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# Dark Play and Children’s Dyadic Constructions of Self and Other

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The authors explore children’s symbolic play that involves themes of fear and darkness, and they investigate the nature of children’s binary oppositions, particularly between self and other. Their account is based on a year-long qualitative study they conducted with seven children, four to ten years of age. They observed the children engage with play materials, including toys and dolls, at home and on virtual sites such as *Roblox*. The play episodes they analyze highlight children’s dyadic roles and scenarios and the pleasure of their play involving themes of fear. The authors also address the media and cultural representations that provide roles and narratives for the children to extend this dark play. **Key words:** binary oppositions; cultural narratives; dark play; self and other; symbolic play

**B**RIAN SUTTON-SMITH (1997) writes that adult esteem of children’s play depends on its links to imagination, development, and progress, yet this notion of children’s play—and broader social beliefs about children’s innocence—tends to exclude darker forms of play such as aggressive, destructive, rough, rude, or obscene play and nonsensical fantasies. Richard Schechner, an American theater director and scholar in performance studies, originally coined the term “dark play.” Schechner (1993) describes a type of performance or theatrical experience that explores intense and provocative themes and deals with taboo subjects, violence, and disturbing aspects of human nature. Schechner argues that dark play affords the expression of desires, fears, and anxieties while pushing the boundaries of conventional theater and challenging the audience’s comfort levels and expectations.

Sutton-Smith (2008) discusses Richard Schechner’s dark play, comparing it to what he himself called “cruel play” (Sutton-Smith 1997), and children’s play behaviors that he described variously as illicit, disorderly, grotesque, subversive, and “intentionally contrary” (Sutton-Smith 2008, 93). He offers examples of this

form of play in his research on the stories preschool and school-aged children make up: "and then I was dead" (94), "the poop splatted" (95), "once there was two babies and they hung from the ceiling naked" (95). As with Schechner's theatrical dark play, these young children's representations "would strike their parents or their teachers as offensive" (96). Yet, for Sutton-Smith, such forms of play carry a similar function as Schechner's performances in increasing the player's feelings of control and empowerment, as well as providing the child with a private transcendence over the ordinary, hegemonic adult world through a "kind of courageous parody" (96).

Jayne Osgood, Mona Sakr, and Victoria de Rijke edited a special edition of *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* titled "Dark Play in Digital Landscapes" (2017) to address the experience of dark play in young children. Although the authors and contributors did not refer to Schechner's original use of the term, they expanded on Sutton-Smith's views of the darker sides of play to include digital as well as nondigital spaces (Osgood, Sakr, and de Rijke 2017, 109). The special issue contributors characterized children's dark play as revolving around children's interests in the frightening, "the spooky, and the dangerous" (Roselló 2017, 145). They wrote that children "often seek out risk and feelings of exhilaration in their play" (Procter and Hackett 2017, 214), and that dark play supports the uniquely thrilling synergy experienced between fear and fun—"The fun is in *almost* being caught, in *nearly* dying" (Roselló 2017, 154). Corroborating Sutton-Smith's work, these contributors noted that children's dark pretend scenarios carry experiences of intensity that, to the observing adult, may appear "troubling and disturbing" (Roselló 2017, 149) or "deeply upsetting for adults" (Osgood, Sakr, and de Rijke 2017, 109). Jarod Roselló (2017) writes uncomfortably of his own daughter's attraction to dark and scary narratives and the excitement of the threat and near escape in play.

Considering the function of dark play, Carolyn Bjartveit and E. Lisa Panayotidis (2017) envision this play as taking place in "a liminal space between real and fantastical worlds where imaginations run wild and children can test their emotions" (116). This liminal testing supports Sutton-Smith's (2008) notion that dark play can help children distinguish between their "own private pretending" (121) and the public, social world over which their private realities can offer a transcendence. Educational philosopher Kieran Egan (n.d.) describes the importance of children experiencing stories of "jealousy, fear, hate, cruelty, selfishness" because these emotions are part of the human experience and, he writes, shielding children from these darker instincts may "leave them with the guilty suspicion that they are the only ones who harbor wicked impulses" (5).

Anxiety and fear are unavoidable human attributes, and fantasy characters may provide objects of focus for these anxieties, providing children with imaginative elements to help them work through their fears in a safe context.

