In this chapter, I explore some of the internal systems of connection that constitute joyful assemblages in the lives of my research participants. The examples brought together here are relatively closed systems. They create safety and provide physical, social, emotional and imaginative ecosystems in which people feel safe and in this safety they can flourish. In some respects, these systems of connection need to be read in relation to vulnerability. They provide protection from broader contexts of marginalisation. They offer platforms for visibility, identity and relationality that are built on recognition, community and creativity. They create contexts for affecting people with joy. Spinoza (2001: 121) explains that:

If a person has done anything which he imagines will affect others with joy, he also will be affected with joy, accompanied with an idea of himself as its cause; that is to say, he will look upon himself with joy.

As we have seen, so many of my research participants are part of communities that have historically been marginalised, colonised, de-valued by global cultural processes. This broader context of historical marginalisation means that specific interiorities need to be created and inhabited. Interiorities that offer safe visibility. This chapter offers three of many possible examples. These are council housing estates as sites of class belonging, football as a global community that affirms superdiversity and digital games as creative imaginative platforms and resources for children.
Council estates as sites of class belonging

Some of my fieldwork sites are located adjacent to council estates, and many of the parents involved in my research live on these estates. Some parents had made the conscious decision to bring up their families on the estate, and they embraced the sense of community and belonging these locations provided. Others, who were born on an estate, had never imagined anything other than life on the estate, and had not thought much about the possibilities of another life. These participants’ experiences of estate life could not be further from the terrifying discussions of Tony Blair’s ‘sink estates’ (see Hanley, 2012). Participants’ shared belonging stories relate entirely to the estate as their place of connection:

[I lived on the Cherry Orchard estate] till I was eight ... And I came to this school ... and Sherrington and then Kidbrooke. And my mum moved round to Hornfair Road, which is about three roads round, in a house, so I’ve always been in Charlton ... And then I just moved to Plumstead last year and now I’m moving back because I don’t like it. I’m literally swapping with someone that was brought up in Plumstead and she wants to move back. I don’t know, I just can’t settle there, it’s really strange ... You know your bubble, that’s that, and now you’ve stepped outside your bubble you’re like, no, definitely coming back here. And here, you walk down the road and it’s ‘Hi, hi, hi’. And in Plumstead I don’t know anybody. (Ella, south-east London focus group, 2018)

This is one of the many times in which I heard the estate characterised in a positive way by different parents as a ‘bubble’. Ella’s home, the Cherry Orchard estate, is well known in the area, and a geographic landmark. White-clad frontage and green lawns fit with the appearance of the local school, whose name the estate shares. Like other participants, Ella acknowledges the estate as her ‘bubble’ that provides comfort and familiarity, but also presents some barriers to the possibility of social mobility or new experiences. In the same group discussion, Jean shared a similar story of familiarity and belonging within the estate:

See, I grew up on [Bram High Plain] which is literally just outside the estate, down towards the bottom road, I grew up there, so I was like six or seven, and then my mum moved to Woolwich, so my mum’s
still in that house. So I’ve only ever lived there. And then back into Charlton onto the estate where I’ve had all three of my children. (Jean, south-east London focus group, 2018)

The notion of the estate as a ‘bubble’ within which people feel comfortable and accepted resonated for many. While housing estates, and having grown up on housing estates, are often used as a way of explaining class belonging, they also clearly explain place belonging for many. Two estates were central to my ethnographic work, one in London and the other in Melbourne, and many other research participants lived in forms of council housing. Both estates are located next to schools. While the estate itself provided the location for many of these women’s lives, there were also occasions and events that focused their sense of class and shaped their sense of belonging through the sociocultural markers of class. For example, Neve clearly felt a sense of place connection, which she explained by describing how people in her estate were brought together through their love of football during the World Cup:

I don’t follow sport at all, I’m one of those that are sort of ‘ugh?’, but actually, at the start of the World Cup I was like, no, we’re not going to get anywhere, anyway. But then, as it was going on, and I could see it building up and everyone was getting so excited and I was like, come on, let’s go and watch it, let’s go and watch it. And we’d sit, our group of friends, we all went in together: us, with our kids. The local pub shut off their car park so all the kids had space to run around and enjoy themselves. They had a barbeque. There was such a buzz. And everyone, I don’t think I’ve ever in eight years of living on the estate, I don’t think I’ve ever seen us all come together like that. I think we had such a buzz with the build-up that it became really exciting. (Neve, south-east London focus group, 2017)

