (2019, p.15) explains:

*The concept of the refrain is named after a bird song. Like birds sing out their territory to find a mate, to voice their presence and to mark their space, a refrain is a practice of place-making, a ritual or set of habits that embed people, animals or things in a place.*

Continually linking gaming practices to discourses of freedom, in the sense of the refrain, creates this freedom. The escape from surveillance, the blanking out of the self, these expressions materialise the freedom. Arguably these films carve out material spaces of acceptance for the young people in this project. These ideas are equally relevant to the second film that is introduced a little later in the chapter. Before that the conclusion to this section presents the closing credits of this first film (Figures, 48, 49 and 50). Some Sections have been omitted here as they contain identifying information.

6.7.9 Video stills (8, 9, 10 and 11) The Credits



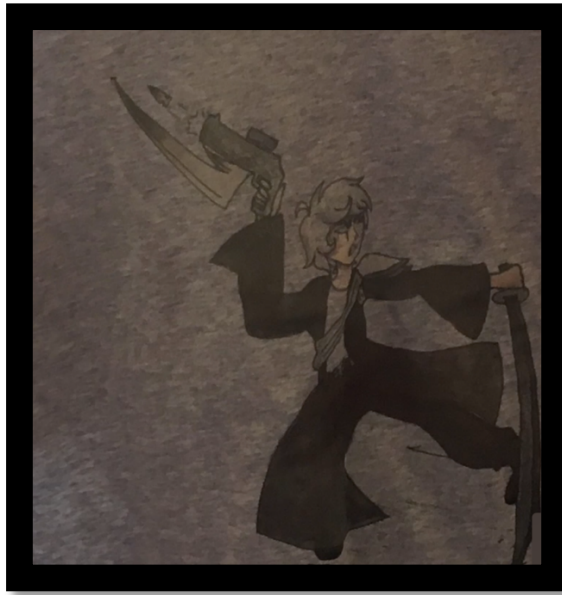
Figure 48: Video still 8 Crimson t-shirt



Figure 49: Video still 9 Anna-Lena Dragon

**ALL THE NAMES WE  
USED FOR THE CAST  
AND SO ON WERE TO  
PROTECT THE  
CONFIDENTIALITY AND  
THE IDENTITY OF THE  
PEOPLE INVOLVED IN  
THIS PROJECT.**

Figure 50: Video still 10



*Figure 51: Video still 11 Caspian t-shirt design*

So, the film does what the creators intend and sends out 'an expression of gaming' (see Figure 42, above). This expression carves out a space of freedom without limits and invites viewers to experience that freedom visually and aurally. This world making is lively and populated with participants, it is assembled with Torsos and Original Characters (OCs). The following section focuses on the film that was created by the participants from chapter five, Sara and Ceri and the dolls. While there is a similar recognisable refrain the films are very different.

#### 6.8 Felt with monsters: a film and a song

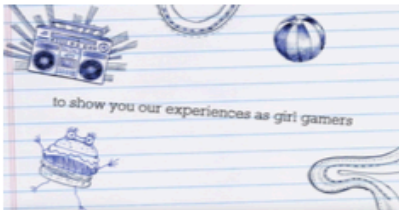
The group who created the 'Felt with Monsters' film comprises Ceri and Sara who were introduced in chapter five. This chapter described how the dolls were creatively modified and materialised complicated gendered becomings over the course of the project. Unlike the Gamer's resistance group, Ceri and Sara did plan a rough story board of the film. However, Ceri took this home to work on and it never returned. The overarching theme, they decided, would be to do with bullying and misogynistic online abuse. Both Ceri and Sara had experienced this kind of online abuse. Neither Ceri or Sara wanted to narrate the film and the communication of their message took two distinct paths. Firstly, they decided

that the dolls should be holding banners or placards with messages. In order to convey the feelings accompanying these statements Ceri and Sara used coloured felt. No key was produced to offer an easy translation of these colours into distinct and bounded feelings. Instead, they decided, which colour online harassment felt like and felted it. Secondly, Ceri wanted to record a song to sing as an accompanying track. We made the film over several weeks using iMovie on my laptop. As the stills show this film is about the gendered experience of gaming spaces. It shares with the Gamer's resistance film an emancipatory and hopeful message about what these spaces could be. This film asserts that gaming spaces are for everyone and that without the harmful dialogue, these spaces represent a space to circumnavigate some of the difficulties of everyday life. Below are the stills from the film, presented as a split view with the accompanying song lyrics of each frame presented alongside (Figures 52, 52, 54, 55, 56 and 57).



Once I was seven years old, my momma told me

Go and make yourself some friends or you'll be lonely



Once I was seven years old

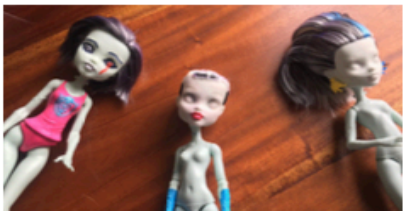
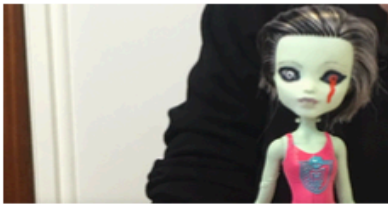


Figure 52: Felt with Monsters split-screen (1)



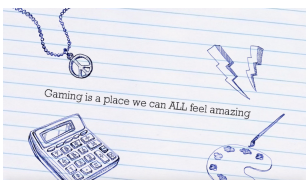
It was a big, big world, but we thought we were bigger



Pushing each other to the limits, we were learning quicker



By eleven smoking herb and drinking burning liquor



Never rich so we were out to make that steady figure



Once I was eleven years old my daddy told me  
Go get yourself a wife or you'll be lonely

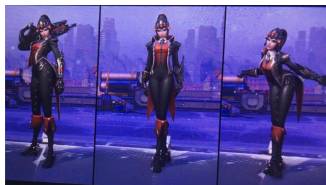
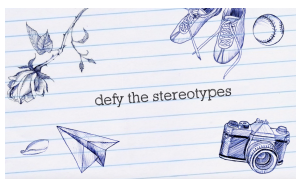


Once I was eleven years old



I always had that dream like my daddy before me

Figure 53: Felt with Monsters split-screen (2)



So I started writing songs

I started writing stories  
Something about the glory

just always seemed to bore me

'Cause only those I love

will ever really know me

Once I was twenty years old, my story got  
told  
Before the morning sun, when life was  
lonely  
Once I was twenty years old

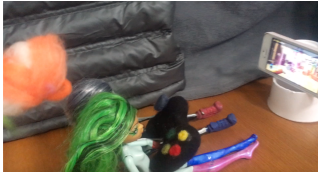
I only see my goals I don't believe in  
failure  
'Cause I know the smallest voices, they  
can make it major  
I got my boys with me at least those in  
favour  
And if we don't meet before I leave, I  
hope I'll see you later

Figure 54: Felt with Monsters split-screen (3)

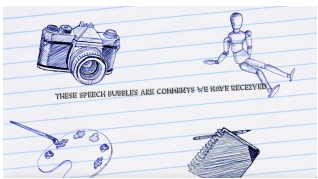




Once I was twenty years old my story got told  
 I was writing about everything I saw before me  
 Once I was twenty years old



Soon we'll be thirty years old,



our songs have been sold



We've travelled around the world and we're still roaming

Soon we'll be thirty years old

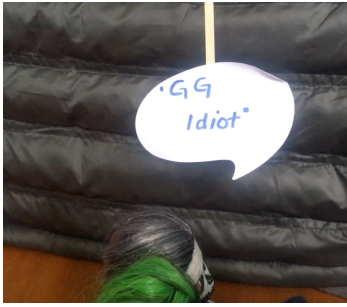


I'm still learning about life  
 My woman brought children for me  
 So I can sing them all my songs  
 And I can tell them stories

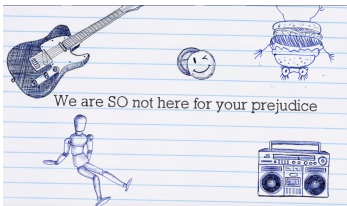


Most of my boys are with me  
 Some are still out seeking glory  
 And some I had to leave behind

Figure 55: Felt with Monsters split-screen (4)



My brother I'm still sorry



Soon I'll be sixty years old

My daddy got sixty-one



Remember life and then your life becomes a better one

I made a man so happy when I wrote a letter once  
I hope my children come and visit once or twice a month



Soon I'll be sixty years old, will I think the world is cold

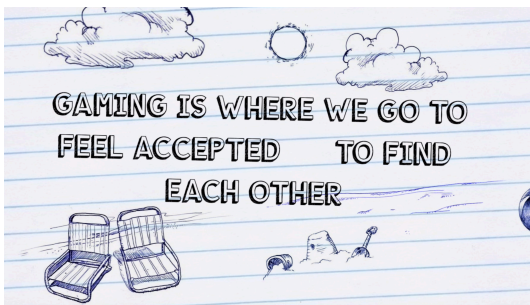
Figure 56: Felt with Monsters split-screen (5)



Or will I have a lot of children who can warm me



Soon I'll be sixty years old  
 Soon I'll be sixty years old, will I think the world is cold  
 Or will I have a lot of children who can warm me  
 Soon I'll be sixty years old,



Once I was seven years old, my momma told me  
 Go and make yourself some friends or you'll be lonely  
 Once I was seven years old

Once I was seven years old

Figure 57: Felt with Monsters split-screen (6)

## 6.9 What can a film soundtrack do?

The soundtrack to this film is a recording of Ceri singing the track, 'Seven Years' by Lucas Graham. The song has a melancholy pace and a reflective tone. As the lyrics suggest it is a song that sweeps the vista of a whole life; how the things that come to matter in a life tend to be other people and how milestones of relationality connect generations. Simultaneously, it is an appraisal of how short life can be and how populated that life might be.

Ceri chose the song and chose to perform it. In a discussion about soundtracks, Ceri spoke about their love of singing and when, as a group, we explored the idea of recording a song for the video Ceri was enthused and was confident about singing this song. We were around two thirds of the way through the filmmaking when the song was recorded. Sara was absent that week and we serendipitously ended up in a very small office, little more than a cupboard with a window in the door. Ceri, listened to the song on headphones and sang, strongly into the microphone on my mobile phone, my laptop and audio recorder also recorded the song, in one take. It was a moving experience; the heart and the affective registers Ceri employs to feel and sound out every word gave me goose bumps. Ceri has a strong voice and the song is clearly very meaningful to them. Ceri's background is explored in the previous chapter so the resonance of some of the lyrics is understandable.

What was not predictable, to any of us, was how the personalisation of the song forges an instant connection with its audience, the willingness to vulnerability, the reaching outwards, optimistically the song vibrates with affect. It connects with me at least, on an affective register. I am limited here however, in my capacities to convey the richness of the film and encounters surrounding it. The format of a textual, doctoral thesis flattens out the sensory texture and curtails attempts to capture or register the embodied and affective registers of this process.

However this alacrity for song can be linked to the Welsh Heritage of the post-industrial valleys, famed for its big voices, vectors of 'Hiraeth'<sup>28</sup>. Perhaps the gendered tradition of Male voice choirs is flowing through the performance, particularly as the school recently initiated its own male voice choir. Ceri too, has a stake in a rousing and powerful vocal range that has been echoing around the school. The song, its lyrics, the residual memory of the space of the recording, the emotion and affect of Ceri's voice, create a texture, a multiplying of the narrative of the film. I speculate that the song represents a 'zooming out' for Ceri, that viewed at a temporal distance, struggle is easier to live with. There is a connection here, as well to the idea posited by Henri Bergson (Guerlac 2006), that time of the common imaginary, or scientific time closely associated with Greenwich mean time does not exist anywhere. Rather, he argues, we all carry distant and recent past events into every moment as they fold outwards to an unknown and unknowable future. Arguably, Ceri is absolutely of their time. The fluidity of gender and sexuality may not be new concepts to those of us familiar with the scholarly field of gender and sexualities, but in popular culture the new proliferation of these discourses remains contested and the site of a significant struggle. This is particularly true within strands of feminism where Trans\* individuals and their wider community are entangled in a bitter debate about their rights to even exist (Phipps 2020).

In this context the survey of a life in its totality, populated with joy and inter-generational connectivity might bring perspective and an imagining forwards as well as looking backwards through time. Interestingly the song also sidesteps immediacy, the immanence of being. The lyrics are about how things used to be and how they will be and about not being lonely. Drawing on knowledge of Ceri from the last chapter perhaps it is only the past and the present that come into focus with enough clarity to be described, perhaps for the songwriter as well as Ceri, here and now remains too in-flux.