Given such research, in our view, dark play is an important experience for young children. Although close examinations of this form of play are still few, one element that stood out in our observations of dark play was the children's use of dyadic constructions or binary oppositions. Binary oppositions refer to a philosophical or linguistic framework that describes the system of two opposing categories that define each other by their differences, that is, where each element exists in relation to the other. The concept can be traced back to various scholars and fields of study, including most notably Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist, who described the role of binary oppositions in the organization of meaning in language (Fogarty 2005), and to Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French anthropologist and structuralist theorist, who posited in his book *Structuralist Anthropology* (1958) that binary oppositions form the basis of cultural structures and symbolic systems. Put succinctly, "people understand things relationally and comparatively" (Schalk 2011, 198) and signs "gain their meaning from their relationships and contrasts with other signs" (Munawar and Rafique 2016, 123). Dualisms organize our understanding of the world: life and death, good and bad, hot and cold, security and danger. As such, young children learn about the world through oppositional categories that function as structural frameworks in their everyday lives as well as in their stories (Egan 1986, n.d.), where characters take on dyadic roles and these structures become incorporated into their own narratives.

One of the key dualisms in a child's developing identity is the binary opposition between self and other, described as "one of the most basic theories of human consciousness and identity" (Schalk 2011, 197). A contrasting entity may be required when learning to define the self, that is, "the existence of an other, a not-self, allows the possibility or recognition of a self" (197). Jo Warin (2010, 2011) explores children's developing sense of self in terms of their experiences with other people. Following five children from preschool to age seventeen and focusing on their capacity and desire "for telling a story of self," she concluded that "identity formation and group formation occur interdependently as groups are created on the basis of beliefs about peers who are 'like me' and peers who are 'unlike me'" (2010, 61). In other words, the children's conceptions of self depended on "making social comparisons and building up a narrative of self." From these studies, Warin concluded that it was crucial that "all children

have access to the resources for building up a story of self" (2011, 2), including resources from fictional narratives.

Mark Bracher (2006) refers to "identity-bearing scripts or narratives" (28) as internalized perceptions that direct children's narratives and behaviors, for example, "the smart child" and "the loyal friend." The association in play with characters "like me" and dissociation with those "unlike me" is part of a child's ongoing dualistic construction of self and other (Tajfel and Turner 1979) because a child at play may position the idea of self through a "juxtaposition towards the other" (Jensen 2011, 64). The phenomenon of the "other" in play has therefore to do with "the role of other as a reference and contrast point relative to sameness" (Miller 2008, 587), whereby sameness represents the in-group, "us" or the self, and the other represents the out-group or "them" (Staszak 2008). While identifying "like me" and "unlike me" may be understood as an unsurprising, even required, aspect of play development in children, it is also a phenomenon that prepares children for broader societal and cultural structures. In the Western world, these are based on a similar binary construction. The literature suggests that educators and parents be mindful of the forms of the other in popular narratives that children receive and onto which children may extend their binaried scripts. As Egan (n.d.) writes, "We do still have to worry about the particular influences of the fantasy stories we choose, of course, but not that fantasy itself is bad" (6). Generic forms of othering, based in the children's tendencies to formulate the world in dyadic ways, may latch on to cultural representations that extend these patterns of "good self" and "bad other" onto more harmful structures. For example, while the human-zombie or human-alien binaries may be harmless in societal terms, binaries such as civilized-savage or familiar-exotic characterize other human beings as subordinate or inferior (Jensen 2011). As such, parents and educators should be aware of how the dichotomizing structure, so spontaneous and understandable in children's play, may get tethered to more harmful systems of us and them, self and other in our collective culture.

Finally, while children's understanding of the world begins with binary oppositions, they learn other "terms along the continuum between such opposites" (Egan n.d., 7). A simple example is that between hot and cold lies warm. So, although fairy tales in Western cultural contexts may provide exaggerated and unambiguous distinctions of good and bad characters, fantasy stories also offer children mediating categories. For example, between human and animals there are talking rabbits; between life and death there are ghosts. Egan argues that such intermediary groups may prepare children for philosophical and nuanced

ways of thinking, as they consider what lies between consequential dualisms, including self and other.

In this study, we observed children's symbolic play with themes of fear and darkness, what we call dark play. Our purpose was to explore how children characterize frightening elements in their pretend play—through dyadic constructions and attribution of roles and themes—by engaging seven children in home play sessions over the course of one year with online play (e.g., *Roblox*), and offline play (e.g., LEGO toys and dolls), depending on the children's interests. Binaries of good and evil, life and death, and self and other—as well as the tensions and ambiguities between these states—formed key elements in the children's observed dark play. We intended the study to respond to the question: How do children engage in dark play, and how are binary opposites or dualisms expressed during this play?