Neve’s narrative about her affection for the estate community and their rallying around football as a shared experience shows how various practices and preferences are expressions of class belonging. Wellington boots, croquet and rowing are a world apart from kids playing in the pub car park while the parents watch football on TV, but both sets of practices respectively illustrate two different kinds of predominantly English class belonging. While the World Cup brought the community of Cherry Orchard together in new ways, it also illustrates Neve’s sense of geographic and class belonging in the
estate. She identifies with her own ‘bubble’. Yet, she also thinks that people on and off her estate have more in common than they have as a point of difference. Neve used the example of contemporary transatlantic politics to explain:

*I think probably most people of faith will, like I’m not asking people’s views about Donald Trump, but I think there’s probably people from all faiths who were in the [anti-Trump] demonstration on Friday. You know, there were some things that people come together for. And he’s a pretty big one.* (Neve, south-east London focus group, 2019)

On the other side of the earth, Atherton Gardens, the Melbourne estate, is similarly imbricated in people’s sense of place belonging, although in more complicated ways. Atherton Gardens is a primary site for refugee resettlement, and within the broader geographic and economic community, the estate is taken as a signifier of migration and poverty. Atherton Gardens was built by the Housing Commission of Victoria in the mid-1960s as part of the Victorian Government’s long-running ‘slum reclamation’ program, which began with the *Housing Act 1937* and the *Slum Reclamation Act 1938*. The estate features distinctive, prefabricated concrete panels that were made in the Housing Commission’s concrete factory. One of my main research sites was a primary school just a block or two down the same street. It is the school of choice for locals who cannot afford to send their children to private or Catholic schools. Layla, a local mother whose son attends the school, explained her place belonging by saying, ‘I feel like I’m in the community at Atherton Gardens, I know all the kids there. Yeah, I grew up there, went to school there, came to this school.’

While Layla has a clear sense of community belonging, others feel ambiguous about belonging to Atherton Gardens. Not everyone feels okay about growing up on an estate, and experiences of class and race hierarchies play out differently for migrants who are people of colour, as compared to white people. I have written elsewhere about Abdul and Caleb, who are first-generation Australian boys from refugee families who fled Somalia and West Papua respectively before they were born (Hickey-Moody and Willcox, 2020). They also live in Atherton Gardens with their families. There is a class divide between those who live on the council housing estate and
those who live in private housing in the area, which is highly desirable real estate close to Melbourne’s central business district and an area buzzing with bars, nightclubs, fashionable restaurants and boutiques. While the housing estate serves a much-needed purpose of providing shelter, it also reinforces the difference between refugees, migrants and the very well-off professional families and young people in share houses who live in the area. This juxtaposition clearly illustrates ‘the great class divide [that] opens up the possibility of a longing for expansion that not only has no economic possibility for expression but also equally has to be understood in terms of the psychosocial affective history of its production’ (Walkerdine, 2017: 6). The hip homeware shops filled with Danish-style furniture that line the main streets of Fitzroy scream ‘unaffordable white middle-class belonging’ to passers-by, and are most certainly not shops for those who live in Atherton Gardens.

In a conversation we had at the beginning of a round of workshops on belonging, Caleb ironically asserted that he lived in the very affluent suburb of Toorak, and, claiming that his ‘dad had a big house there’, suggesting his family was financially well-off. I was amazed that someone would drive from Toorak to Fitzroy every morning to attend a government-funded school. I confirmed this wasn’t true by checking with his teacher. Later that afternoon, when I was walking to the tram, I noticed the blue neon sign that reads ‘Our home’ installed on the side of Atherton Gardens. While this sign reads like a proud statement, it contrasts with the run-down building, pointing to the very limited reach of this gesture towards gentrification. As a symbol, in comparison to Caleb’s imaginary home in Toorak, the neon sign seems to overlook the struggles refugee families go through when moving across oceans to find a safe home. I wondered if Caleb likes the sign, or if he thinks it is ironic.