#### 6.10 Sara: a queer victory?

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<sup>28</sup> 'Hiraeth' is a Welsh word that broadly translates to a loss or longing for home, where home is also a Wales of the past (Walkerdine and Jiminez 2012, p.1).

The other sticky story of the film, the segments that prick tears in my eyes, raise hairs on my neck and texture my arms are the gameplay sections. I cannot view them unentangled from those months working with Sara who as the last chapter showed, at times had very little to feel good about. These game play clips are her treasured, 'best moments' and if playing video games is one of the only times Sara ever feels good, the value of these glory moments take on a further significance. Texturally, there is a Hollywood awards reel feel to them, a 'best moments' editing that is carried out by the game, which frames the angles and provides the player with special extra victory moves. If I was looking for queer-performativity in everyday gaming practices, then the snarling, stubble shadowed Cowboy, glowering cigarette taken from his lips and flicked into the middle distance by a player named 'Pink Princess', controlled by a 14-year-old girl might pique my interest. These feelings of victory and power are carried everywhere by Sara, kept close in her phone in her pocket. The clip included a multi-angle slow-motion of her kills, a death toll and a description of her most skilful assassinations. Haptic connectivity materialises this virtual victory in her hands whenever she needs it, and it travels here into their film on the defence of gaming territories. The comments that appear in the speech bubbles are all things that have been said to Sara by other gamers. But she spoke also, with a broadening smile and a shiny eye of the amazing sensation of being told she is a 'good Ghenji' by another player. Ghenji is an Overwatch character and the cowboy in the film. There is nothing virtual about this success for Sara, and I remember the feelings of relief that accompanied hearing about the joy of gaming, and the joy of connecting with other people who understood.

### 6.11 Monsters and mayhem: a tale of two films

In her book, 'Touching Feeling' (2004) Kosofsky-Sedgwick, thinks with 'texture' (p.16). Texture, she argues, relies on a multiplicity of perceptions and perspectives: 'whose degree of organization hovers just below the level of shape or structure' (p.16). While Kosofsky-Sedgwick posits textural analysis as a way to sidestep the epistemological tensions created by the concepts of affect and performativity, it provides a useful concept for thinking about the way that connections are obscured and made visible depending on where they are experienced from. Throughout the processes of entanglement, creating the geographically

distinct video-activist productions that I introduce and discuss in this chapter ('The Gamer's resistance' first and then 'Felt with Monsters') I *felt with* their creators. What can never really (and perhaps should never) be translated are all the complicated, joy-filled, sad affects that flowed through them. Those affects, at that time, in that place had a texture, from the silky joy erupting laughter and the smooth optimistic hope of the gathering narratives, to the abrasive, striating, impacts of the territorializing forces of misogynistic and ableist discourses. These textural affects do not translate easily into textual chapters. The process of academic writing is ill-suited to conveying the non-discursive registers of this project. Attempting to present the embodied but unuttered, the known and shared in a flattened text of inadequate adjectives has been a constant frustration. But, thinking with texture lends itself well to Hickey- Moody's 'sticky stories': '*stories I tell are those that have stuck with me, like burrs to a cloth, pricking at me, reminding me they are there and have a purpose*' (2019, p.9). This concept is useful to think about the residual feelings of the project and the way that these videos have an affective power to connect me with that time and space generally but more specifically, some sequences are totemic of some of the stickiest stories.

The Gamer's resistance film presents a less linear and instantly recognisable format. This film both in the making and presentation invites the viewer to experience a beloved world. There is no narrative thread and instead it begins with an entreaty to appreciate a democratised space. It places those participants within the context of a space that engenders sameness. I have introduced these participants in the preceding chapters and, therefore, the importance of this levelling environment does not need underscoring further. It is worth remembering too that inviting those who experience and intra-act in diverse ways with the social world will tell stories and convey meaning and messages in ways that exceed the normative. I watch and re-watch the section of gameplay and marvel at confidence and ease with which a space that is, trust me, difficult to negotiate flows between them.

In the Felt with Monsters film a more recognisable format emerges but the complexity of fashioning those dolls (see preceding chapter) and the positioning of them materially and lyrically with the song demands further viewings. In each film the young people reach out

from the screen, it is a powerful plea for acceptance from both. It is also a plea, like that of Greta Thunberg, through doing. In other words, look at what we could have, watch how we do it, how we play collaboratively and non-judgementally. The films also 'connect viewers to gaming territories. The films emphasize passionately what is at stake, 'we stand and fall in the name of gaming; you shall not pass'. However, the mode of appeal is through inclusivity, join in if you want to. These are territories, carving out new spaces, as I speculate here that these films do. In plain language, supported by strong visuals, there is a clear and unavoidable message that it is consistently available in these two films. That gaming is a felt space that young people want to protect. That they are prepared to do that protecting mildly. That games offer a space of connectivity with others and, provided you respect the freedom felt in those spaces you are welcome.

#### 6.12 Making films from compost: how far can the tentacles reach?

*'Donna Haraway has proposed the figure of a tentacular thought (Haraway 2016) dethroning Anthroexceptionality in favour of a homo born from 'humus', from the thick of grasping interdependencies, both required by and involved in the multiple modes of composition in which we are engaged.'* (Stengers 2019, p.18)

What was affectively and materially absent from this film-making process was any sense of stuckness or silence. Once the process began the young people had no shortage of things to say, and no hesitation in the collaborative process. Filmmaking is after all a doing and opening up the process to possibilities meant that everyone got to add their bit (Escott and Pahl 2019). This is what unfolded, there was very little regard for the coherence of a linear narrative, and although messages are carried neither group deliberately fashioned a beginning, a middle and an end. Only once the process felt finished were credits added as a final flourish and a nod to the software affordances of more traditional modes of film making. There was no prior planning, my attempts to steer each group in this direction floundered repeatedly. I constructed storyboards at the end of conversations more for my own benefit than as a guide to what we went on to produce. It is due mainly to the evolution of the relationships that had been built within these groups (I include myself in



their number here), within safety of the research relationship I had built that I was able to trust and enjoy this process.

As I have outlined in the 'Method-ing' chapter making room and space for young people to express themselves however they chose, rather than worrying about getting 'good data' meant that the films could and would be composted. In the case of the Doll group both Ceri and Sara were accustomed to using creativity as a survival skill and the same is true of almost all the Gamers' resistance group. Over many months I had made a space for them to participate as much or as little as they chose, provided as many tools for ethical relationships and respectful boundaries as I could. And on more than one occasion I gave in to their chaos and just went with it. Whole afternoons of inaudible recordings, blurry movements and raised voices on the video cameras, when on leaving the school I had misgivings that I would ever have any 'data' to write about. I believe it is those messy moments, the ones that could not ever be 'distorted into clarity' (Law 2004), that could not be written into a more traditional methodology, that allowed me to develop the relationships I did, that meant I could work in an intuitive and respectful way alongside those young people. For St Pierre (2019, p.7), 'The post-qualitative inquirer, the inventor, the creator, assumes an affirmative attitude of trust in the world and experiments'. The making of these films was not a 'partially participatory process', I offered technical and material support when I could, I facilitated group discussions and dictated spider grams to make sure everyone had a say but the films are their own. In Chapter three, on ethics I think with the tricky and controversial problems of giving these young people their property back (Lomax 2015). I have had the good fortune to be involved in youth engagement and activism alongside my doctoral research and as such a potential audience existed to hear any stories my participants wanted to tell, our compost already had some existing hummus and I was able to add this to the relationship.

### 6.13 A beginning without ending: Leaving ethically.

The weeks that built towards the conference carried a finality, with the final editing of the films time limited by the fast-approaching summer holidays and the project's end. This provided a valuable opportunity to prepare and to gradually draw to a close our lunchtime clubs. Each film was recorded, edited and finalised within four weeks. These were the last four to five weeks of the project, with my official finish date for fieldwork coordinated to end with the school year in July. Making these films with a screening at a youth conference scheduled for September gave me a valuable opportunity to leave the field in a way that felt ethically sensitive to me. I was able to say that our regularly scheduled time together was drawing to a close, but that we would see each other once more after the summer holidays to check-in, to watch the videos and be sure that they were happy with the contents after a six-week cooling off period. And it also meant that the conference was the end to our project together. This public, last meeting provided an opportunity to say goodbye, hopefully on the wave of good feeling generated at the film's good reception, forging connections with other young youth activists from across Wales and participating in workshops at an event. An event that was carefully planned to be as inclusive of all young people as possible (See Renold et al. 2020) the films live on (through descriptions of them), the Agenda case study about this project will live on in new spaces, forging new connections. To finish this chapter, I tentatively map the onwards journey of this research.

### 6.14 Tentacle one: The conference/Cwrdd

In September 2019, the film-making participants from our project travelled to the Cardiff to participate in the AGENDA 'cwrdd<sup>29</sup>' (Renold et al. 2020). This annual conference, organised by Professor EJ Renold showcases performances, activisms and art productions by young people, across Wales who are standing up, speaking out and calling time on a range of topics, broadly related to positive relationships. Every year a theme has a theme and in

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<sup>29</sup> Cwrdd is a Welsh word meaning 'to gather, converge and touch, run into, stumble across, join, exchange and encounter by accident' (Renold et al. 2020, p. 442).

2018, the theme was inclusivity. These events are carefully choreographed and crafted as a way of 'doing something with the something doing' (Renold 2019, p.1; Massumi 2013). The events are usually attended by key influential and political figures who punctuate the young people's performances with short position pieces. When they are not contributing these influential adults form part of the audience and the young people's voices raised at these events are seen, heard and felt with. The Cwrdd is also attended by young people themselves along with teachers and school representatives. The first half of the day is filled with talks, performances and installations. The afternoon is given over to creative activities facilitated by the AGENDA team. The event always closes with a movement workshop choreographed by Jên Angharad. So, at the end of the conference the energies and affects of the room are gathered and worked with.

In 2018 both films that were produced by the participants in this project were screened. Ceri and Sara, travelled with a member of University staff, unable to access support or transportation with their school. They sat in the front row, beaming. The Gamer' resistance group were nearer the back, in case the environment proved to be challenging in any respect. On the day Terry was unwell and so Lena, Blethyn and Judd were accompanied by their teacher and a teaching assistant. They were flushed with the thrill of seeing their film projected on to a cinema size screen, to a conference hall filled with people. I can only speculate on what it meant and how it felt for them all to enjoy such resounding success, to be a part of something, to hear and feel the applause at the end of each film. For both groups it was an event to be going to Cardiff. In the brief conversations I was able to have with the Gamer's resistance group, who had to leave at the end of the morning, they were elated and jubilant and excited. When the time came to say goodbye, I shared a moment of sadness with them.

The Doll group stayed all day, Ceri enjoyed the inclusivity and visibility of gender and sexualities diversity, being in an environment where they perhaps were not so alone. Sara's energy started to flag towards the end of the day, and we spent the final twenty minutes in

one of the specially designated 'chill out rooms'. The volume of people, the affective fullness of the day and her ongoing battle with anxiety came to be overwhelming. It gave us a valuable opportunity to debrief. She had loved showing the film but said that it felt like a long time ago. She said she was sad that our lunchtime club had come to an end. Things at home and at school had not improved for Sara. She was still seeing her counsellor. When I asked if she was still gaming, she responded with a ten-minute account of her successes, the wins, the kills, unlocked characters, special moves and the uplifting praise of fellow gamers.

