

Surveying Children's Videogame play during the Pandemic: Australian and Chinese approaches

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Keywords

Videogame Regulation, China, Australia, Surveillance, COVID, Pandemic

INTRODUCTION

Videogame regulation is globally varied and highly contested, especially in relation to children's play. The central query propelling this research concerns how videogame play and its regulation was differently experienced and understood by children in Australia and China during the COVID 19 pandemic. Drawing upon ethnographic research undertaken in Australia involving interviews, play sessions and participant observation from 2020 to 2022, in combination with reviews of the existent literature from China during the same period, this presentation aims to conceptualize the reception of videogame regulation among parents and children against a backdrop of authoritarian communist and neoliberal capitalist frameworks.

This research considers children's videogames against a complex backdrop of temporal and spatial controls spanning videogame regulation to pandemic restrictions. In 2018, the harmful effects of videogames were formally recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) with gaming disorder (GD) included in their 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases (Wu et al, 2023). According to several scholars, the WHO classification was largely driven by pressure from Asian countries including China, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan, where videogame addiction is perceived as a serious public health problem predominantly impacting youth (Kuss, 2013; Ha, 2017).

In the opening weeks of the COVID 19 pandemic, the WHO appeared to reverse its stance on videogames as addictive to instead promote videogame play as helping to communicate public health messaging and building social inclusion in a time of social distancing and lockdowns (Snider 2020, Davies & Hjorth, 2024). As spatial restrictions were rolled out internationally in the months that followed, global videogame sales increased by 63 percent while gaming grew by an overall 40% (Clement, 2022). The growth in children's videogame play was especially pronounced. According to the respective owner companies, in 2020 alone Roblox's user base increased sevenfold (BBC 2021) while Nintendo reported a 400% increase in profit (Hackett, 2020). Sales of Minecraft increased by 65% during the pandemic (Woodward, 2022).

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In the same period, China took a remarkably restrictive approach to children's videogame play. State legislation implemented in November 2019 that limited access to videogames for under 18-year-olds was further tightened in September 2021 altogether preventing children from videogame play during the week and limiting play to one hour per day on weekends and public holidays (Brooke, 2021, Xiao, 2022). Where China formally and forcefully imposed game play regulations onto game companies and their platforms, in Australia as elsewhere in the world, parents became the often reluctant and illiterate adjudicators of how much their children should engage in videogame play and at what times.

In seeking to answer how videogame play was differently experienced and understood by children in Australia and China during the pandemic, additional questions arise. How did parents and children in Australia and China perceive these radically different regulatory approaches to children's videogame play? What short-term and long-term impacts can be observed arising from the existent literature on this subject? How do these differing governmental approaches enable and balance a children's rights to play at one end of the spectrum (Apperley, 2015) with an individual's rights to data privacy and digital sovereignty at the other? (Kokas, 2023).

Reflecting on the recalibration of the digital in the aftermath of COVID-19, this paper examines and compares how game regulation took place at quotidian level in China and Australia during lockdown periods. What emerges in this complex regulatory entanglement is the 'social surveillance' (Soriano et al. 2019) and 'careful surveillance' (Andrejevic et al. 2021) undertaken by parents, as well as the government surveillance undertaken by game companies at the behest of the Chinese state (ABC 2021) and data surveillance of game companies for profit (Egliston, 2019).

BIO

Dr Hugh Davies is an artist, curator, and researcher. Working across digital media, academic scholarship, and creative practice, he explores the social, cultural, and political dimensions of games and play across the Asia Pacific region. Davies has co-authored two books: *Understanding Games and Game Cultures* (2021) and *Exploring Minecraft, Ethnographies of Play* (2020). He is currently a researcher in Chinese Platform Studies at RMIT in Melbourne, Australia and is president of Chinese Digital Research Association (CDiGRA).

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