Football

*With football, it’s part of pretty much everyone’s lives really. Yeah. Depending on what club you support ... You could talk about football and have a laugh with it.* (Muhammad, south-east London focus group, June 2019)
Football – called soccer in Australia – is a theme that is most passionately discussed by children in Melbourne, London and Manchester, and features heavily in their artwork. Investments in football are a way that children belong to, or participate in, global imagined communities. While the partial streetscape in Figure 6.2 – featuring the words ‘RONALDO’ and ‘CR7’ (Ronaldo’s initials and jersey number) repeatedly scrawled across it – is from a school in Manchester, the children across six of twelve research sites were equally besotted with football (soccer). It is a primary vehicle for friendship, belonging and pleasure.

Playing, watching and following football are all ways of belonging to a global, multi-ethnic community, which is very appealing to many of the children with whom I work. In his early, field-defining article on English football, “Football’s coming home” but whose home? And do we want it?’, Ben Carrington (1998) famously argued that football works to create a white national ‘imagined community’. As expressions of global soccer communities, this whiteness is interpolated and radically diversified by my research participants. The term ‘imagined community’ was developed by Benedict Anderson (1983) as a shorthand for the way notions of citizenship and belonging are reconstructed by contemporary forms of
media, popular culture and government. Anderson argues that feelings of national belonging, of being part of a national community, are largely symbolic. This is not to say that mediated belonging is less real than attachments formed away from the keyboard (Russell, 2020) or screen, but it emphasises a need to analyse popular media if we want to understand how appeals to national sentiments work. Sport is one of the key domains in which mediated forms of imagined community are made – not just through football, but all kinds of competitive sports. Carrington (1998) discusses how the imagined community of English football supporters intersects with axes of gender and race. Sport invites fans to join an imagined national community, but it is a community in which certain types of bodies and identities are favoured over others. Carrington (1998) explains:

The symbolism of national sporting sides, and sport itself, has ... acquired huge political significance, especially for the political right, in trying to foster certain narrow notions of what Britain’s/England’s ... cultural identity should look like. (102)
Much of Carrington’s argument is concerned with the ways that popular media, and particularly the entertainment genre of sports television, can try to promote a myth of white, pure Englishness. Indeed, the broader social contexts within which football and football entertainment exist are closely linked to the national imaginary. In Britain, football’s series of racial and national exclusions (which have been continued in the racist vilification of players involved in the 2021 FIFA Club World Cup) have previously been thematically connected with whiteness as configured in such things as the Britpop movement of the mid-to-late 1990s:

What we see here [in football culture, pop culture, etc.] is an attempt to promote a fixed, closed and racially homogenous [sic] sense of national cultural identity that actively excludes black representations from the national imaginary. (Carrington, 1998: 105)

This point has been built upon, extended and recapped in a variety of ways since the late 1990s. Jamie Cleland (2014) has examined sport as a site for the creation of myths about national identity and belonging, and argues that this myth addresses people differentially according to race and gender. By and large, the evidence used to substantiate this argument has been textual. In an Australian context, theorists such as Colin Tatz (1995) in ‘Racism and sport in Australia’ and Baker-Lewton et al. (2017) and Cleland (2014) similarly recount the racialised and gendered nature of sport. These studies show that the achievements of white male athletes are most highly valued. While it is certainly the case that much sports commentary in Australia and England has formed a vehicle for racist sentiment veiled as ‘nationalism’, the majority of children interested in sport in my project were interested in football, often enamoured with it, and were mostly children of colour. Underneath mediated surfaces of whiteness, football communities are superdiverse, intergenerational and embodied. My fieldwork notes are peppered with comments such as this:

There was some interesting discussion around whether children went to church, or mosque, with one boy saying that he didn’t go to church this Easter but he had gone before, and the other one commenting that he would rather go play football. They all would rather play football. (Fieldwork notes, inner-north Melbourne, 2019)

Football was as significant as religion in the lives of many of the children. Indeed, not just in the lives of children – one mother in
London recounted experiencing the most profound feeling of belonging ever during the World Cup. Her estate was covered in football flags, and everyone on the estate came out to be part of a party for the final match. In the transcript below, parents from London’s south-east explain their attachment to football and suggest it arouses more passion than religion:

Anna: Yeah. Yeah. I know ... that you can just support a team, and then you’re connected to the whole community.
Sahar: Especially when it's the World Cup or something.
Sally: I've seen more resentment and arguing about football than religion. Definitely.
Anna: What would you say?
Sahar: There’s so much. When you’ve got kids it’s about entertaining them and keeping them happy. And I think your life gets too busy to concentrate on one thing. And teaching them the right and wrong things. And you don’t want them to get in trouble and stuff. Like when you hear of these shootings and stabbings and things going on it’s awful. Like that twenty-three-year-old boy that got really badly stabbed and was bleeding to death. And he really died ... The boy went to the shop to get something, and he was trying to help these two other boys because they were picking on the Muslim. But he got stabbed instead. It was really bad. He was a Muslim boy. But the guys who did it to him – I don’t know. I don’t know who they were ... They’ve got gangs and groups and stuff like that. I think reading all this and seeing it on the telly – I think that makes you feel threatened before you even go out and see anything happening.

(South-east London focus group, June 2019)

Here, the similarity between religion and football is introduced, by a mother saying ‘I’ve seen more resentment and arguing about football than religion’, and then going on to discuss football and violence caused by religion. Expanding on this theme, Cleland’s (2014) study also found that violence oriented at religious soccer fans was an issue. Yet the children in my ethnography overwhelmingly described football as an activity they love and a place where they feel happy. The image in Figure 6.3 of three girls playing soccer in their hijabs illustrates the role that soccer has in maintaining friendships.

The school soccer oval is packed at lunchtimes and is always filled with as many girls as boys. Before school, too, the pupils are
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playing soccer on the field and in any available space on the tarmac. During fieldwork, I often had to hide the football so as to encourage focus on art-making rather than football-playing, so enduring was the love of the ball. It would be bounced around in class at any given opportunity.

Figure 6.4 was made collaboratively by two young girls in a Melbourne school. It depicts a giant flying football that has an ice-cream factory inside it. The picture is powerful because it clearly situates soccer within a landscape of pleasure, and this is overwhelmingly the case for my research participants. Not only does the soccer pitch fly, so that anyone can play soccer whenever they want, but players can also make themselves an ice-cream mid-match. The merging of sport and ice-cream in the flying ice-cream factory-cum-soccer pitch is a drawing about what really matters, identity and belonging. Made in pairs, this imagined world was no less real to the girls who made it than playing soccer at lunchtime. Who wouldn’t want to live and play in an ice-cream-making mobile soccer field? Later in this chapter, I examine some of the children’s explorations
of their gender identity through their pleasurable investments in ice-cream and the video game Fortnite. As children explored identity through animation and other media, it became clear to me that possessing some insight into children’s imaginative worlds is critically important to understanding their worldviews and values. I was also reminded of the feminist adage that the personal is always political (Hanisch, 2000); that spaces of pleasure, such as online gaming environments and sensuous experiences like eating ice-cream, play a central and significant role in children’s worlds and everyday lives and play (Knight, 2019; Moore, 2017).

**Pleasure and the spectre of adolescence**

Some of the children in the study are approaching adolescence, and even those who are not quite of that age can often be seen exploring their gender and the sensual nature of their body through an enduring obsession with ice-cream and the computer game Fortnite. I read both the love of ice-cream and the fascination with – or addiction
to – Fortnite as relating to the spectre of adolescence and the development and performance of gendered identities.

A childhood passion, an enduring vehicle for pleasure and friendship, ice-cream brings with it the possibility of wish fulfilment, the child-food assemblage of messy cone-sticky hands-lips-cold-sweet, the tongue dance of licking the drips, the acknowledgement of a happy intergenerational moment (Kim, 2019). Ice-cream can mean many things all at once.