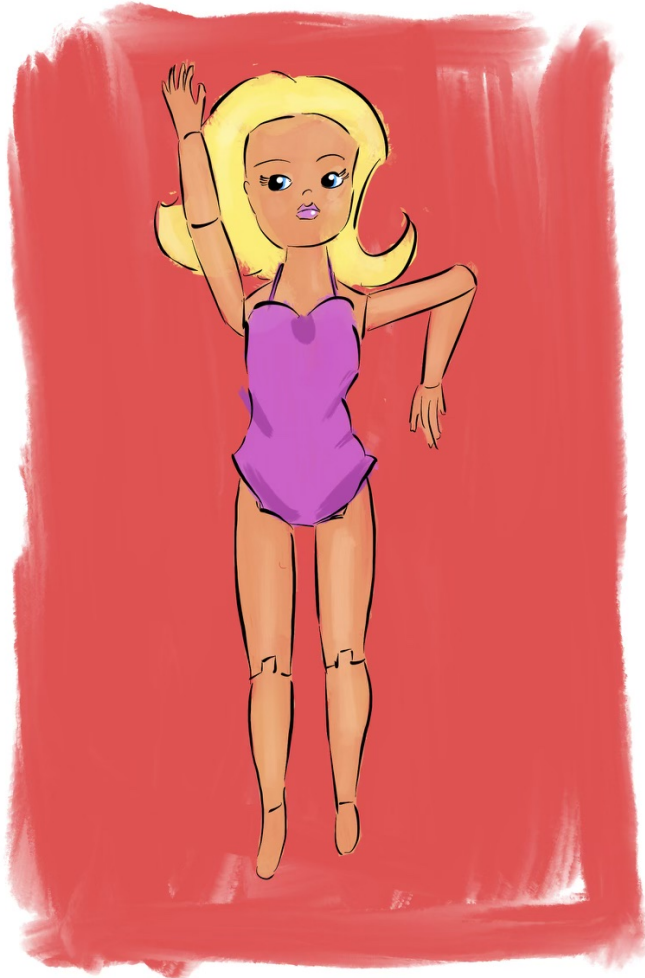
When it was time to say goodbye, something had shifted between me and Sara, back in the familiar pattern of gaming talk her posture was a little bit straighter, her eyes a little shinier. The sadness of her goodbye was reciprocated. It motivated my writing when I wanted to give up. For Stengers (2013, p. 18) 'realism might be more about fingering, tasting, discriminating and caring, composing with a reality that overflows ongoing attempts to classify and name'. This echoes Haraway's call for us to Stay with the trouble (2016), even when it is not always clear what that trouble is. I have worked with many young people and known many more, but Sara's story is particularly sticky and troubles me still in a way that defies characterisation. It is not that I felt she was in danger or at risk of any harm. Instead, it was very difficult to convey that of every participant, gaming spaces felt the most vital for Sara. I firmly believe that for her they represented a space of survivability. However, I could not find a data snippet that adequately reflected the way Sara led me to this understanding, no single declaration, no single beseeching look. I felt it, it was communicated affectively, but confounds easy definition or description. In contrast to the question at the beginning of this chapter that answers the question, 'what can a neuro-diverse teen gamer do'? With the affirmative declaration, 'change the world'. In relation to Sara, the answer instead would become, the equally affirmative: survive.

#### 6.15 Tentacle two: The crush card

The card below (Figures 58 and 59, and Appendix 6) features in the pedagogic activities of the recently published CRUSH resource (Renold, McGeeney and Ashton 2020). This is a resource that shares creative pedagogy developed for a professional learning programme

with teachers and practitioners to support them prepare for Wales' new Relationships and Sexuality Education curriculum (Welsh Government 2019, pp. 3-4; Renold and McGeeney 2017). The cards were developed to provide teachers and practitioners with a glimpse of the complexity of young people's lives. Each A5 card features an image (a doll, lipstick, tampon, wedding dress) and teachers and education professionals are asked to sort them into thematic groups. These groupings are not pre-determined allowing for more personal reflections on their meanings. The exercise is repeated several times, each sorting producing new categories. Finally, participants are asked to turn over the card. The image on the front is connected to the story overleaf, but in an unexpected way. The card that draws on this research features an image of a doll on the front, while the reverse tells a complex story of disability and gender fluidity. This is particularly important in view of the assumptions that exist around the intimate and sexual lives of young disabled people; namely that they either do not or should not engage in sex or intimacy (Liddiard 2018). The easy readings of the images that appear on the front of these cards are troubled by the complex stories that appear on their reverse side. This stretching research tentacle lands in

the policy context of compulsory RSE curriculum development in Wales (Renold and McGeeney 2017).



*Figure 58: Crush card (front view)*

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Ceri (age 15, white Welsh) is gender fluid and a lesbian. They have been in a lesbian relationship with a girl in their school for a year but the relationship is kept a secret from all the other students. Ceri is a young carer for their parents, and their mother is registered blind. Ceri has physical impairments and cannot walk without the aid of crutches, and an ongoing wrist problem makes some writing and mobility issues even more difficult. Ceri also has Dyslexia. Ceri struggles to control their anger and has had anger management counselling in the past and has previously suffered with mental health problems, depression and anxiety in particular. Ceri attributes many of these emotional difficulties to extensive periods of relentless bullying in their life. For all of these reasons, Ceri makes regular use of the nurture room - a space in school for young people with extra learning, behavioural or emotional needs.

Creativity is an important and central facet of Ceri's life. As part of a research project Ceri identified doll modification as an enjoyable way to express the thoughts and feelings they have about living their life: "For me stripping it back to nothing, getting rid of everything is a big thing." The dolls are stripped of their standard, factory applied hair, make-up and clothing and re-modelled in a way that is more reflective of Ceri's aesthetic and interests. Ceri likes to create "uncertainty about the doll's gender and sexuality". Although they feel progressively more accepted by their peers and teachers, engaging in online communities with other young people who enjoy playing around with identity categories is vital for their emotional wellbeing and sense of community or belonging. Also, taking dolls that symbolize normative and stereotypical gender identities and transforming them in to something else feels creative and affirmative for Ceri who engages with other young people posting videos of their dolls in online forums. "I know it's a doll but the lips are just too pouty for me. And I don't like the message it sends to girls about how they should look.... This one time I soaked my dolls head in Acetone, I dunked her face in Acetone just to try and help me." Modifying the dolls is a cathartic and transformative experience for Ceri when they are living at the nexus of so many contradictory and exclusionary categories and for whom expressing themselves in creative ways is crucial to their emotional well-being.

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Figure 59: Crush card (back view)

## 6.16 Conclusion

This chapter has presented and analysed the two films produced by some of the project's participants. It has shown the way that both films respond to common discourses around young people's gaming practices. In the Gamer's resistance film, the narrative of inclusion indicates that the sometimes-divisive nature of online and offline spaces is something worthy of going into battle against. These young people invite viewers to experience the

landscape, temporality and texture of gaming spaces. Rather than opting for a YouTube style tutorial approach to presenting this world they instead chose rousing music. The Doll group also carefully selected a soundtrack, and Ceri sang. Both groups used music and visual images to grapple with a difficult topic, misogyny in gaming. Explicit here, for me, is the single biggest rationale for the use of chaotic, creative, participatory methods in research with children and young people.

There was no directive for this activism, as the Gamer's resistance film demonstrates there was no adherence to sense-making or linear narratives. In this sense the video activism departed from projects more specifically geared towards using film in participatory action research (Lomax et al. 2011; Singh 2007; Chowns 2007; MacEntee 2015; Escott and Pahl 2019). Moreover, I had very little experience of filmmaking prior to this project, and in this respect the participants were the experts. Gillian Chowns, social work action research film 'No you don't know how I feel' (2007) was co-produced with nine children whose parents were receiving palliative care. This project engaged the services of a videographer, although to maximise the input of participants in the collaborative research he became a facilitator as the recording of the film was handed over to the young people. Unlike my project the design and execution of this research had factored in the resources and planning for a final finished 'end product' an educational film, conveying messages from children whose parents were gravely ill.

Mitchell's use of 'cellphilm' (mobile phone film), however, offers some closer parallels to my research (Mitchell and de Lange 2013; Mitchell et al. 2014). Her research in South Africa and Southern Mexico engages with rural communities, providing Participants with technologies (that they sometimes otherwise would not have) to produce films about their lives, everyday experiences and what matters to them. Mitchell's work with mobile phones as participatory video production technologies covers a lot of ground. She wrestles with the colonizing practices of introducing technology to remote and rural areas where poverty levels are high. She also reflects on the power of the method to give something back to participants, while weighing up the potential of causing local inequalities and division. In later research, where participants own mobile technologies are more advanced, Mitchell laments this loss of the technology as a form of reward (2014 p.611).



This tension of 'what is in it for the participants reflects some of my own desire, through this research to give something to the participants who were so generous with their time and lunch hours. On the day of the conference I was able to provide each participant with a USB drive, a copy of their own film on each. The gamer's resistance group also had t-shirts (introduced in chapter two). The doll group kept additional Monster High dolls for their own use and throughout the project I took bakery goods and refreshments to each lunchtime meeting. However, Brown et al. (2020) point toward the importance of recognising the contribution of research participants in co-produced and participatory projects.

Remuneration, they argue, is linked to the legitimacy of knowledge and the value of time. Therefore, as in their own research they advocate paying participants at the same rate as their academic partners. Brown et al. (2020) make a convincing case. However, they do so in relation to a five-year, large scale, Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded, co-production project, 'Imagine: connecting communities through research'. The resources are not comparable to this project; however, it is a point of reflection and consideration for future projects.

Mitchell's work aims to raise awareness around HIV and Aids transmission, working with teachers to bring their culturally specific knowledge to the topic in a hope to improve education in schools (Mitchell et al. 2014; Mitchell and deLange 2013). Similarly, Katie MacEntee (2015) used mobile phones in research linking gender-based violence to HIV and aids transmission amongst secondary school students in a South African school. MacEntee (2015) describes the difficulties and responsibilities of positioning the video productions of her research as intervention. Like Mitchell et al (2015), MacEntee, highlights that it is often the aim to reach policy makers with participants stories, to amplify an issue to the extent that someone with power to change things might notice (2015, p.29). She concludes, however, that a focus on the process and the relationships formed can lead to smaller, local changes (highlighting services, self-reflection) that can be equally, if less obviously impactful.

A key finding from Mitchell's project related to the filming of locally specific indigenous practices where, Mitchell argues, video has become a medium for the transfer of specific ancestral knowledge relating to food practices. In many ways, each of the two videos

produced in my research attempted this same transference of a specialised knowledge, video game footage. The inclusion of these clips was for the participants, a way to invite the viewer to understand a world that might otherwise be lost in descriptive translation. There are too many identifying characteristics for the films to be included here and while it was a difficult decision, the anonymity of participants felt more important. The editing necessary to remove identifying characteristics would also have altered the films and therefore the key justification for their inclusion, to show them as they were meant to be viewed. These are ongoing issues and tensions in participatory and co-production research projects and remain a thorny and troublesome topic for me. In the end I was guided by concerns around the life of visual images in digital spaces (Mannay 2016; Fink and Lomax 2015). It is impossible to retrieve or to take back images that are available on the internet. This thesis will be freely available, and I will therefore relinquish any control I have over potential or imagined audiences of the films. Participants each have a copy of their own films and we agreed to be mindful of each other's privacy. While they were happy for me to share the films, I have decided to take a more cautionary stance.

This research, deliberately invited complexity, ambiguity and the hard to describe. Beyond the simple readings of protest against injustice, the complexity of participants lives is evident in the films. However, as I explored in relation to Sara's story, answering the question 'what can a teen gamer do?' is anything but simple. Across other chapters I have shown that teen gamers can materialise different selves, eschew binarised heteronormative gendering, escape the affective deadness of depression, create order and familiarity amongst a house of disorder. A teen gamer as I argue above, can survive and perhaps change the world. While it might be tempting to characterise those stories and these practices as fantasy, and stories of utopian optimism, the films demonstrate well that this is far from the case.

Each and every participant was aware of the territorializing forces that impede their gaming practices, their everyday practices. Discourses of risk, addiction, vulnerability, misogyny, ableism, health and sexism are all evident in these films. The young people who participated

in this project are aware of the negative discourses that circulate in relation to gaming. And yet, they persist. The stories of heroism, emancipation, equality, acceptance, brilliance, skill and mastery go some way towards helping us to understand this. When these stories are situated within the context of lives that can sometimes be hard to survive, the importance of these spaces becomes clear. At the end of this project, I was prepared to stand and fall in the name of gaming too.

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion?

#### 7.1 Introduction

This final concluding chapter summarises the main arc of the thesis, plotting each preceding chapter along its curve. I start by revisiting the opening introductory and literary chapters, unusual insofar as each unconventionally, contains elements of theory, empirical data and summarises extant empirical literatures. The rationale for this approach is that it is emblematic of the thesis and the research it reports. Theory, praxis, data and existing research were enfolded within every stage of the research, preceded the research, continued alongside this project and beyond it. Presenting the chapters in the way that I have, while unusual better reflects the innovative and original path of this journey. Each chapter represents a cut, one of many possible and so in this sense every chapter represents a new relationship to the data and to the process. The method-ing chapter is revisited, paying particular attention to the way literature and praxis are brought to bear on the approach to data production and the development of the research questions. I consider again the case of ethics, and its unique and original contribution to ethics in research with children and young people. Key moments from the three empirical chapters are then considered in relation to my four research questions

1. What can a neuro-diverse teen gamer do?
2. How do territorializing forces immobilise or impede teen gamers digital practices and what lines of flight are possible?
3. What happens when the territorializing forces of binarised (heteronormative) gendering is troubled?
4. What can a teen-gamer activism project do?

The final sections of this chapter consider what, along with the answers to the research questions this thesis contributes. Responding to the idea that a doctoral thesis makes an

original contribution, theoretically, methodologically and empirically I map the way that this research achieves that ambition. Lastly, I map the possible future questions and directions arising from the research. I conclude with a contribution from my participants, the last word as ever is rightfully theirs.