### **Materials and Methods**

The researchers conducted a close qualitative inquiry with seven individual children, four to ten years of age. The recruitment process included ads published in community centers and university bulletin boards. We recruited three of the participants based on previous acquaintances. We aimed to follow a maximum variation sampling in terms of gender and age (Patton 1990). The sample included four girls and three boys, with a relatively equal representation for each age range (four to five; six to seven; eight to nine or ten). Although we aimed to recruit a diverse population, the children reflected a relatively homogenous sample, most of the participants coming from similar middle-class backgrounds in a majority English-speaking neighborhood in the Greater Montreal area. There were five white children, one Asian child, and one biracial child. To gather data on the phenomenon of children's dark play, we conducted naturalistic observation of children's play by acting as supportive play partners, interviewing them, and shadowing them (Vittadini et al. 2014). Each child was visited three to four times over a period of one year. Each child's individual play meeting lasted between sixty to ninety minutes, depending on the child's interest and engagement. By visiting the children in their homes, we aimed to encourage and support their "spontaneous play in their everyday lives" (Jung 2017, 179).

Jo Warin (2010) focuses on the importance of a child's "capacity for telling a story of self" (61) and "the social relationship between teller and told" (50).

Young children's rich symbolic play depends on a degree of reciprocity and interaction, especially with a care giver who "expands on the children's ideas, encourages communication, and assumes roles to help them elaborate" (Wieder 2017, 272). As the adult researchers, we aimed to provide this exchange and support for the children to explore and extend their play. We secured university ethics approval, and authors Sandra Chang-Kredl and Dan Mamlok conducted the play sessions with the children. We used pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities.

As many twenty-first century play theorists have noted, children's play in Western cultures unfolds in both online and offline spaces (Marsh 2010; Jung 2017; Osgood, Sakr, and de Rijke 2017). Whether in-person or virtual, play takes place in spaces that are outside ordinary life (Huizinga 1949), in which symbols express elements of reality in "as-if" conditions (Fromberg 1992). Some theorists argue that this detachment from one's immediate circumstances allows children to experiment and express a range of emotions (Fein 1981). We observed the children in our study engaging with virtual sites such as *Roblox* and *Sonic the Hedgehog*, and offline settings with, for instance, LEGO blocks, dolls, Disney figurines, and books, depending on their interests and following their leads.

In our study, we identified dark play sequences as those that involved themes of fear and darkness, for a total of fourteen play episodes (see figure 1 for details). We characterized pretend play by the child's utterances and play behaviors in terms of play roles (including virtual personas), object transformations, storytelling, pretend enactment, and play themes (see Chang-Kredl and Howe 2010). We determined themes of fear and darkness by the children's expressions of emotions of fear (Procter and Hackett 2017) and elements of aggression, destruction, and domination (Sutton-Smith 1997). A pretend play episode referred to a segment of play focused on one narrative theme, such that the episode started with the introduction of the theme (e.g., "a lion eating the world"), was maintained through the child's declarations or gestures (e.g., pretending to consume the objects in the room), and terminated once the child ended or changed the play theme (e.g., child sees an audiobook and turns it on to listen, which ends the theme of "eating the world") (Nelson and Seidman 1984). At times, children included short moments of other play (e.g., during Eloise's thirteen-minute online play episode in which the main theme was "getting babies sick," she on occasion made her character jump on a trampoline or buy cookies at a bakery, while returning to the sustained theme of infecting babies). We included the children's conversations with the researchers in the play epi-

sodes when they elaborated on their play themes. The length of individual play episodes isolated in our study ranged from four minutes to thirty-five minutes (see figure 1 for details). We transcribed these audio-recorded play episodes and collected and organized visual data.

### *Analysis*

We identified play sequences that involved themes of fear and darkness in the fourteen play episodes. We analyzed each of the episodes using a narrative coding scheme adapted from Saldana (2016) that specifically focused on the elements of setting, character types (protagonist, antagonist), and characterizations (physical description, status, transformation), action or plot, elements of fear and darkness, conflict and resolution, and reflexive asides. We compared themes to ensure validity.

### *Limitations*

While dyadic formations were implicated in the children's play episodes we observed, we cannot generalize these findings given our small sample size. However, the research provides close descriptions of how the children's spontaneous play involves a drive to identify and assume dyadic roles and play with themes of self against an other. While one strength of this exploratory project is in its focus on the children's self-selected play in their home environments, future research could take place in classroom or recess settings. Future research could also include more directions with the materials and themes offered to children, perhaps focusing entirely on video game play, or play with character figures, or on how toys dictate specific cultural narratives. Closer textual examination of the dyadic cultural narratives that children draw from in their play may be warranted as well.