It took repeated, unprompted discussions of ice-cream and countless artworks about ice-cream to bring me to the point of approaching an academic discussion of children’s love for ice-cream. Does the fact that children made artwork about ice-cream more often than anything else really matter? If so, why? From a psychoanalytic perspective, I could say that the visceral oral pleasure of consuming ice-cream is a precursor to sexual pleasure, a brief return to the oral phase, or part of a budding gender performance (Blaise, 2010; Mechling, 2000; Renold, 2005). Ice-cream is a treat to which children gain access through their parents, so it brings with it a sense of approval, reward and celebration. Pleasure is a key means through which children become who they are (Bond Stockton, 2009; Rasmussen, 2006; Renold, 2005). In this instance, geographies of pleasure form around ice-cream. The children’s fascination with ice-cream was introduced to me in north-west Manchester in 2017, when the collaboratively produced future city populated by high-rise estates featured ‘an ice-cream maker in every home’ (north-west Manchester girl, 2017). At the time I tried to play down this comment, saying that everyone having a home and everyone having an ice-cream maker were issues of very different importance. To my adult mind, they were not comparable. However, the ubiquity and consistency of children’s work on ice-cream eventually made it worthy of consideration. Here are some examples of the many ways that children in very different contexts have, unprompted, brought ice-cream into their work, and what I think it might mean.

Figure 6.5 is an image of a collaborative painting made by children in Manchester in 2017. It is the work in which ‘everyone has a home’ and there is also an ‘ice-cream maker in every home’. I have written about this image elsewhere (Hickey-Moody, 2018, 2019) because, as I noted above, it also shows a vision of the future that models sustainable urban developments, such as ‘all the streets are rivers’, a glass
dome protecting the environment and a flying mosque. The ice-cream maker in every home then reappeared in different forms of obsession with ice-cream, some of which included animated pink ice-cream as part of an identity story (in an Adelaide mosque), and the flying ice-cream factory with a football pitch inside, which is shown above.

Many other children made various representations of ice-cream in relation to fun, identity and friendship. As well as being an identity resource and a source of pleasure, ice-cream signifies financial success and security because it is a luxury item, and can also be used to say, ‘I love you’ (Mechling, 2000). Ice-cream is a sign the basics are covered: a treat. For example, a news story by Quartz magazine reports on how class structures in Cuba are rated by the types of ice-cream people can consume (Feinberg and Padrón Cueto, 2018). Poorer people have access to a diluted, mass-produced brand called Coppelia. Coppelia is also a place, a park where people can come to get ice-cream and sit in an open-air market park to publicly demonstrate their access to ice-cream. However, with eighty per cent of people living on US$30 a month, and a government hold placed on certain ingredients, only the remaining 20 per cent of the
population can afford the substantially higher-priced and harder to find premium gelato (Feinberg and Padrón Cueto, 2018). The authors remind the reader that, for the communist state, this is a form of governmental control, and the direct linking of class to ingredients shows how children’s portrayal of ice-cream makers in every home expresses a fantasy of abundance, pleasure and enjoyment for everyone, despite financial constraints. A refugee mother in west Sydney explained ice-cream to me as an example of the safety of their secure and successful life in Australia:

Oh yeah, the world is a very dirty place and every country is trying to protect their own interest. Every country. I still feel guilty and sad, but you know, I’m here with a beautiful life and they’re [my family] over there suffering, they don’t know where their next meal is going to come from, it’s terrible … Like today, watching my kids eat waffles makes me happy. That would make any mother happy, to be able to put a dollop of ice-cream on top of a waffle and hand it to them. I was so sad I didn’t have a banana for them. Can you imagine – that feeling, like – not being able to provide – it’s so sad. So sad.

(West Sydney, interview, May 2018)

A sign of prosperity, security, intergenerational pleasure and unformed sexuality, as well as a delicious experience, the enjoyment
of ice-cream is a moment that, for children, ‘really matters’, because it means a range of things. Another seemingly banal feature of everyday life that was a site of connection and engagement repeatedly referred to by the children in my study was the online game Fortnite, which I contextualise in the next section.

**Fortnite: Battle Royale, world-making and drawing about world-making**

A noticeable number of boys in the study played the video game Fortnite. No girls in the study made art about a computer game, although girls did make art about media culture broadly – such as the ‘TARDIS’ from *Doctor Who*, and art featuring their computer or their iPad. A number of boys made artwork about games other than Fortnite, such as Minecraft and Roblox but, for the most part, when representing or drawing media culture and games, boys aged nine to thirteen made art about Fortnite. Only a few boys per group would draw Fortnite, but the ubiquitous interest in the game (and the fact that it was used as an example of something that ‘really matters’) stuck with me and led me to realise I needed to think seriously about the appeal of this experience.