## 7.2 Wild Introductions to the field

The introduction to this thesis took the unusual approach of summarising some of the key empirical research in the related fields of study: childhood and youth, disabled childhoods, neurodiversity and gaming. The rationale for outlining these literatures as an introduction to the thesis is that what follows sits uneasily in the context of these related fields. While scholars such as Goodley, Runswick-Cole and Liddiard are bringing post-human theory to disability studies through their concept of the dis-human in fruitful ways; this work does not engage with young people's digital practices. Moreover, this is not a thesis about disabilities per-se. Similarly there is little, if any research in contemporary childhood studies that brings these approaches to the study of digital gaming and neurodiversity. Nonetheless, this literature was included to contextualise the project and situate it relationally to these fields.

## 7.3 Wild encounters with theory

The preceding extended introductory chapter paved the way for a literature chapter that could engage in more detail with the onto-epistemological framework guiding my approach to research feminist posthuman new-materialism (Coleman and Ringrose 2013). This chapter outlined the way that working with process ontologies affords a focus on fluidity and movement. These theories drawing on the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari (2013), Stengers (2019), Haraway (2016), Barad (2007; 2013) and Braidotti (2013; 2019), implicate materiality and distribute agency, non-hierarchically to the human and more than human of research encounters. These theories are notoriously difficult to integrate methodologically. However, I engage with the recent work of Jack Halberstam (2017; 2020) and bring their concepts of 'wildness' and \* to the 'doing' of PhEmaterialism.

*Wildness names simultaneously a chaotic force of nature, the outside of categorization, unrestrained forms of embodiment, the refusal to submit to social regulation, loss of control, the unpredictable (Halberstam 2020 p.3)*

Halberstam (2017) describes the use of the \* in a similar vein, to indicate a wildcard search the \* is used as holding open of possibilities. These ideas reflect my approach to the researching, reading and ruminating of this thesis. I found Halberstam's 'Wilding' useful to conceptualise this unfaithful, eclectic and sometimes unruly, patchwork approach to theory-data-research entanglements. Halberstam also develops the concept of 'bewilderment' where a position of stunned curiosity, 'a bafflement that's close to being enchanted' is taken. This conceptual fluidity has been useful throughout the project. Prioritising wild and bewildering relationality in this way shifts the focus from the identity politics of over-categorisation, looking for more examples of what is already known. So, the concepts helped to scaffold the vertigo-inducing practice of thinking beyond the representational (to the extent that this is possible). Conceptual promiscuity is justified by Deleuze and Guattari (2013) for this reason, for them the usefulness of a concept is gauged only through its application. In other words, specific and situated usefulness is prioritised over replication.

This approach reflects most accurately the processes that unfolded in this research. It is wildly unfaithful to any single theorist or corpus of work. Instead, it shares several core commitments to work gathering under the feminist-new-materialist umbrella: it rejects any notions of impartiality, objectivity or analytic distance from the reading and researching that took place. I understood my own relationality to the research encounters I was entangled in using the concepts of assemblage, becoming and intra-action. Halberstam's wilding and bewilderment should not be conflated with naivety and ignorance, rather this concept attaches itself nicely to what might elsewhere be called researcher reflexivity but is more accurately described through Barad's 'intra-action (2007)'. Ideas of authority within the research encounter are given over to maximising the capacities of these encounters to materialise difference and alterity, to creating the conditions for becoming and thinking differently. As change is always, already in existence, focusing in detail on these encounters it becomes possible to illuminate the micro moments of movement towards different modes of relationality. 'Bewilderment' (Halberstam 2020) permits those glimpses, those

affectively sticky stories (Ahmed 2004; Kofoed and Ringrose 2012; Hickey-Moody 2019a) that defy categorisation or easily fit into existing frames of reference, those representational frames that cannot account for excess. It is these excesses that interest me, that I attempt to map in this thesis. The non-representational is not the non-sensical, rather different-sensical, or super-sensical, where the linguistic is not privileged and affect is given equal status (Massumi 2015).

As Elizabeth Wilson argues in 'Gut Feminism' (2015), these ways of knowing with and being with, the realms of intuition and gut feeling have not historically been given credence. The regimes of scientific truth that still govern much of the social science academe demand at least a rampant empiricism. While the randomised control trial remains the undisputed heavy weight champion of research. But as Wilson (2015), Braidotti (2019), Stengers (2019) and Haraway (2016) contend, these regimes of truth continue to reproduce existing modes of thought. If things are to change the task for researchers is to map where it is already happening, to add these stories to the corpus and the cannon. Highlighting difference and complexity makes it harder to ignore, and chips at the edifice of rationalism, reason and positivism. It follows then that different ways of knowing can be supported through different ways of doing research, something feminists have long been aware of (Braidotti 2019; Wilson 2015). While it is certainly not the case that innovative and creative methods lead necessarily to better research or to prioritising different ways of engaging with data, rather there may be some usefulness for those of us seeking complexity to engage with this complexity in our method-ing.

#### 7.4 Method-ing wildly

The innovation and idiosyncrasy described in the method-ing chapter reflects the situated, ethically inflected, relationality of the research intra-actions it describes. Working with the affective capacities, flows and agencies of every unique encounter is demanding.

Recalibrating with the theories outlined above asks researchers to consider the micro-moments in projects, where researchers stay with the emerging trouble, crafting spaces for different stories of young people's lives in ethically response-able ways. To illustrate the situated usefulness of the methods in this thesis I included empirical data in this chapter.

Again, while this is not a conventional approach to thesis presentation it illustrates well the entanglement of theory and method.

Arguably, I could have conducted a traditional ethnography, spent time in 'the field', become a participant-observer in their lives and reported my findings inflecting them with a degree of researcher objectivity. However, as I have outlined above this does not faithfully represent what I set out to do, nor what I did. It is an ethical move to implicate myself and my methods in my praxis, as intra-acting with and alongside participants, noticing and attuning to the affective relationality of these encounters. It is an ethical move to draw attention to the cuts I made in the data that is produced, and to acknowledge that these analytical, agential cuts are one of myriad possible cuts (Barad 2007; 2013).

A significant drawback for researchers engaging with new and emerging theory is the noticeable absence of a training manual, a how-to guide for the novice researcher. While there is some guidance available this tends to be an abstract, step-by-step account of the neat and tidy application of theory and concepts to an amenable sample (cf. Fox and Alldred 2015). For researchers engaged in childhood studies the simplification of these messy encounters will be immediately obvious. Instead therefore, I looked to the publications of researchers engaging empirically with these theories (Lenz-Taguchi 2009; Osgood and Robinson 2019, Renold and Ivinson 2019). I was also inspired by feminist researchers in the related field of creative, visual and participatory methodologies (Mannay 2015; Lomax 2015; Fink and Lomax 2016; Lury; 2020; Leavy 2019). This rich vein of feminist research documents the affordances of visual and creative methods for different modes of participation and opening up spaces for participants own meanings to materialise. Using creative approaches can slow down research encounters, shift the focus away from interview techniques that assume a coherent and knowing linguistic account is available to participants (Mannay 2015; Lenz-Taguchi 2012). Critical engagements with the visual and creative draw attention to the way images in research can be used to frame and convey stories about research participants and serve as a reminder that the visual is no less open to framing and interpretation than other approaches (Fink and Lomax 2014; 2015; Kara 2015; Mannay 2015).



Finally, the method-ing chapter outlined the four research questions. The main, overarching research question: What can a neuro-diverse teen gamer do?

This key question was underpinned by three subsidiary questions:

2. How do territorializing forces immobilise or impede neurodiverse teen gamers digital practices, and what lines of flight are possible?
3. What happens when the territorializing forces of binarised (heteronormative) gendering is troubled?
4. What can a neurodiverse teen-gamer activism project do?

As this chapter has outlined, the decision to keep this key question open in preference to, 'What can a neurodiverse teen gamer girl do'? was informed by my commitment to keeping the research open to the broadest range of participants. In view of the fluid nature of gender categories, excluding boys deliberately, from the outset seemed to limit the possibilities for complex and diverse contributions. As the project continued, this decision proved prescient. Had the project been explicitly geared solely towards girls this might have negated Ceri's participation. A project that aimed to capture some of the fluidity and mutability of gender would not have been possible had it started with gender foreclosure.

Moreover, as I have argued, gender is produced relationally in complex assemblages. Excluding young people entangled in those assemblages, based on gender would have been counterintuitive to this understanding of gender. The main research question is answered across the empirical chapters. Each of the subsidiary questions can be mapped onto the empirical chapters. For instance, question two: How do territorializing forces immobilise or impede teen gamers digital practices and what lines of flight are possible? links to Ceri and Sara's stories in Chapter five. Question three: What happens when the territorializing forces of binarised (heteronormative) gendering is troubled? is addressed at length through an exploration of femininities and neurodiversity in special school settings. Lastly, question four is explored in chapter six which focuses on the videos produced for the youth activism conference. I will respond to these research questions in the sections that follow.

## 7.5 Wild questions with troubling answers

The following sections, through the stories and summaries from across the three empirical chapters, draw out the moments in the analysis that I relate to the research questions. Although each chapter responds to every question to some extent, the sections addressing the research questions represent decisive cuts to the analysis, as they do to the data. What started as a project aiming to engage with the missing narratives of girls in digital gaming spaces (inviting both boys and girls to contribute to these stories) became a project with neurodiverse gamers. This welcome development brought its own challenges. As I highlighted at the start of the thesis I am not a scholar of neurodiversity. However, my research experience, engaging children and young people using creative and participatory methods, provided the tools and confidence to engage with these young people. The theory-method-entanglements that evolved in this project are informed by the ethically response-able research I have been involved in previously and alongside this research. That is to say, I was not a novice researcher let loose in a special school with some coloured pens and a flipchart. While the methods or techniques (Springaay 2016) of data production evolved collaboratively, I had planned lightly and was confident that I could work with these young people in art-ful ways. It is no coincidence that these methods were developed in a way that shifts the focus from purely linguistic accounts. The rationale for developing creative approaches to researching with disabled neurodiverse children and young people is outlined in chapter three. An interview schedule and an audio recorder would not have been or felt appropriate, nor would observing these young people from the side-lines with a clipboard.

This was an enjoyable project, while the stories are complex, affectively heavy and difficult in places, the joy of materialising t-shirts, making dolls, dancing, singing, gaming and crafting were purposefully engaging. These chaotic, messy and sometimes headache inducing methods carried the difficult stories into the research on vectors of lightness. And so, the intensity of the stories was not reflected in the lightness of their transmission. In crafting the conditions for stories of the positive affordances of gaming, these were the stories that seemed to have to be told that could not be contained. I never led with questions about difficult home lives, misogyny in gaming or negativity, while knowing that they were probably there. Crafting the spaces and methods for participants to bring their own stories

allowed the pace, the depth and the flow of what they shared to be in some sense, given over to them. However, the project was named, there was a topic, participants brought their unique stories to this. The case of ethics (see chapter three) functioned well as a statement of my commitment to participant's well-being. Inevitably there might have been a feeling at times that participants had to contribute, that they needed to provide 'good data'. These eventualities can never be entirely mitigated (Mannay 2015; Lomax et al. 2011; Renold et al. 2011). However, working in response-able and ethical ways aimed to minimise these consequences wherever possible. These methods are specific to these encounters in these places and I am not providing a blueprint for replicable research. Rather, it is an account of entangled openness in the research process. It is a thesis that relays how I worked with these theories and neurodiverse young people in particular settings at particular historical moments.

A key difference between this approach and that of other participatory approaches is that mine was a lot less structured. Other approaches might focus too, on safer knowledge claims. This is what Lather (2006) calls the legacy of positivist approaches, writ large in qualitative research, where anxiety around truth and validity remain. Lather (2015) instead proposes a 'move towards glimmers of alternative understandings and practices that give coherence and imaginary to what is possible after the methodological positivism that has taken up so much of our time' (Lather 2015, p.5). The approach I have taken costs a relinquishing of definite themes and linear order (however much these must finally be written into existence in this thesis) but the gains here are complexity of everyday life (Lather 2015). Unlike traditional ethnographic approaches that report 'thick description' and 'being there' I make no claim to observing 'natural encounters', the methods, and importantly, myself were always *in* those encounters, those assemblages (but remained purposefully different to them). It is from this tension, this difference that I came to notice what matters. Not in a clear and linear way, noticing themes and linking to representations but through constant, almost overwhelming, relentless, engagement, 'staying with the trouble' (Haraway 2016) as a way of 'knowing' through becoming with the research assemblage.