## **Results**

The fourteen play episodes varied, and they included, for instance, playing with a Rapunzel LEGO set, completing a video game level, and drawing a scary character.

We consider the types of play observed in the examined episodes, the children's dyadic constructions, play themes of defeating the other, and the combined presence of fear and pleasure in the children's play narratives.

Episode #	Child	Child's Age	Play setting, materials	Description	Length of play episode in minutes
1	Eloise	9.5	Online play: <i>Roblox</i>	Killing zombies with tea	7 minutes, 14 seconds
2	Eloise	9.5	Online play: <i>Roblox</i>	Kill-or-be-killed	19 minutes, 40 seconds
3	Eloise	9.5	Online play: <i>Roblox</i>	Getting babies sick	13 minutes, 17 seconds
4	Olivier	10	LEGO figures and blocks	Lego Me and Criminal Lego Me	14 minutes
5	Olivier	10	Homemade play sword	Sword fight, Percy Jackson style	4 minutes, 12 seconds
6	Elijah	4	Living room with toys	Eating the whole world	35 minutes, 57 seconds
7	Elijah	4	Living room	Dinosaurs and monsters	7 minutes, 40 seconds
8	Kody	7	Online play: <i>Sonic the Hedgehog</i>	Good guys and bad guys	7 minutes, 25 seconds
9	Kody	7	Online play: <i>Sonic the Hedgehog</i>	What makes Eggman bad	11 minutes
10	Kody	7	Online play: <i>Sonic the Hedgehog</i>	What makes Sonic good	5 minutes, 11 seconds
11	Arielle	4	Pretend rocket ship, made up of a table with a folded mattress	Rocket ship and monsters	10 minutes, 40 seconds
12	Arielle	4	LEGO Rapunzel set	Rapunzel with her frying pan	19 minutes
13	Lilly	6	Bedroom, upper bunk	The girl with the long horns	6 minutes, 7 seconds
14	Victoria	10	Drawing materials	Drawing a scary character	15 minutes, 54 seconds

Figure 1. Descriptions of children's play episodes

*Forms of Play*

The contexts of play, settings, and material varied depending on the children, their homes, and the times at which we visited. For instance, Eloise played a *Roblox* game online on the family laptop. Olivier played with a sizable set of LEGO figures and blocks, then with homemade play swords. Elijah enacted play sequences with an assortment of toys in his family living room. Kody played the *Sonic the Hedgehog* video game on a desktop computer. Arielle pretended to ride a rocket ship with a table and folded mattress. Lilly dramatized Disney stories in her bedroom using costumes, and Victoria drew pictures of characters that frightened her.

Age and play materials seemed to affect the type of play in which the chil-

dren engaged, such as enactment, storytelling, and forms of nonplay including discussions (Chang-Kredl and Howe 2010). The younger children, Arielle and Elijah, both four years of age, engaged in extended play (nineteen and thirty-six minutes, respectively) and repetitious enactments in which Arielle acted out the scene of Rapunzel knocking down objects and “people” with a LEGO-sized frying pan, especially the LEGO character she dubbed Flynn. This was often preceded with a small whisper (“watch this,” “what? bah hah,” “do it again”) and followed with hearty laughter. Elijah, in his living room surrounded comfortably with sofas and toys, enacted a prolonged sequence in which he was a lion who ate the entire world, including people, friends, superheroes, and “the whole planet earth.” The more he ate, the bigger and more powerful he became. He peppered this cannibalistic play sequence with vocal sounds of “yummy yummy” and pleasurable laughter. While power was certainly central to these play episodes, the tone was light and joyful. In the *Roblox* “horde defense” game, nine-year-old Eloise spent a good portion of the time enacting killing and hiding episodes online. She acted out story events and simulated the characteristics of the character through voice, speech, and action, controlling the online action through the laptop keyboard and trackpad.

Many of the children, including Lilly, Victoria, Olivier, and Kody, seemed to enjoy conversing with the researchers about their play and perspectives. For instance, Kody, seven, narrated his game play with *Sonic the Hedgehog* as he enacted “saving the world of Egglanland turning into an Eggman Empire” through “never letting the evil Eggman control the world.” Moments of play could be distinguished from discussions between the children and researchers, which often took place during play episodes, through indicators of enjoyment (e.g., laughter, the quality of “as if,” spontaneity, and symbolism). Video games have many predetermined elements, and online action sequences necessitated immediate and continual responses, whereas play in a child’s room with toys tended to call more for the initiation of ideas and narratives. For example, playing with a set of LEGO figures and blocks, Olivier, ten, spent much of the time setting up characters and pieces, ascribing roles to figurines, and describing how his characters developed through their associations with other characters and organizations, whether in a story he told of a plane crash involving criminals (“this huge evil boss”) or a rocket trip to a distant planet.