Gaming is a powerful form of experiential learning in which children invent and test system hypotheses (Apperley, 2010: 101–13). For example, ‘I think if I enter that room this way, I will have access to my target’, ‘I think if I attack my enemy this way, it will kill them’ and so on. Strategic thinking and experiential learning are always central to using the ‘toy’ or a ‘key’ feature in a given video game, which in Fortnite is a weapon. The game of Fortnite also has diegetic ‘toys’, which are props, such as sports equipment, that players can earn. Fortnite is an online multiplayer game (Marlatt, 2020), which is highly social (users play each other and chat with each other as they play), and it also mobilises dance. The characters in the game dance, and children and youth playing the game often learn ‘Fortnite dances’ from their avatars.

Avatars and toys in Fortnite were constantly reproduced by boys in the project as symbols of ‘what really matters’ to them. Children in the church community in Adelaide decorated their refuge tents with symbols of ‘what really matters’, which, in this instance included
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a purple Fortnite piñata and a yellow mobile featuring three characters (or ‘skins’) and toys from Fortnite. Other symbols of ‘what really matters’ included family members and favourite books, songs and places. What has stood out to me across the years of undertaking this fieldwork is the consistency with which some boys in each group will choose this game as an example of what really matters. This makes me think it is related to learning masculinity. In the game, boys get to dress up in different avatars: they try on a selection of ‘skins’, or ways of looking, and this freedom to imagine and to be whomever they want to be is clearly very appealing to them.

The idea that children’s engagement with gaming is drawn along gendered lines is a statement that might sound reductionist, but it is an accurate empirical account of the children in my study who made art about Fortnite. None of the girls in the study said that they played Fortnite, or indeed enjoyed gaming, which of course is not to say there aren’t millions of girls all over the world who love gaming – they just did not happen to be in my ethnography.

As an adult it was, at the very least, alarming to see boys make images and characters from Fortnite as their expressions of ‘what really matters’. I found it nearly impossible to believe that a character from an invented world can really matter as much as family or a religion. At the same time, I had to believe that it does matter, because the boys were adamant that, for them, it does. Many children play Fortnite with people they know offline, or have online friends with whom they often play – like a pen-pal they never meet, largely for geographic reasons. Primarily, the social aspect is engaging for these boys, but there is also something appealing about the nature of the imagined world they inhabit – they learn, and often master, dances that are built into the game of Fortnite. During one of the creative methods workshops in Adelaide, where we built refuges and decorated them with ‘what really matters’, boys made small stuffed animals and mobiles that represented Fortnite characters and danced Fortnite routines together. It was clear that the game was a vehicle for friendship and a means of feeling secure in oneself.

Fortnite also offers the opportunity of becoming and being all kinds of people by wearing different ‘skins’. The everyday reproductions of Fortnite characters and weapons as artworks and dances were ways of demonstrating friendship and developing an identity on social media (e.g. TikTok). The boys desired the socially sanctioned
opportunity to switch gender and to enjoy dance that is offered by Fortnite moves and skins. They can change how they appear from within the relatively safe confines of a virtual world in which everyone else in that world is ‘playing along’, i.e. suspending their disbelief. The ‘collaborative collage’ in Figure 6.7 shows ‘what really matters’ to two boys in Melbourne, and presents us with a drawing of the ‘legendary pickaxe’ that has been hastily and carelessly turned into a ‘collage’ through the application of a roughly cut strip of felt. Pickaxes are a tool in Fortnite, also known as a ‘harvesting tool’: a device that can mine substances and break barriers, and cause damage to enemies. Different pickaxe skins are divided into ‘Legendary/Epic’ skins, ‘Rare/Uncommon’ skins and ‘Common’ skins.