While I feel that stories of multiplicities and ambiguities around the way young people survive their lives have certainly always been there, that a feminist engagement with this topic would reveal gender relationality was somewhat inevitable, the stories in this thesis are nonetheless unique. I present the types and kinds of stories that refuse to be pressed in to 'normative' narratives of innocence, linear trajectories, camaraderie and simplicity. I was only able to slip into these particular stories because of the relationships that were built and crafted through the research process, in the trouble of it all, wilding and method-ing.

## 7.6 What can a neuro-diverse teen gamer do? Assembling the assemblages of un/intelligible gender trouble

Chapter four introduced the neuro-diverse girls from the special school, mapping the ways that these girls are impossibly positioned in relation to dominant masculine discourses of neurodiversity (Baron-Cohen et al. 2011). Discourses that inflect the way professionals understand the girls in the school. Katya and Selby, who I met in the dedicated ASD classes and Lena and Anna who were in the post-16 class of the school. It is a stretch to include Katya in the category of teen gamer, nevertheless what she can do is an important question and I include her in this analysis. My claim is that a teen gamer can craft her own territories of survivability. This first research question should be qualified by an addition, instead of, 'what can a neuro-diverse teen gamer do'? chapter four focused more specifically on, what can a neuro-diverse teen gamer attending a special school in South Wales can do? The answer I argue, remains the same. Spaces of survivability, solitude and social acceptance are thin on the ground for the girls in this study and so their importance cannot be overstated. This is not the place to draw up hierarchies of difficulty faced by teens in contemporary society. Teens' position at the intersection of increasingly schizoid, contradictory discourses is well documented elsewhere (Egan and Hawkes 2012; Bragg et al. 2018; Ringrose 2008; Renold and Ringrose 2019) but it should be clear that the complex life worlds and everyday experiences of Katya, Anna and Lena offer very little respite from what are self-evidently troubled and troubling pasts.

### 7.6.1 Re-imagining the real with Crimson-Lena

It is tempting to cut a line between the 'real' experiences of materially mediated spaces and the virtual world of play, be that digital in Anna and Lena's case or the sensorily totalising environment of the soft play area for Katya. The unsustainability of this position is highlighted by several key theorists including van Doorn (2011) who sketches the way that digitally initiated practices are materially real in people's constructions of themselves and others. This is supported by Papacharissi (2015), whose study of Twitter maps the circulation of affect with no greater or lesser intensity, or real consequences between them. A feminist new-materialist analysis enfolds cyber-social spaces and renders the distinction invisible altogether. Democratising the human and non-human relations that we are all always entangled in, equal status is afforded to the forces entangled and imbricated in the affective relational webs of assemblages. As a parallel example, I would not call embodied memory of scalding that prevents me from laying my open palm on a hot plate, virtual or not real. It makes little sense to try to hold the line between spaces that have the power to affect us and alter the course of our lives. As outlined earlier, past and future are enmeshed in the experiential now, so too is the digital. Papacharissi's 'affective publics' (2015) evidences this in relation to social media. The very real consequences of digital conflict were introduced in chapter two where I described the online wars of Gamer Gate. These spaces are, and are increasingly so, part of the fabric of our everyday lives. Pictures and images, information on our lives, content created and lived in online spaces exists in no discernibly different way.

As a reminder subjectivities in this sense emerge as assemblages of the material-discursive-affective-human and non-human (Blackman et al. 2008; Strom et al. 2018; Puar 2012), performing a cut in any of the stories could produce the teen gamer as a user of digital spaces in response to a lack in materially 'real spaces'. If however, the analytic gaze is shifted slightly, moments of power and agency are rendered visible. Lena is her Original Character (OC) Crimson in every way that matters in that assemblage-encounter. Blethyn is relegated in every sense, he is marginalised by the discursive enactment of Lena's power and strength. Teen gamer Lena becomes strong, invincible and does not feel pain. This is no more a fixed position than any other. Certainly, without Lena Crimson does not exist, Crimson and Lena become together. Crimson is not an intellectualised, disembodied list of

characteristics, she is lived in that encounter and in a way that Caspian (Blethyn's OC) never quite does.

This is not to say that Crimson is rendered materially real through Lena's discursive acts, rather Crimson becomes with Lena, materialises affectively. In the encounter that features in chapter four neither Blethyn nor I were in any doubt. It is not the case either that we recognised Crimson as real and that this act of recognition rendered Crimson real, Crimson is felt-thought via affective registers, Crimson-Lena, Lena-Crimson becomes via the complex entanglement of all these forces and affects, of recognition, declaration, drawing, colour, embodied gesture and vocal register. This cut materialises no 'ASD girl', no lack or excess, it recognises the affective landscape of the Lena-Crimson-Crimson-Lena assemblage. Via this situated assemblage a teen gamer can become otherwise, gender becomes otherwise ('girls are way more fabulous'), in those moments a different story is possible, and perhaps the neurodiverse girl becomes visible.

#### 7.6.2 Hard to find in soft play: the appearance of the disappearing neurodiverse girl

Similarly, the soft-play-Katya assemblage enfolds and unfolds different situated knowledges and sensorial registers. I am overwhelmed by the smell of urine, foot and bodily odour and disoriented by the heat, the adhesive clamminess of the damp PVC fabric that I am completely submerged in, I am looking for guidance from Katya. Katya has been using the soft play for at least a year and knows its landscape much better, Katya has an advantage. Teen-gamer Katya renders herself in complete control by becoming invisible but affectively totalising in proximity. Here, Katya shakes the research assemblage snow globe, and I was temporarily blinded by the blizzard. I was afraid, Katya remained silent, watching me, testing me and my capacities for discomfort. Situationally, it became overwhelming and too much for me. Once the affective spell was broken and I moved outside of the game, Katya disappeared again. Always elusive to the project and to the specific research encounter. Teen-gamer Katya can become invisible and unseen.

#### 7.6.3 Every day is Christmas

As both Lena and Katya evidence there are possibilities otherwise, but perhaps the most succinct analysis of what teen gamers can do is provided by Anna. Gaming spaces are spaces for different stories and different situated subjectivities to unfold. Practices that arguably feel good, feel different and upend the more every day. These are spaces of survivability, that make living on the girls' own terms, possible. For Anna, once her frequent severe depression surfaces, these spaces *are* her life, they are the only thing she feels she can do. Sometimes for months this is where Anna lives. If the urge to individualise schizophrenia is resisted and not seen as a problem to be fixed in Anna, and the gaze is shifted to the world around her, it is understandable that cinnamon scented Christmas every day is more liveable. What can a neurodiverse teen gamer do? The answer is, survive.

#### 7.6.4 Crafting queer communities

Chapter five introduced Sara and Ceri who draw on digital gaming spaces and communities to carve out different narratives of gender mobility and safety. For Sara, markswomanship is an (online and offline) practice that provides opportunities to feel good and to feel powerful. Reflecting on Sara's family life, the possibility of order in digital spaces arises in context of mess and chaos. It is worth remembering too that this backdrop was not simply a case of untidiness; the hoarding and lack of cleanliness in Sara's house was severe enough to warrant local authority interventions. Like Anna, Sara's life was hard surviving was difficult.

For Ceri, community kinship to local and global communities can materialise stickier stories around gender fluidity against a familial backdrop where they struggle to find adhesion. Supportive, affirmative positive communities were outlined by Sara and Ceri as one of the greatest strengths of digitally mediated gaming cultures. However, these stories jostled against the narrative in the 'Felt with Monsters' film, where misogyny and gender violence featured. Clearly though these negative encounters, while upsetting were in no way defeating. These narratives can and do co-exist. Ceri and Sara still claim these spaces and the positive affordances for their own stories of survival. What is evident from the video is that although depression and anxiety seem to have the upper hand in other areas of their lives, when it comes to gaming Sara and Ceri will come out fighting. The anger is there in the

video along with the power and victory. What can a teen gamer do? The answer is survive and thrive.

## 7.7 Territorializing territories: what makes for a line of flight?

Question two focuses on the force relations that territorialize, immobilise or impede teen gamer's digital practices and what lines of flight are possible?

In chapter four, neurodiverse girls, the analysis demonstrates that the very articulation of strength, physical domination and power in Lena's account is only necessary because those things are in question. Crimson materialises those affects, feelings and characteristics that are rejected in Lena. While Crimson offers Lena a line of flight away from the territorializing forces of gender, these immobilizing forces are felt with enough affective force for them to be explicitly addressed and rejected.

While Anna's quietness means that she does not incur the same confused antipathy that is sometimes directed towards Katya and Lena by school staff, her withdrawn and visibly heavy sadness marginalise her. Anna is on the periphery and in the classes I participate in she is mostly left alone. There is no glib jolly along or attempts to move her out of the sadness, the animated lightness of her game play seems to me to be an overlooked resource for engaging Anna. Here the immobilizing forces are those of the difficulties people may feel in engaging with someone who is profoundly depressed. Anna can be non-responsive and if she does not want to talk can be rude and sarcastic as a defence mechanism. The categories and diagnosis seem to have congealed and solidified to the extent that most of the staff and other students do not attempt to engage with Anna never mind how she is feeling.

### 7.7. 1 The quiet territorialization of schizophrenia and depression

Anna's game preferences are tied to normative scripts of the things that 'girls' enjoy (Walkerdine 1990; Youdell 2010). Gee (2007) outlines what he sees as girls' preferences for dressing characters up, making houses and caring for animals. The graphics, accompanying music and style of play is undoubtedly lighter than many shooting games; I wonder if these



games provide a space of unquestionable lightness, a path away from the diagnostic labels that pin Anna down? Christmas Anna becomes in a world where every possible detail has been thought of, where pets are happy and well-fed, where her wardrobe is extensive, and her friendship group is large. During the walkthrough of her Sims world I could almost smell the cinnamon that seemed to be dusting everything, where fairy lights iced the town and everything twinkled. More than just an escape or a distraction, Anna spent weeks of her life living there when she was unable to bear living anywhere else. I was surprised that no one ever talked to Anna about those places.

There are several key points that illustrate the possible lines of flight amongst the territorializing forces that immobilise or impede teen gamers digital practices in chapter five. Chief amongst them is the online gaming sexism and misogyny experienced by Ceri and Sara, and this is the focus of their activism video. For Ceri their brother's, sometimes, wilful, misunderstanding of her fluid identities attempts sometimes to fix her in place. By repeatedly forcing Ceri to say what they are he achieves this to some degree. However, this only impedes Ceri's becomings to some extent and it is through the online communities of Ceri's digital practices that possible lines of flight materialise. I will return to this point as I explore research question three below.

For Sara, the most obvious territorializing forces flow from the counsellor. The solutions provided for Sara's complex problems revolved around neo-liberal understandings of self-improvement through self-modification. This is the idea that whatever the malaise the responsibility for curing it lies with the individual and their capacities to discipline their bodies; what Foucault calls, 'technologies of the self' (1998).

This subjectifying process ignores those contextual factors that are beyond the realms of the wellness rhetoric and over-simplifies the problems faced by Sara. Sara's gaming practices are singled out as a problem to be solved. Sara is told that by rationing playing time she will start to feel less depressed and anxious. This advice seems to me to be both predictable and wholly wrong-footed. There is very little that shines the light of joy into Sara's often dark and lonely existence but playing and excelling at videogames is one of them. It is naïve to ignore the challenges faced by resource poor counselling services who have seen

unprecedented rises in mental health issues amongst children and young people over the last decade (Pitchforth et al. 2018). But it seems to me that exploring Sara's enjoyment of creativity or clay pigeon shooting might have been a more affirmative and less dismissive approach. If lines of flight are those moment of possibility otherwise, this is what gaming represents for Sara, those flashes of success, recognition, of becoming with 'Mercy' the healer. In those gaming montages I see Sara becoming with cyborg, with cigar smoking cowboy. At every viewing of these clips the reflection in the corner of the glass was Sara beaming, becoming, something else.

So territorializing forces immobilise and impede teen gamers digital practices through adult discourses of risk, addiction. Online misogyny and gender discourses feature too. However, the lines of flight glimpsed in those moments when none of these things matter anymore were evident. Crimson-Lena in all her fabulous strength, Sara's joyful face reflected in the corner of her phone screen while her cowboy, cigarette-flicking self annihilates the opposition. And Ceri, whose creative flights are outlined in more detail in the next section

## 7.8 Troubling gender territories

Research question three: What happens when the territorializing forces of binarised (heteronormative) gendering is troubled?