#### *Attributing Dyadic Roles in Dark Play*

Symbols of personification were found in the roles that the children assumed

and attributed during their play episodes. Kody's character play was based on video game personifications in *Sonic the Hedgehog*. Kody assumed the role of the good guy: Super Sonic, leading a team that, as he explained, "always wins." Super Sonic is the superhero transformation of Sonic the Hedgehog. On screen, he is a yellow, sprightly, animated hedgehog character with flame-like fur and oversized gloves and running shoes. Dr. Eggman is the game antagonist, portrayed as a human scientist who aims to dominate the world. He wears a circus ringmaster's blazer (red with white and yellow buckles), white gloves, black boots and a classic villain's moustache. Kody explains that Eggman is bad because he "tries to destroy Sonic" and wants to "make the world what he expects." Kody takes on the agency of the heroic character. According to Kody's declarations, evil is someone who "wants to rule the world" and good is, interestingly, "that I always get saved."

Eloise, nine, also developed her role play in a video game, *Roblox*, although she personalized her characters through game setting choices. In two of Eloise's play episodes on *Roblox*, the online avatar that she assembled to represent herself was a female human-animal hybrid with fox ears, wolf tail, and long rainbow-colored hair. The character was armed with weapons, typically high-level firearms. She play acted as an innocent, happy girl and used this ingenue ploy to lure her enemies into drinking her tea, which, as only her character knew, was poisonous. The antagonists that the game provided for Eloise's play sequences were monsters, prototypes of frightening creatures from typical horror films and apocalyptic television programs in American popular culture, including ghosts, demons, dark angels, and void slimes. These figures provide the exaggerated external threat onto which a player identifies a malevolence to be overcome. The facet of fear in the video game creates an urgency and thrill. In another play sequence, Eloise adopted the avatar of a baby, again with hybrid human and animal characteristics (foxtail). The baby was both protagonist (as main character) and antagonist whose aim was to sicken other babies while adults were somehow impervious to the illness Eloise dispensed.

Elijah, four, assumed an offline role that he himself described as "bad" and extraordinarily powerful. He embodied the omniscient character of a ravenous lion, enacting the lion ingesting everything in sight including the kitchen, the house, people, and the "whole planet earth." Elijah the lion is hungry, never sated, and unstoppable.

Elijah: [Roars forcefully]. Ha ha, ha ha [running all over the house].

Yummy yummy yammy yam. [Sounds of eating] ["Eats" the kitchen] I ate the whole fireplace.

Chang-Kredl: Is there anything that the lion cannot eat?

Elijah: No.

Chang-Kredl: Nothing? What's the biggest thing the lion can eat?

Elijah: A whole house.

Chang-Kredl: Wouldn't the lion get really big?

Elijah: Yeah, it would be so big that it would be even taller than a giant. And then it would be a giant, it would be so tall.

Chang-Kredl: Really?

Elijah: I am eating the whole house [eats]. I ate the upstairs now [going to the kitchen]. Hey guys, I just eaten the kitchen.

Mamlok: Why does the lion need to eat so much?

Elijah: It is so hungry.

Mamlok: But when the lion becomes so big, what is he going to do?

Elijah: He's going to keep on eating.

Mamlok: He never gets full?

Elijah: He never stops.

Mamlok: Is he a good lion or a bad lion?

Elijah: Bad lion, because he eats everything. He even eats people.

Elijah assumes a raw and total power, consuming "everything that lies outside the self" (Lomba 1998, 144).

Olivier, ten, developed his offline characterizations of good and evil through LEGO characters, sharing his construct of two characters he named "LEGO me" and "criminal LEGO me." The characters looked exactly the same except that the criminal figure carried a gun. As the following transcribed play segment shows, Olivier ascribed the evil aspect in criminal LEGO me to that character's social association with a group of criminals, that is, a "criminal base." Yet, Olivier did not depict a clear us-and-them scenario, because he identified both characters, good and bad, as "me."

Chang-Kredl: Which do you like being better?

Olivier: Lego Me. Has a sword.

Chang-Kredl: What's the difference between Lego Me and Criminal Lego Me?

Olivier: Criminal Lego Me is evil!

Chang-Kredl: What makes him evil?

Olivier: Um, he's working for these criminals [points to airplane full of figurines].

Chang-Kredl: I see, okay.

Olivier: They've got a huge criminal base and stolen vehicles including this plane.