Fortnite characters, practices and dance moves bleed into children’s creative spaces and are vehicles for pleasure, friendship and identity construction. These observations are echoed by other scholars as well. As a teacher-educator studying how multiliteracies cultivated in social settings can be leveraged towards academic success, Rick Marlatt (2020) undertook research into Fortnite. He had two objectives: to examine how Fortnite players operate within their digital community, and to explore what relationships may be established between the game’s social literacy contexts and formal literacy learning. Marlatt attended a public Fortnite ‘Battle Royale’

Figure 6.7 ‘Legendary pickaxe’, mixed media on paper, inner-north Melbourne, 2019
on his university campus. For twelve hours on a Saturday, he conducted informal observations of gameplay and digital literacy, watching and listening as twenty-five university students competed for prizes in a standing-room-only computer lab. His two primary research questions were:

1. How might Fortnite gamers operate within a digital community of practice?
2. What intersections, if any, are visible between the game’s social literacy practices and academic achievement in school settings?

Marlatt argues that, ‘[s]imilar to academic textual activity, the multiliteracies of Fortnite operate equally in cognitive and physical realms, where physical moves in corporeal and digital spaces are supported by applied conceptions of language and textual operations’ (9). Marlatt usefully develops a framework for understanding the discourse and literacy practices generated by Fortnite players. Marlatt’s work helped me to leverage my analysis of how Fortnite operates in the physical and mental realms of young boys’ lives. There are pleasure and risk factors involved in putting on different skins and being encouraged to dance. Such experiments are part of a broader process of social engagement that demonstrates an experiment of masculinity and dominance among peers, which shows why Fortnite characters are ultimately ‘what really matter’ in many young boys’ lives across the fieldwork sites.

Another research project on Fortnite was undertaken by Beate Hygen and colleagues (2019), who also note the ubiquity of electronic games and the extensive amount of time children spend on this activity. As the first study to examine children and social development in relation to Fortnite, Hygen and colleagues investigated whether the quantity of time children spend on gaming is related to their social development. They examined relations between time spent gaming and social competence in a sample of Norwegian six-year-olds who were followed up with at the ages eight, ten and twelve. Results suggest that, among girls, greater social competence at both eight and ten years predicted less gaming in two years’ time, and that more gaming at age ten predicted less social competence at age twelve. They also found that the impacts of gaming are particularly gendered, suggesting that spending more time gaming seems to have a detrimental effect on the social competence of girls but not...
boys. Girls tend to play video games in smaller groups than boys, and their relationships offline are often more intimate (Archer and Lloyd, 2002: 79; Richardson, Hjorth and Davies, 2022). It might be that girls who game lose out on something very influential: more intimate interactions with close friends. In other words, given the differences in boys’ and girls’ social lives with peers, time spent gaming may carry less of a developmental ‘cost’ for boys (Hygen et al., 2019: 10). While boys spend substantially more time gaming than girls, gaming is more integrated into boys’ play culture, and therefore easier to integrate into their social development.

What is clear, both from the studies cited above and my own findings, is that gaming is a significant form of social connection for all children who play. On one level, gaming can be seen as a form of escapism: children who struggle socially may turn to gaming as an escape. However, gaming is also an inherently social activity, and can form an extension of social activities for people who are gregarious offline (Apperley, 2010; Kowert, 2014; Richardson, Hjorth and Davies, 2022). Gaming can fulfil the need for mastery and accomplishment: by playing games – and thereby taking part in the gaming community – children may come to feel more competent and accomplished than would otherwise be the case.

A major theme that runs through the data on pleasure relating to football and gaming is the close relationship between pleasure and friendship. Children really enjoy football and gaming with friends. Indeed, online multiplayer games provide a context in which children are presented with a selection of possible new friends. The images in Figures 6.3 and 6.4, showing friends playing football together and friends standing next to a giant football which is also an ice-cream factory, make it explicitly clear that football, like Fortnite, is a social activity. Outside these three particular examples of vehicles for new friendship, the continuation of existing friendships is also, clearly, a very important part of the children’s creative work. An excerpt from my fieldwork notes below shows an interwoven context for how play, space and games emerge from workshops that ask about values, belonging and what really matters:

Outer-east Adelaide, day two:

Andrew, Spiro and John made a ‘skate park’ and a playground in the middle of the tent city as the central area that connected all of the
tents together. They gathered sticks and bush materials from around the building and experimented with arranging them in the middle of the tents, like a giant bonfire. This imagining of communal space echoes the designs of the earlier collaborative large canvases. The playground/skate park is a space which is generally designed for children and so it seems a sensible choice for the boys to create. Playgrounds and skate parks are places where you hang out with friends. It’s important that they see this (friendship through doing) as being in the centre of their community. I wonder, too, if this is a space which is associated with certain kinds of play and several of the ‘special objects’ that they made are also associated with play – such as the tools you need to have fun?