*It is necessary to interrogate how the uneven institutionalization of women's, gay, and trans politics produces a transnormative subject, whose universal trajectory of coming out/transition, visibility, recognition, protection, and self-actualization largely remain uninterrogated in its complicities and convergences with biomedical, neoliberal, racist, and imperialist projects.*

*(Puar 2015, p.45)*

The way these forces figure in the disruption or gender troubling of binarised, heteronormative gender is illustrated well in the sections on M-Preg in chapter five. Here, in a move beyond the fixity and stasis of imagined trans\* trajectories, bodily capacities are storied otherwise (Puar 2015; Osgood and Robinson 2019). Gendered foreclosures are not

the exclusive preserve of normative gendering, where border crossings are pathologised and the production of normative genders is defended through shame and othering. Arguably, trans\* identities too come to be associated with a binarised, heteronormative choice, along an imagined linear path (Halberstam 2018). The imagined process of evolving from one gender, albeit dangerously to another. This flattening of gender into discrete groups ignores the multiple ambivalences and contradictions that characterise Ceri's stories. So in those sections it is possible to see what happens when trans\* as well as normative gendering is troubled. Maternal, gestational forces materialise within the relational web of trans\* male subjectivities. These stories provide vital lines of flight away from fixity, definitiveness and foreclosure of continuing movement (Ivinson and Renold 2013; 2014). The cost for Ceri at least, is weighed in sadness, a sometimes-enjoyable sadness but one with a more identifiable source.

#### 7.8.1 Violently upsetting the equilibrium: neurodiverse girls

For Sara the interventions around counselling are tied to some extent to her refusal to do normative femininity, gaming, napping and refusing to wash regularly are not behaviours associated with teen girls and the hyper-femininity of normative discourses (Walkerdine 1990; 2007). Sara's counsellor's first moves seem to focus on these aspects of Sara's life. Arguably these are quicker things for the counsellor to 'fix' than complex peer and family relations, the additional support Sara needs to continue her studies at school. However, gaming for Sara is a key coping strategy and so policing this area of her life seems counterintuitive.

The analysis in chapter four highlighted the almost impossibility of the neurodiverse girl subject position. Neurodiversity or Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a gendered medical category (Baron-Cohen et al. 2011, Silberman 2001; Murray 2011; Egerton and Carpenter 2016). The 'symptoms' or characteristics have been historically linked to 'excessive male brain' (Baron-Cohen 2011; Ridley 2019). That is, a lack of empathy, increased rationality (whatever that might be), an aptitude for maths and logic, organised systematic thinking, repetitive behaviours, poor social skills, and a frustration at being misunderstood that is commonly manifested through violent behaviour. When staff working with children and

young people encounter this set of traits or behaviours in girls, confusion, marginalization and pathologization unfold.

As I highlighted in the data extract with Lindsey, the girls are described as wild and unpredictable with the power to, 'verbalise the boys'. Not only are girls in Lindsey's description both predictable and unpredictable at the same time, but their mere presence is also enough to violently upset the equilibrium of the classes they participate in. I spent time in these classes with those boys and there was often a powder keg feeling to the room. If lesson instructions were difficult to understand or execute the boys would start to hit themselves and their desks or to slap the arms of the teaching assistants. In one lesson two boys started a Lego throwing fight, another class member started to cry and then to pace before putting himself in the padded timeout room. So, on the one hand it is very easy to understand how a wild and unruly extra person may well be the catalyst for further unrest. While on the other hand it was very difficult to relate to the idea that there was ever a sense of calm and predictability to that environment. However, I am aware that I spent relatively little time in those classes, and it is entirely possible that there were flows of tacit, embodied noticing that I never perceived.

Chapter four specifically outlined the consequences of gender trouble for the neuro-diverse girls in this study. These girls are characterised as too wild, too unpredictable, troublemakers, obnoxious. I also reflected on how it feels to be situated amid an environment that reads the same behaviours, that draw such strong censure, easily from boys. Arguably, this double standard is not a new finding in any sense (Jackson 2006; Walkerdine 2007; Raey 2001). However, the same repertoires for masking undesirable gendered performances are not readily available. Those performances that in all likelihood pre-empted a diagnosis, find no easy pathway through an incredibly gendered terrain.

#### 7.8.2 Gender as a troubling concept

Throughout this thesis I have highlighted affective forces where they are most identifiable and most amenable to the craft of research thesis writing. As I said in chapter six, much more besides escapes capture in this way. The electric frisson of making films, the shiny,

victorious joy of breakthroughs in editing, the treacly texture of Sara's defeated posture. The moments of realising that gender is something unplaceable, and uncategorisable, that it shifts into focus only in those moments when it materialises as a territorializing force. Movement when glimpsed is always on a path of escape from categories:

*"The practical implications of PostHumanist approaches to studying gender... is that they allow for a recognition of identities as generated relationally with objects, spaces, places and they are multi-sensory becomings that constantly mutate and transmute – making certainties about gender infinitely uncertain."* (Osgood and Robinson 2019 p.69)

And yet the importance of interrogating gender remains. As a politically operationalised concept, while so much inequality is produced in its name, the luxury of abandoning the concept altogether does not exist (Hemmings 2018). Gender does things, even if that is orienting against what it is reported to be as Ceri does. What then for the gender trouble of neurodiverse girls? How might we move towards an understanding of their lives without recourse to restrictive binary stereotypes? Stillness and capture through image creation, gaming alone, these are the only moments of respite for Lena. The young people in this study like most young people, seek out spaces of acceptance and experimentation produced through increasingly complex social assemblages.

Post humanist perspectives have approached ASD as an assemblage, a lived, material, embodied, and everyday reality that emphasises the multiple relations in which every human being is positioned. In this respect, ASD and disability are "the quintessential posthuman position" (Goodley et al 2014, p. 846). However, neurodiversity has been linked in unhelpful ways to an impoverished and stereotypical posthumanism in ways that predict a future fashioned solely in the realms of the digital, where materially 'real' spaces are subsidiary and undesirable. While 'Vice versa, "the child with autism" may be considered a figure of the posthuman because he or she shows that our existence is always dependent on, and in relationship with, a whole range of technologies' (Frigerio et al. 2017; p.394; see also Wolfe 2009). At the intersection of these complex, contradictory and competing discourses the young people in this project fashion different stories of gender relations and

neurodiversity. The joyful and emancipatory affordances of their gaming spaces hold an uncomfortable mirror to the contexts of their lives. However, those contexts are implicated and entangled in those stories too. While Anna might declare a desire to live in a permanent Sims Christmas, this story goes some way to expressing the melancholic relationship these young people have to their everyday lives. It is as much an expression of desire for things to be different again. Until then, they craft those differences for themselves.

## 7.9 Teen gamer activism doings

### 7.9.1 Dragons, solidarity and visibility

Question four, what can a teen-gamer activism project do?, was the focus of the previous chapter, but I will recap here and outline the way it infused the thesis. As a core participant to the Gamer's resistance group, the narrative of the video was very much shaped by Lena's contribution. For Lena, a teen-gamer activism project materialised as Crimson in a conference centre in Cardiff in her 'way more fabulous' iteration. Lena-Crimson's message to people was one of the vital importance of gaming spaces for all young people. On the huge screen, to a rapt audience a neurodiverse girl briefly came into focus. The teen gamer activism project also brought Anna and Lena together. They had a fractious and borderline aggressive relational style with each other, they shared no common ground in gaming terms. While they shared an aptitude for drawing this seemed to be a source of competition rather than one of solidarity. Lena was unnerved by Anna's quietness and disapproving looks. Anna thought Lena was too loud and annoying. However, in one meeting they collaborated on a dragon that Lena (and Blethyn) insisted be considered Anna's contribution to the video activism. So perhaps there was a little solidarity after all. The activism project carried Anna-Lena's solidarity dragon to Cardiff for a while. Anna was unable to attend, but she was there all the same.

*Erin Manning argues that to conceive of art as the manner through how we engage, helps us glimpse 'a feeling forth of new potential' (2016, 47). This requires careful attention to how the proto-political potentials of feelings and ideas are performed and transformed through events and the crafting of artefacts. It also demands an*

*'ontology of engagement' (Stengers 2019, p.19) marbled with a Baradian ethical 'response-ability' (Barad 2007) that blurs any clear divide between research, engagement and activism. (Renold et al. 2020, p.442)*

As this quote demonstrates there are no simple input, output, outcomes to summarise here. What unfolded and enfolded at the conference was possibility, the narratives that participants crafted through the videos were released and in the same moment realised. It is important not to overstate but also not to understate what it meant to those young people, to know that their contributions matter.

Starting from the middle of this complexity it is impossible to imagine all the different ways it might come to matter in the future, although the tentacles described in chapter six highlight the mobility so far. This backward tracing and mapping demonstrated how Ceri was able to tell a story through song, that materialised the impossibilities of occupying the present moment. Ceri's refusal to be immobilised by territorializing gendered forces is reflected in the lyrics of the song. Their willingness to be visible and heard is carried on the vocal registers of the song. The difficult feelings in gaming spaces felt and experienced by Ceri and Sara were felt with felt, as a way to express in colour and texture the injury of misogynistic slurs. A teen gamer activism project can materialise those registers. It can carry young people usually absent from research and youth activism events to Cardiff to sit alongside peers, where young people like Greta, like them, are standing up for the things that matter to them. A teen gamer activism project can materialise positive stories about gaming spaces as spaces of inclusion and acceptance. A teen gamer activism project can also materialise for a moment, for anyone looking, the elusive neurodiverse girl.

#### 7.9.2 A place for process and everything else

Stories of gender-based violence in gaming spaces were told in the film with the dolls that I have introduced in chapter six. There was a contrast between the topics that were discussed through the process of creating the dolls and the more territorializing narratives that the dolls convey. So in this sense the teen gamer-activism project became the repository for the stories that are depressingly familiar in relation to girls in gaming spaces (Sarkeesian 2012;

Shaw 2014). Perhaps this freed the process from these narratives and so the process of engagement created a space for the queer becomings with incest, male pregnancy, shooting, and pulling hair out. The important stories of sexism and misogyny had a space to materialise and left an opening for more complex stories of trans becomings and power.

#### 7.10 Making and mattering a contribution

A tension in this thesis has been find a balance between amplifying and illuminating the stories participants want to tell and the business of social science research. The former is self-evident within these chapters and the latter is primarily concerned with documenting how to do this. As I have suggested above there is scant literature detailing how to do this. To the best of my knowledge there is no comprehensive guide on developing a feminist new materialist research project (although a few are underway as I write this conclusion including a series for Routledge<sup>30</sup>, Murriss 2020). There are useful edited collections of research working with these new theories (Osgood and Robinson 2019; Coleman and Ringrose 2013; Ringrose et al. 2019) and articles (Renold and Ivinson 2019; Hickey-Moody 2017; Lenz-Taguchi 2012; Jackson and Mazzei 2017) and the PhEmaterialist website is a useful resource. However, there are no accounts of research with neurodiverse young people exploring their digital gaming practices using these theories. In other words, while this approach is used elsewhere, to the best of my knowledge it hasn't been used to research with this group. Therefore, my significant contribution is answered by recourse to the research questions and the crafting of the journey that allowed me to explore and answer them. I will outline briefly but specifically what my contribution in three main areas is below.

#### 7.11 Mattering theoretically, methodologically and empirically

This thesis adds to the growing body of work that engages the theory of new-materialism as an onto-epistemological ethical engagement with the research process. It demonstrates how these theories might help us to engage with children and young people in interested rather than intrusive ways, to tell different stories about their lives and how they are

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<sup>30</sup> More information on this book series is available at: [www.postqualitativeresearch.com](http://www.postqualitativeresearch.com)



rendered more survivable, more liveable through their cyber-social relations and communities.

This thesis documents the broad range of innovative and creative research practices that were employed to produce data entanglements. It is not my claim that these methods offer a route towards a more authentic research encounter nor that they are always participatory and democratising, instead the careful use of these methods may create spaces for telling different stories in different ways, but at other times operate in the same alienating way as other research methodologies. Material or radical reflexivity, ethical praxis and respectful curiosity were at the heart of this thesis, inspired by decades of important work in this area by feminist researchers. To the best of my knowledge, the case of ethics, developed as a way to engage research participants in discussions of informed consent represents a unique and innovative approach. The case was inspired by the work of Squinkifer and Marcotte (2017) and the use of ethical objects in the work of EJ Renold and their paper (Renold et al. 2011) 'becoming participant'. The case is totemic of my contribution to the creative 'gifting' (Oakley 2016) between participant and researcher.

The field of disabled childhood studies is growing at pace and there is an increasing body of research that has highlighted the gap in the literature exploring the everyday lives of those children and young people. It is the case that girl's videogaming practices and relationships are an under researched area, the same is true of the everyday lives of girls with diagnosis of neurodiversity. Research in these areas often simply state that these girls exist. This thesis engaged with girls from both groups and explored the conditions of that existence, what brings them joy, what makes life survivable and what do they want the world to know? I do not claim to have definitive answers to any questions. Instead I have more questions but in the preceding chapters some of those different stories about gaming, relationships, gender and the everyday lives of those young people find a place.