Chang-Kredl: Okay, . . . that's the whole criminal sect right there [pointing to plane].

Olivier: Yeah.

Chang-Kredl: Alright, and what do they do?

Olivier: Uh, they have this huge evil boss...This is his base.

In the children's play we observed, choosing a side appeared to be an unproblematic decision. Sometimes it was a matter of identifying the bad guy or monster and then assuming the other side. For instance, in Eloise's online *Roblox* play, the bad characters were easily distinguished through appearance and behavior that reflected, as noted, popular horror genre representations in Western cultures: demons and zombies lurking around corners and threatening to murder the player through powerful means of attack (lasers, weapons, slime, physical size). Eloise showed little hesitation in explaining which characters were on her side ("everyone that are not creatures," "all of the other humans") and which were on the other side ("creatures" and "zombies").

Eloise: No don't kill me, I'm just trying to kill you, okay. Just accept it.

Chang-Kredl: Are they all different forms of zombies?

Eloise: Yes, they are all different zombies. Like me and him and everyone that are not creatures we are all on the same team that try to kill all of the zombies. . . . Oh no, no no I'm gonna die, gonna die. High-ya! Ah no! Don't kill me please. You are almost dead, and you need to accept it because you are not going to kill any of us. No, I finally dodged it. I must die. No, no you must die, not me. Not me and my teammates.

Chang-Kredl: You've got teammates; who are your teammates?

Eloise: All of the other humans. We are all on the same team.

Eloise went further in depersonalizing zombies with phrases such as "they are not real players like us," "they are made by a map." As Elijah explains while

discussing monsters, they are unequivocally bad: “Monsters scare people, chase them, cause trouble, and mess up rooms.” Eloise, however, did articulate nuances in her appraisal of good and bad during one play situation in which she had to shoot dark angels or be killed: “I feel bad because I want the angels to be on my side, but we are killing the angels. I feel like we are the bad guys now.” She further comments on how angels being bad “makes my life a lie.”

At times, the researchers introduced guiding questions during sessions. Lilly, six, and Victoria, eleven, each responded to our question about monsters (“When you think about monsters, what are they like?”) by drawing and describing characters they would be frightened to encounter. Although Lilly did not recall the name “Maleficent” from Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty*, she drew an image with crayons of a figure wearing a long dress and cape while recounting, “You know, the girl with the long horns” and “big bowl on her head,” who has the ability to make others her slave with “a tap on her head.”

Lilly: It is really scary. I just need to use my crayons. Here [draws]  
. . . long dress, a cape . . . it is really scares . . . see [shows Mamlok  
her drawing]. I know the video is really scary. That’s her cape.

Mamlok: Ahh.

Lilly: Oh, that’s the way I feel, as if she is there. Do you want me to  
erase it?

Mamlok: I want to ask you what are you scared of.

Lilly: This! . . . Because look, she has horns. Oh my god—I forgot  
something [fixes the drawing] she has a big bowl on her head,  
and if she sees anybody, she taps on her head, and they become  
her slave.

Mamlok: Oh dear.

Lilly: So, I am very scared of her.

Lilly had wide, fearful eyes as she drew this image, then she insisted on erasing it: “I am going to erase it, so you will not be scared.” As with Eloise, Lilly’s imaginings of a frightening character are influenced by popular, North American media.

Prior to drawing the image described in the next sequence, Victoria shared that an inebriated man had sat next to her and her mother while they were riding the city’s subway and that she felt frightened and uncomfortable. Victoria tried to make sense of these feelings, explaining that it was not that this person did

anything to her or even talked to her or her mother; rather it was her feeling of unease when encountering someone who seems strange or different. Victoria proceeded to draw a picture of a creature that appeared to be inspired by popular images of aliens.

Victoria: Okay, here.

Mamlök: Oh, wow! All right. So, this is a real alien, right?

Victoria: Yes. If I saw that, I would be scared.

Mamlök: You wouldn't like to meet this guy in the metro.

Victoria: Nooo, I'd be very scared if I saw this in the metro. I'd be very confused.

Mamlök: What makes this character scary?

Victoria: His, how his eyes are huge. Normal, bigger than normal and there's just black. And he's green. And, I don't know . . . he doesn't have human characteristics.

In both Victoria's short description of her train encounter and her drawing of the alien figure, she seems to link her ideas of a frightening character to elements of strangeness (understandably, aggressive, disorderly, and uncontrolled behaviors induced by alcohol consumption would be disturbing for some children) and difference ("doesn't have human characteristics").

