



The demands and motives afforded through digital play in early childhood activity settings



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ABSTRACT

In drawing upon cultural–historical concepts this paper examines the demands that children meet when digital tablet technology is introduced during free play in early childhood settings. In particular, this paper reveals how an iPad and movie making program create new demands on children that afford a new relation between play and learning. Through analyses of video observations of children in one child care center in Australia it was found that how children respond to the new demands depends upon their motive orientation as they engage with tablet technology. The concept of *flickering* is introduced to capture how the microgenetic movement between collective and individual imagining in an activity occurs, between being in and out of an imaginary situation, and between concrete objects and virtual representations.

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1. Introduction

Play in the early years has generally been conceptualized in relation to its value as a pedagogical tool for supporting the development of children's learning; and much of this research has theorized play from a maturational point of view (e.g. Roopnarine, 2011). Longstanding theories of play within this framework have shown how it follows predetermined stages, such as solitary, parallel, and cooperative play (e.g. Smilansky, 1968), where the age of the child determines what kind of play might be expected. These developmental theories of play conceptualize play as universal and intrinsic to the child, unfolding in predictable ways along a common life span.

Yet recent case study research has shown that imaginary play is learned in families (Gaskins, Haight, & Lancy, 2007; Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013; Ugaste, 2005), and laboratory based studies have found that some parents signal and teach pretense in play to their infants (e.g. Lillard, 2007). Evidence also shows cultural variations in play across communities, disrupting the common belief that all children naturally play in exactly the same way (Goncu, Jain, & Tuerer, 2007; Pellegrini, 2011; Roopnarine, 2011). Here, the development of play is thought to be culturally constructed and not simply signaled by a child's movement from one age to the next.

Theories of play that are framed as universal and naturally unfolding are not helpful for understanding, for example, how new settings such as digitally interactive virtual conditions afford new ways of playing and learning. The argument in this article is that we need new ways of thinking about play that takes us beyond a *biologically oriented theoretical gaze* in order to recognize new possibilities in new settings. Virtual imaginative play for preschoolers appears to invite a new kind of play (Marsh, 2010; Singer & Singer, 2005), creating new demands and motives that are needed to be better understood.

This article draws upon the cultural–historical concepts of demands and motives as conceptualized by Hedegaard (2012), in order to examine *the nature of* digital tablet technologies and what this affords for children's learning and development. The

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analyses focus on the transitions between activities within a free play activity setting in order to offer a better understanding of children's play and learning with digital technologies. The discussion is premised on the view that transition *between activities* is a central concept for understanding children's learning and development. This paper goes one step further than Hedegaard's analyses of transitions between activity settings (see Hedegaard, 2008) and examines microgenetic movements *within* a concrete activity setting where an iPad and movie making software program are introduced.

This paper acknowledges recent theorizations about the nature of play and learning in relation to development (Hennig Rossen, 2013; Van Oers, 2013), the conceptualization of the play–learning child (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2010), the microgenetic analysis of narratives for affording play development (Hakkarainen, 2010), and the nature of digital play in early years settings (e.g. Marsh, 2010). However, what is missing is how digital tablets create different demands on children's play and learning as understood through a child's social situation of development (Bozhovich, 2009). To capture demands and motives for play and learning in these simultaneously virtual and concrete settings, we draw upon Schousboe's (2013) spheres of play/reality and previous theorizations of collective and individual imagining (Fleer, 2010) in order to make visible how children flicker between the concrete activity and imagination. In this literature, it has been shown that children flicker between the concrete objects and the imaginary situation (Fleer, 2010) or move across the *porous sphere* of an imaginary situation collectively created, to staging new events, whilst always being cognizant of reality, as is evident when play fighting. These microgenetic movements in play provide a conceptualizations for thinking about the nature of digital play in free play settings where there are elements of learning in play that are needed by children for successfully playing in virtual and concrete situations.

We begin this paper with a discussion of the key cultural-historical concepts of development, learning and play, in the context of demands, motives and transitions. This is followed by an analysis of the demands that digital tablet technology makes on children within a concrete activity setting. The analysis is based on a case study of three year old children creating a slowmation¹ of *Goldilocks and the three bears*. The paper concludes with a discussion of the idea of *flickering between play and learning* within concrete activity settings where play is the leading activity. Here new insights are offered about how digital tablets in free play settings can lead to a change in the relationship between play and learning.

2. A cultural–historical conception of play, learning and development

Anchored in the works of Vygotsky (1998) and Elkonin (1999), Hedegaard (2012) put forward a conception of learning and development which argues for recognizing an analytic unity which includes the perspectives of the society, the institution, and the child (see also Hedegaard, 2008). One consequence of the centrality of the institution in this unity is that children's transition between different institutional practices, such as from home to school, presents them with new demands. Hedegaard's thesis is that these demands afford new possibilities for children's development (Hedegaard, 2009). In brief, central to the child's transition from one institutional practice to another is how demands in the new practice are successfully negotiated: how for example, a child learns that persistence is highly valued in a school practice where days are organized into blocks of time.

Hedegaard (2012) argues that the “dialectic between the child's orientation within an activity setting and the demands from the setting and other persons influence the child's activities within the child's zone of proximal development” (Hedegaard, 2012, p. 127). That is, development occurs when the demands and support within the concrete situation, and demands and actions from the child her/himself, lead to a new motive orientation for the child. In the context of early childhood, we see a development when the child's motive for play makes the transition into a learning motive so that learning in school becomes the child's new leading activity within the school setting. In concrete terms, when children start school they must deal with the new demands of reading, writing and mathematics. The practices that constitute schooling require them to move on from the leading activity of play, creating new demands and also possibilities for children to move on from a motive orientation of play to one of learning.

Based on our research in family and school settings (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2008, 2013) we have previously argued that the new demands children meet in both school and family life create new possibilities for both learning and development. In taking the child's perspective when analyzing children's development in specific institutions, such as preschools, the concept of *motives* must also be foregrounded. Motives are not internally developed but are culturally shaped as a result of a child's participation in everyday life. Hedegaard (2002) argues that we know very little about how institutional goals become children's personal motives. As children enter an institution, such as a pre-school center, often “the motive that lies behind the school activity is hidden from the child” (p. 61). The motive a teacher has for the particular activities s/he creates and that the child may participate in, may be very different to the motive the child has for entering into that particular activity. That is, play may be the dominating motive when children begin school. For the teacher to support the transition from a play to a learning motive as part of the child's development, s/he must not only be aware of the child's actual motive, but must keep in mind the ideal motive that “should develop through the school activity” (Hedegaard, 2002, p. 66). To determine a child's actual motive is challenging. Leontiev (1983), cited in Hedegaard (2002, p. 61) argues that “The true motive can only be explained objectively, “from the side”, for example by studying the child's “playing school”, because the personal “meaning” of playing can easily be brought to light through role play, and this, is its motive” (p. 212).

¹ A simplified form of stop-motion digital animation which plays at 2 frames per second enabling children to narrate their creation (see examples on www.slowmation.com).

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