## 7.12 Weighing the thesis

I have outlined extensively what I believe to be the key strengths of the approach taken in this research, to craft and create with young people the spaces for different, complex and

messy stories to emerge. However, this was not without its drawbacks and limitations. Primarily that the approach is a victim of its own successes, it creates chaos, ambiguity, it is messy in process and product. Therefore, this kind of approach is not amenable to achieving easy or straight forward answers. In projects where time or resources are scarce adopting this approach would likely derail things significantly. Relatedly, there are issues around transparency, explaining what it is beyond making a mess, I actually did. It is for these reasons that the method-ing and literature chapters are so long. Working 'differently' is a broad remit and not one to be conflated (as I have reflected before) on taking in paper and crayons to produce 'more authentic' stories. While on the surface an approach like this might not seem to sit easily with policy work and recommendations, I have worked alongside EJ Renold, whose creative and participatory praxis inflects my own. Their research demonstrates that with care-ful crafting, complex stories can find a place to land, in impactful ways. In a world of numbers, facts and certainty, the creative can carry complexity on the vectors of participant's own voices (Bragg et al. 2018).

Elsewhere, theories of complexity and new materialism are taken to task for their focus on whiteness and the philosophy of dead white men (Ahmed 2008, p.30). However, I am not claiming to speak on behalf of any large social group. The Welsh valleys are notoriously mono-cultural. As I detailed above a future direction for this research is to engage with more ethnically diverse populations. However it is only by engaging in different ways, that different knowledges and stories can be told. Neurodiverse gamer girls were until now a more-or-less invisible population. These approaches have also drawn criticism for claims to 'newness' that ignore indigenous knowledges that have always valued the capacities of the more-than human and the affective in their ontological and epistemological project (Watts 2013; Todd 2016). As a doctoral student the approach outlined in this thesis felt somewhat unorthodox and risky. Arguably I could have devoted more time to engaging with indigenous knowledges, not least because they lend further weight to my approach (Rosiek et al. 2020). However, in their summary of the reluctance of Western scholars to engage with, 'agent ontologies' Rosiek et al. (2020) highlight some of the challenges faced. In indigenous literatures, they argue, there is no need to make a case for the agency of the material world, it is taken as self-evident. These literatures instead focus on the particularities of the emergent relationships. This, they surmise, places the Western scholar

firmly in unfamiliar territory, intellectually and linguistically. I came to these debates very late in writing this thesis and some of the conceptual language I use here felt risky enough. However, I remain interested in respectful anti-colonial ways to engage with indigenous knowledges in future research.

### 7.13 What matters in the future?

To some extent, what matters in the future has already begun. I have delivered workshops on the 'case of ethics' for social work practitioners (Edwards 2019) and students. There has been a positive response to this method and I have been contacted by scholars from across the UK about ways this can be incorporated into practice. I also described the tentacular reach of the thesis in chapter six with the Crush Card (Appendix 6). This card has been in use for almost two years now as part of a professional learning programme for Relationships and Sexuality Education in Wales (Renold et al. 2020).

Additionally, Wales is currently radically overhauling what was the Special Educational Needs (SEN) system. 'The Additional Learning Needs transformation programme' (Welsh Government 2020) is underway for implementation by September 2021 (Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal ACT 2018). This act extends the funding provision for those with 'additional learning needs' to 25 years of age. It also aims to put learners and their rights at the heart of decision making. This process of reforms will evolve alongside the significant changes to the national curriculum in Wales, including statutory relationships and sexuality education (RSE). So, 'additional learning needs' provision and relationships and sexuality education are hot topics in Wales at present (Welsh Government 2020; Renold and McGeeney 2018). This research can continue to make valuable contributions to raising the profile of these young people. A key strategic move in this direction will be to organise future events, to continue the journey of the stories in this thesis. I also plan to engage with stories that there was no space for here, that I plan to work with in similar ways. These stories will feed forwards to teaching resources and contribute to the ever-widening field of resources on ways to work with young people around relationships and sexualities education.

There are several avenues that this research opens up. In light of the success of this project I am interested in how a similar approach would work across many different groups, opening up to wider ecologies of practice. For instance, questions remain around the neurodiverse girl and ethnicity and I would be interested to try and find her, to work creatively and tell those stories. I would be interested to explore what this approach could bring to understanding the lives of girls in multi-ethnic inner-city areas. Wider assemblages of participants might include adult caregivers, parents and significant adults in the lives of neurodiverse young people. There are also many more 'cuts' that could be opened up in myriad ways, using the same data and data that I have not presented here. The decision to focus on girls was outlined extensively in the opening chapters of this thesis and there simply was not the space or time to work with all the data. However, I plan to return to it in the future.

#### 7.14 What matters in the end

The title of this thesis 'making gender trouble' works in several ways. The thesis to some extent makes this trouble for the reader. Perhaps more than this, the whole thesis has been about making gender trouble the project. Gender is operationalised as a category to disrupt the notion that neurodiverse girls are simply unpredictable, more violent and unmanageable, when compared to their male counterparts. Gender is operationalised as a concept by the participants in the trans\* chapter, to trouble notions of fixed gender destinations and biological limitations. Gender is operationalised as a concept by the monstrous dolls in the activism chapter, who refuse to be bullied out of gaming spaces. Rather than making claims about what gender *is*, I have shown what it does. In these examples gender troubles the status quo, it disrupts the smooth and striated running of things. Gender troubles the participants of this research. This thesis is an account of staying with this trouble, mapping its movement and tracing its terrain. This is not the end, rather it is a pause for breath. The stories that came to matter in this thesis are about how cyber-social relations and the culture of gaming may provide spaces of survivability for some young people. These stories are about lives in complex assemblages of neurodiversity, gender, youth and teen culture. The last words of this thesis belong to my participants.

## 7.15 A lot on my plate, this matters

The plate below (Figure 60) is taken from a starter activity in AGENDA (Renold 2016) that I have used many times. Participants write on a red plate, something that they would like to stop. On a green plate they write something they would like to start or see more of. This plate was a collaborative endeavour, The Gamer's resistance group produced this together in our final meeting. The handwriting is tricky to read so beneath the plate are the transcribed words as they appear.

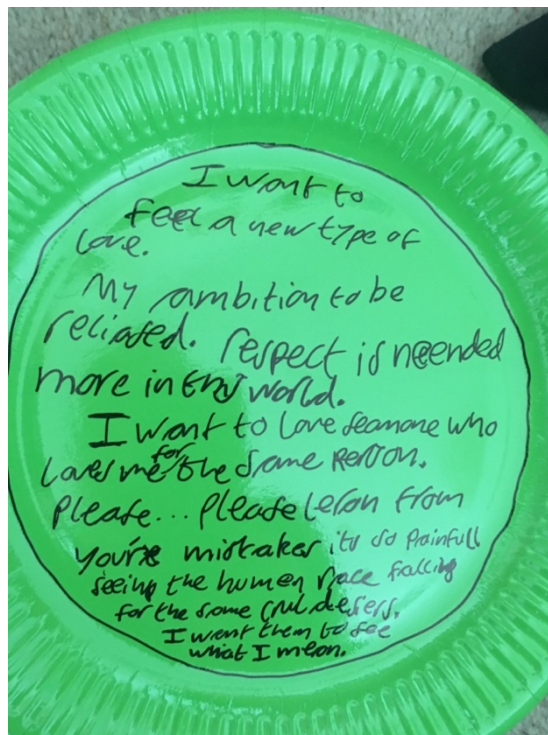


Figure 60: Green plate statement

*I want to feel a new type of love.*

*My ambition to be realised*

*Respect is needed more in my world*

*I want to love someone who loves me for the same reason*

*Please...please learn from your mistakes*

*It's so painful seeing the human race falling for the same cruel desires*

*I want them to see what I mean*

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Visual survey

**Age**  **Gender:**

**I PLAY (shade the box)**

Occasionally **Daily** **Weekly** **Monthly** **Never** → **Because**







**For .....hours**

**Is this is enough?**  
YES NO




**Who decides? (tick box)**





**Other.....** **Me** **Parents/carers** **It depends when I have friends/others to play with**

**I PLAY ON**  
(circle the one used most, tick all that you use)

Tablet/surface/iPad      

**I play mostly**  
(circle)

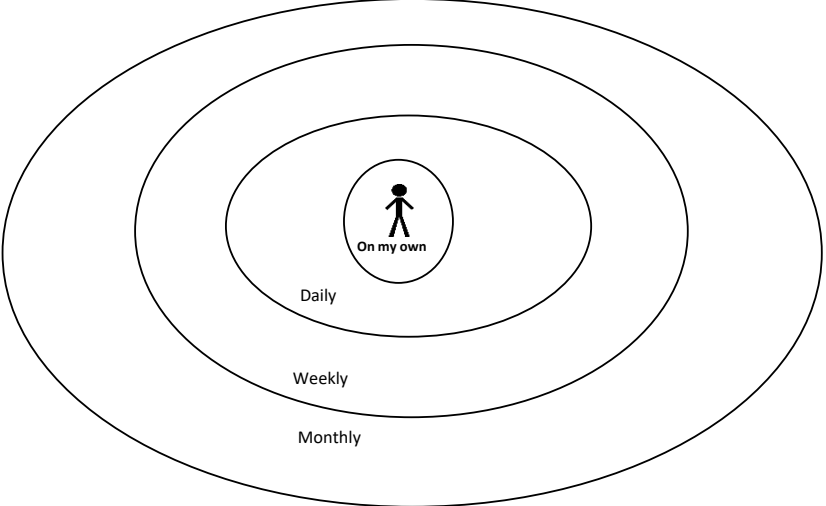
 **At a friend's house**  **Outdoors**  **In the living room/family room**

 **Somewhere else...**  **In my bedroom**  **At school**  **Bathroom**

I play online: Yes No



I mostly play...  
Use these circles to show who you play with and say where they live  
( F = friend, R= relative, O = online friend, S= stranger)



My favourite game is.....  
I'm not allowed to play.....Who decides this?.....  
I watch other people play.....  
The best thing about gaming is.....  
The worst thing about gaming is.....  
What question would you like to be asked about online?

Ceri is new to online gaming. What would your  
5 Top tips be for Ceri starting out?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.





**1. Judd: take one picture of this side, this is the heart.**

*(I take photos as directed)*

**Judd: The funny thing about this is I'm directly in the middle of these two**

**Vicky: You are?**

**Judd: Yes**

**Vicky: This is how you feel?**

**Judd: More anger than sadness as you can see from the line.**

**Look at this then look at me, 3 second turn around.**

**3. and this is the other way around and you can see straight away, the detail, the scratches, you could call them tally marks for how many times this has happened and how my body's become er what you call? Not tangible, malleable, so it affects me less and less each time it happens.**

**Vicky: Like scar tissue?**

**Judd: Yeah, and the red is the practical opposite of this, it's not vulnerability it's suffrage, the rage, the anger, you could say blood lust and it isn't for my betterment it's for, just for the sake of getting rid of it, you know? You know how the white blood cells in the body take care if the diseases well, technically humanity is a disease, technically, it's the most well established organism on this planet so much that it's taken it over and is screwing itself over by the amounts its consuming and as you can see.**

**2. What is the purple? It's eventually a shielding**

**Vicky: That's a shield**

**Judd: The reason why I developed a shield is because I know how human beings are like, what they want, they want purpose they want entertainment, they want desires to be filled and eventually they just have this moment of selfish lapse where they don't care what happens to anyone else, they just do it for their own benefit.**

**That's why even at a young age, like the age of 12 or 13 at Blare Town Comprehensive School I, er, I subjected myself to this burning hatred and selfishness and for the sake of, like when you, for entertainment for others you know? It was basically their entertainment throughout my suffrage, you know, you know how some people say "that person over there loves you" and it becomes a lie, over and over and over and over again, well that's what I used to build the first couple of shieldings. And then this, this is the brain, basically what I wanted was a complete defence, a complete immersion with that suffrage and hatred so I can just, you know, don't feel anymore**

Appendix 4: Participant consent form

**My Consent**

- I know what the project involves and how long it will take.
- I am happy to have what I say recorded.
- I understand that this data will be retained for 5 years post publication.
- I understand that any data collected will be anonymized to protect my identity and the identity of others in any reports or visual materials.
- If the researcher becomes aware of any information that suggests I might be at risk, the school's child protection procedures will be followed and the appropriate support put in place.
- I know that I can decide not to take part in the project at any time without giving a reason.

Name:.....

Signature:.....