### **Play Themes in Dark Play: Self versus Other**

The main plot point of Eloise's online *Roblox* play involved her defending herself against enemy characters. As an illustration, in one sequence, Eloise ran from a zombie, told it to leave her alone, then remembered that she created poisoned tea and invited it to drink her tea. When she was near a zombie, she shot it with her M-16 sniper gun, adding dramatic remarks.

Eloise: Zombie, you are just too easy to get. Die, die, die, die, die.

Oh no, you are following me now. I don't want to be, um . . .

don't give me all of your attention. Don't! Actually, do because I have a tea party that is right now, happening right now, and ends until you guys are all dead. How about you drink some of my tea. DRINK IT! Taste it! Taste it! Taste the bullet and swallow it



For example, when we asked Kody how he knew if someone was good or bad, his response referred to one's gaming skills rather than to one's values: "Well, if they die so many times, or fail so many times, I know if they are bad or good." Namely, as Kody plays the game, the ideas of "good" and "bad" are contextualized into the actions of kill or be killed.

Whether on the side of good or evil, a state of power exists that is imagined on both ends. As evil as Eggman the despot may have been for wanting to turn the world of Egglan into his own empire, Kody seemed to internalize an equal level of power and pleasure in feeling that he was only one of "a few [that] can make it" and prevail against such tyranny, which made him, in turn, powerfully special and more able than most. This identity clearly provided Kody with confidence as he noted that to succeed in this game you have to be "professional like me." Eloise explained the premise of the *Roblox* game with: "The more monsters you kill, the more money you earn, the more weapons you can purchase." And she showed sophisticated knowledge about weaponry. Kody had tools that aided with the player's survival, including shields and invincibility devices.

Elijah's role play as the insatiable lion and Eloise's baby avatar that infects other babies in the neighborhood signalled simulations of power. Elijah's victims and the babies in Eloise's *Roblox* world were not threats, so the kill-or-be-killed scenario did not become an assumption. In these cases, it seems that play with power was the main interest. For Elijah, the joy seemed to lie simply in the exercise of vast power: "[Roars forcefully]. Ha ha, ha ha, [running all over the house]... I ate the whole fireplace." In Eloise's baby narrative, the power and pleasure were found in transferring her own unwelcomed responsibilities onto other babies.

Chang-Kredl: Why do you want to make all the kids sick?

Eloise: Because then they have to do responsibilities for themselves [sic] too.

Chang-Kredl: Oh, do they not want to do responsibilities?

Eloise: Probably not [laughs], which is why I am forcing them.

I'm a baby that forces everyone to do their own responsibility [laughs].

### *Pleasure or "Freaking Fun" in Dark Play*

Pleasure is a characteristic of children's play (Fein 1981), and the presence of robust laughter, such as in Elijah and Eloise's episodes, distinguishes the chil-

dren's play from their conversations with the researchers. We noted while observing Kody's play with *Sonic the Hedgehog* that, to us, the soundtrack of the online game was akin to a horror film and overwhelming. When we suggested to Kody that Eggman's comment—"The sun will fall upon you all. THE END"—may be scary, Kody argued vehemently that "it's not scary" and that "we are going to save the world. I am going to go through all of these, and it is going to be kind of a freaking fun." This insistence that the game was fun rather than scary suggests that Kody experienced the play as a competitive game to be won and that, in the context of the game, notions of good versus bad and the elements of darkness as normative or moral categories were secondary to the goals of winning and having fun.

Arielle role played Rapunzel with a LEGO set depicting a scene from the Disney animated film *Tangled*. Rapunzel, with her reputed long blond hair and pink gown, smacks Flynn, designated by Arielle to be the "ruffian," with her frying pan. This play episode exemplifies Arielle's use of slapstick humor and play as she repeatedly acted out the scene from *Tangled* during which Rapunzel uses her iron frying pan to knock Flynn unconscious.

Eloise was gleeful, taunting, and effective in her role as a monster killer, and she responded too with delight anytime she succeeded in making a baby sick.

Eloise: Wait, I'm going to make her sick. I made her sick! I made her sick! [cheering] I made the baby sick. I am making everyone sick [chuckling]. Okay, I am just going to keep doing this in the neighborhood until I finally get to the hospital [chuckles].

Thus, while Eloise developed sequences of video game play that are sadistic in tone, she maintained a consistent and solid stance of enjoyment in her role play. She was able to embody a rather frightening character herself, albeit an ironic one, demonstrating the synergy being experienced between fear and fun, the sometimes "troubling and disturbing" attraction to cruel themes (Roselló 2017, 149; Sutton-Smith 1982), and a fascination, even identification, with powerfully destructive characters (Sibley 2009).