**This project will:**

-  Explore friendships in online gaming
-  Explore how, when and where you game
-  Explore how your gaming is shaped by others (parents, friends)
-  Ask you the best way to go about researching these things

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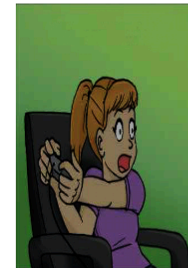
[montaqutr@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:montaqutr@cardiff.ac.uk)

(02920876124)



# Girls and Digital Gaming

A creative and participatory study with girls who play video games












## What will we do?

We will think about the best way to express what it feels like to play online games. We will choose from a variety of activities, giving you the opportunity to say what the best ways exploring experiences of online gaming might be. We will talk about gaming friendships, favourite games, favourite characters and anything else that you think is interesting about gaming.

## How will we do it?

I would like us to think about this together. But I have some ideas:

-  Avatar creation
-  Mapping social networks
-  Video creation
-  Drawing favourite characters
-  Collage production
-  Interviewing
-  Skin creation (drawing)

## Why girls and gaming?

The media rarely report positively on gaming. Often when girls and gaming are talked about it is in the context of harassment or bullying. I am interested in those things but I am also interested in other aspects of gaming. What is great about it? When it does matter and when it doesn't to be a girl who games. Perhaps you never think about it all.

I am also interested in the types of characters you play as in online games and how important that is to you.

I am interested too in friendships in online games, who you play with and the things you talk about while you are gaming.

I would also like to talk about the influence of others on the way you game. Who offers opinions or restricts the amount of time you play or the games you play?



## What happens to the things that we produce?

With your permission, I would like to record the process of talking about these things. This might involve audio-recording, taking photographs or film footage. Any 'data' that is produced will be anonymised to protect your identity.

## What if I change my mind?

Taking part in this project is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

## Keeping Safe

Your well-being is very important. If you tell me that you or someone you know is in immediate danger or harm, I will follow the school's child protection procedures and support will be put in place. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this project please contact Cardiff University's director of research ethics, Professor Emma Renold: [renold@cf.ac.uk](mailto:renold@cf.ac.uk)

Appendix 5: Crush Card



“

Ceri (age 15, white Welsh) is gender fluid and a lesbian. They have been in a lesbian relationship with a girl in their school for a year but the relationship is kept a secret from all the other students. Ceri is a young carer for their parents, and their mother is registered blind. Ceri has physical impairments and cannot walk without the aid of crutches, and an ongoing wrist problem makes some writing and mobility issues even more difficult. Ceri also has Dyslexia. Ceri struggles to control their anger and has had anger management counselling in the past and has previously suffered with mental health problems, depression and anxiety in particular. Ceri attributes many of these emotional difficulties to extensive periods of relentless bullying in their life. For all of these reasons, Ceri makes regular use of the nurture room - a space in school for young people with extra learning, behavioural or emotional needs.

Creativity is an important and central facet of Ceri's life. As part of a research project Ceri identified doll modification as an enjoyable way to express the thoughts and feelings they have about living their life: "For me stripping it back to nothing, getting rid of everything is a big thing." The dolls are stripped of their standard, factory applied hair, make-up and clothing and remodelled in a way that is more reflective of Ceri's aesthetic and interests. Ceri likes to create "uncertainty about the doll's gender and sexuality". Although they feel progressively more accepted by their peers and teachers, engaging in online communities with other young people who enjoy playing around with identity categories is vital for their emotional wellbeing and sense of community or belonging. Also, taking dolls that symbolize normative and stereotypical gender identities and transforming them in to something else feels creative and affirmative for Ceri who engages with other young people posting videos of their dolls in online forums. "I know it's a doll but the lips are just too pouty for me. And I don't like the message it sends to girls about how they should look.... This one time I soaked my dolls head in Acetone, I dunked her face in Acetone just to try and help me." Modifying the dolls is a cathartic and transformative experience for Ceri when they are living at the nexus of so many contradictory and exclusionary categories and for whom expressing themselves in creative ways is crucial to their emotional well-being.

”

Appendix 6: Cards developed to describe the function of the material objects in the  
'Case of Ethics'


Do you enjoy talking?

Who will hear your recorded voice?

Will your voice be transcribed and what does that mean?

How can a voice be obscured?

Why might researchers alter voices?



What is anonymity?

Do you mind hearing your own voice?

Can things that have been said be taken back?

What is confidentiality?

When might it be necessary to break the confidentiality rule?

**VOICE CHANGER**



**MAGNIFYING GLASS**

What is a research project?

What is a researcher looking for?

What is the researcher interested in?



## AUDIO RECORDER

WHY IS YOUR VOICE BEING RECORDED?

WHAT IS BEING RECORDED?

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE RECORDING AFTERWARDS?

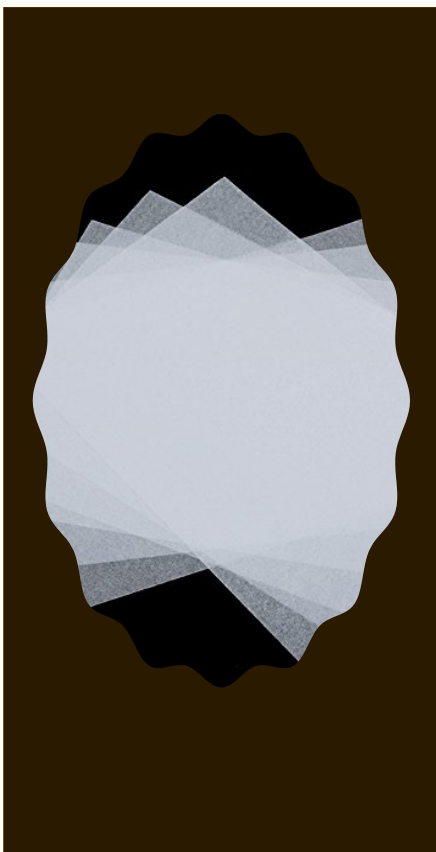
WHO IS ALLOWED TO STOP THE AUDIO RECORDING?

CAN THE AUDIO RECORDING BE DELETED?

HOW CAN YOU TELL IF THE AUDIO RECORDER IS ON?

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT BEING RECORDED?

WHAT IS CONFIDENTIALITY?



## TRACING PAPER

WHY WOULD WE WANT TO OBSCURE AN IMAGE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT?

WHAT IS ANONYMITY?

WHY WON'T THE RESEARCHER IDENTIFY YOUR SCHOOL?

IN WHAT OTHER WAYS IS YOUR IDENTITY PROTECTED?

WHO ELSE WILL KNOW THAT IT IS YOU ?

WHERE ARE THE IMAGES KEPT?

HOW LONG ARE IMAGES KEPT?

WHO CAN DELETE AN IMAGE?



# FELT FEELINGS

How easy is it to talk about our feelings?

How can we express our feelings in different ways?

Do feelings have colour?



Are some feelings more than one colour?

How do you feel about participating in the research?

# MASKS

WHY DO RESEARCHERS PROTECT YOUR IDENTITY?

WHAT IS ANONYMITY?

HOW IS YOUR IDENTITY PROTECTED WHEN YOU ARE PART OF A RESEARCH PROJECT?

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE INFORMATION AND OBJECTS THAT IS PRODUCED WITH YOU?



# CAMERA

Why is the researcher taking photographs?

How do you feel about having your photograph taken?

Does it make a difference if your face is in the picture?

What happens to the photographs?

Who is allowed to see the photographs?

Can the photographs be deleted without having to give a reason?

Can you ask not to be photographed?



# VIDEO CAMERA

What will the researcher be filming?

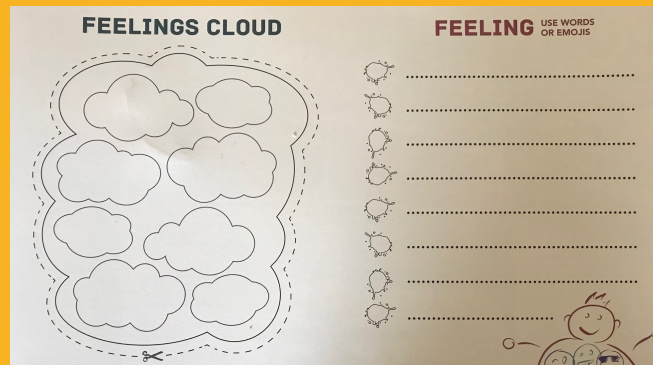
Who will see the videos?

What will the video be used for?

Will you be allowed to watch the video footage?



# FEELINGS CLOUD EVALUATION



How do you feel about all the things we are discussing?

Is it always easy to say how you feel?

Who should you tell if I am worried about someone else who is taking part in the project?

What if we don't know how we feel?

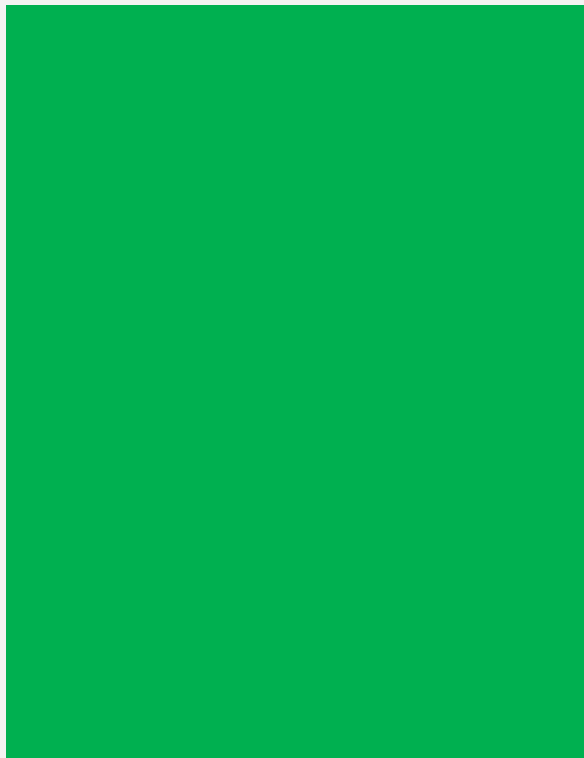
What if you don't like colouring or talking?

Are you looking forward to taking part in the project?

Are there things you would like more information about ?

Who should you tell if you are worried about something to do with the project?

Is it ok if you don't want to say how you feel?

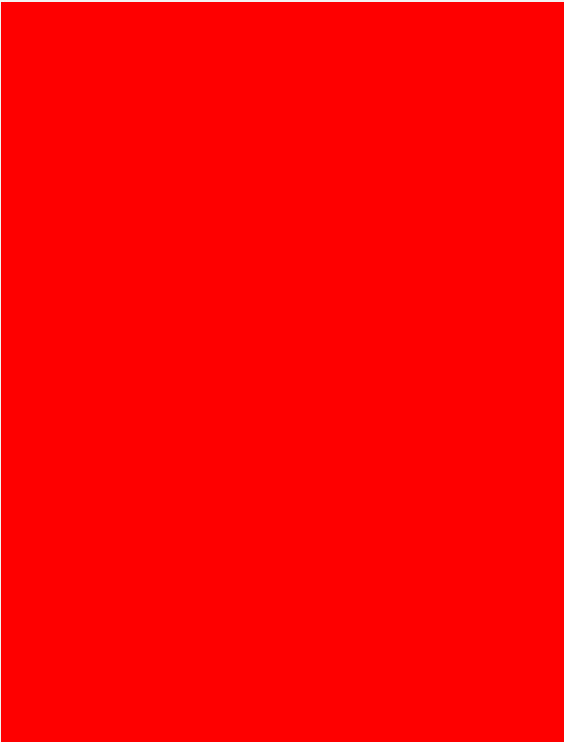


## GREEN LAMINATED A4 SHEET

The green sheet can be used in the following ways:

Touch the green sheet to stay on a topic

Write on the green sheet about things you would like to discuss more



**RED  
LAMINATED  
A4 SHEET**

The red sheet can be used to:

- Change the topic instantly
- You don't need to give a reason



**FELT GAME  
CONTROLLER**

This project is about experiences of video gaming

What do you think it is important for a researcher to know about video gaming?

What does holding this controller make you think about?

What is a research project?

What is a university?

What happens at a university?

What is a PhD?

Who reads University publications?



## CARDIFF UNIVERSITY LOGO

# IMAGE OF YOUR SCHOOL

Why is it important that your school cannot be identified in any photographs taken?



What could we do to make sure that no one recognises your area or school?

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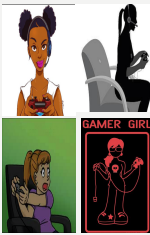
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# CONSENT FORM

Do you know what consent means?

Why do researchers ask you to sign a consent form?

Are there others ways of showing consent?

What are ethics?

Would you read a long consent form?

Do you know what confidentiality means?

Do you know what anonymity means?

When might your confidentiality be broken?

Is consent an ongoing process between you and the researcher?

Can you change your mind at anytime without giving a reason?