## Discussion

The as-if quality of play in these episodes of dark play provided a space for the

children to experiment with powerful roles. The children were practicing narratives of self as the rescuer of the world, the omnipotent lion, and the powerful princess with her frying pan. The construction of narratives through play can be understood as a means to transform everyday experiences and to negotiate predispositions, desires, and challenges (Sutton-Smith 2008).

What we identified as the children's dark play reflected Schechner's (2002) and Sutton-Smith's description of intense, provocative, and sometimes disturbing play themes: eating the whole world, killing dark angels, recounting the terror of a scary villainess with horns. While we associate children's everyday pretend play—for example, animating teddy bears, playing teacher, making a toy plane “fly,” and feeding a virtual pet—with pretend objects, roles, and scenarios, the children in this study drew on cultural symbols found in “legends, fairy tales, and stories transmitted over generations” (Wieder 2017, 270) to fuel and animate their play. The collective imagery of powerful figures, such as zombies, criminals, the evil Eggman, Disney tropes of evil, and aliens, lent form to the children's often intense desires and emotions. These dark characters also provided purpose and clear direction for whom they needed to be as the one who prevails over and defeats the enemy. According to Kelley (2008), “Tales available to children in American society typically entail a battle between good and evil, with good emerging as triumphant” (40). This perspective echoes Bettelheim's (1977) discussion about fairy tale plots and how “the child's deep need for justice to prevail” is satisfied through seeing a hero rewarded and an evil character punished (144). The children's narrations and enactments of darkness were, for the most part, instrumental in creating a sense of exhilaration as they transcended threat or assumed powerful roles, and it demonstrated a clear synergy between fear and fun (Roselló 2017), reflecting how “fear within stories is one of the gifts of fiction; it allows us to expand our experience vicariously” (Egan, n.d., 10).

The binary structure, argued to be necessary for the development of a child's understanding of the world (Egan 1986, n.d.), was readily present in the children's dark play narratives. In children's understanding of themselves in the world, the dyadic construction of differentiating between a sense of self and the other proved a key element. The children seemed to experience this pull to take sides, as they created, enacted, and recalled narratives of good versus bad and self versus other. They also showed a facility for assuming roles of powerful destruction (e.g., poisoning children, eating the entire universe) as well as good (e.g., protecting a princess threatened by an evil witch). The dichotomizing structures of self and other in the play we observed transpired within what we

would consider generic patterns, that is, within harmless binaries influenced by cultural representations of, for example, zombies versus humans and princesses versus villainesses. It would be interesting to follow these children further into their preteen and teen experiences to see whether—and how—their tendencies to play with systems of us and them may later latch onto more harmful systems of othering.

In terms of moving past binary oppositions, although Eloise engaged in the most outright sadistic forms of play, she also expressed the most overt openness to entertaining a mediation or state of ambiguity between good and evil: “I feel bad because I want the angels to be on my side, but we are killing the angels. I feel like we are the bad guys now” and this “makes my life a lie.” Olivier’s labeling of the other as criminal LEGO me provides support for Miller’s (2008) description of how societies are dependent on the criminal label to provide the “establish[ed] moral order and stave off chaos” (589) within a justice system that functions to maintain apparently clear-cut moral boundaries. But his labeling of the character as criminal LEGO me showed his ability to accept ambiguity in his role. It may be that engaging in both the good and evil sides of play serves the purpose of experimenting with ambiguity in a liminal space (Baudrillard 1981), one in which children can experiment playfully with aggressive and destructive fantasies and with characterizations of self and other that view good and bad as a continuum rather than distinct categories.

Rather than adults disallowing dark play because it makes them uncomfortable to see their children engaging in murderous, violent, or frightening fantasies, it may be important to remember that fear and anxiety are shared human attributes, ones that children can explore safely during dark play. Anxiety is an uneasy feeling, “the tense anticipation of a threatening but vague event” (Rachman 1998, 2), whereas fear is linked to an identifiable object, which means that the threat itself is distinguishable and named: the witch, the robber, the bad guy. Fantasy characters may help the child work through their fears (Egan n.d.) by providing objects onto which they can identify a source for the anxiety they feel. At the same time, the ability to realize how identities of self and other are multilayered, complex, and based on various categories that can somehow contradict each other requires us to move beyond a simplistic, binary understanding of reality (Bracher 2006). Rather than reinforcing a continually solidifying system of us and them, children’s dark play, like that we observed with Eloise and Olivier, may offer parents and teachers insights into how children work through the complex gray areas between good and evil, between us and them.

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