Outer-east Adelaide, day three:

The workshop ended with a vibrant ‘dance off’ in the middle of the tent city. This was a great chance for the kids to show off their Fortnite moves, and also to get into their body in creative ways. It felt like there was a sense of pride and ownership over the space (physical tents and made objects). The kids had made their own city then chosen how they wanted to inhabit it. There was an impromptu ‘gallery’ started by Esther, where she took some of the adults – specifically, her mum – on a tour of the tents and proudly narrated the meaning behind the artworks decorating each tent. Each artwork provides a window into the world of the child artist, most specifically, into the things that the child artist loves and what really matters to them. (Fieldwork notes, outer-east Adelaide, 2018)

These excerpts from my fieldwork notes show that friendship, pleasure and intergenerational relationships are key to how children engaged with the tasks I asked them to complete. The politics of friendship (who is friends with whom, why and what the implications of this are for the children involved) is something that my research was not originally designed to explore, but in seeing the larger role friendship plays in ‘what really matters’ to the children, I started to consider it more. Often children either write the word ‘friends’ into their artworks, or draw their friends with them, to show how important they are. For example, two boys attending primary school in south-east London made an animation together about ‘what really matters’, which for them was a spiritual pilgrimage and the striking architecture of the Middle East (Figure 6.8). The boys drew the Burj Khalifa in Saudi Arabia and the Ka’bah,
where they had been lucky enough to have been on Hajj visits with their fathers. They spoke enthusiastically about how they couldn’t wait until they were old enough to go on Hajj together. They practised saying that sentence in perfect unison. It was an affirmation of their present friendship, the significant role that faith plays in their life and their intention to carry on that friendship through faith.

What is ultimately so striking about this animation of the Ka’bah, and the Fortnite drawings, is the idea that religion and faith are entangled with elements of fear, pleasure and friendship, which reveal themselves in almost all of the workshops. Whether it’s a tent city decorated with purple piñatas copied from a video game, a Hajj pilgrimage, a mother’s fear of football and religious violence, or creatively imagined solutions to climate change, there is never any singular succinct location or matter through which faith resonates. Faith is just there. Through friendship, through kindness, through fear, faith appears through a realisation that there is something bigger than just the confines of this moment. The lick of an ice-cream that demonstrates a parent’s love for their child, the hung flags of a
Faith stories

football team across an overpopulated housing estate express community and belonging – all these things are united by, and create, faith. Whether it be a god, a football field or a video game, we all are sustained by faith and, for children, this is a great source of pleasure.

Conclusion

The examples of connection and coming together explored here have been chosen because they are extremely prevalent in my data. They needed to be discussed. Overall, they provide architectures for connections between people that extend people’s capacities to act, but, as my discussion of the Atherton Gardens estate demonstrates, these are never simple equations. Some limiting factors are part of all landscapes and too often these are racialised, gendered and classed. To differing extents, housing estates, football, ice-cream, gaming and art-making all constitute figures of attachment:

Is it a wisdom or a religion – it does not matter which. It is only from this point of view that Chinese hexagrams, Hindu mandalas, Jewish sephiroth, Islamic ‘imaginals’, and Christian icons can be considered together: thinking through figures. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1996: 89)

I want to suggest that in some contexts, the ‘figures’ through which my research participants primarily think are not obviously identifiable as relating to faith. However, these figures are often expressions of faith for both religious and secular people. They show connection to community and/or demonstrate God’s love. They express identity and belonging and/or God’s will. They express ways of being in relation to others that have global, multifaced purposes.

Note

1 In 1998, Britain’s then-Prime Minister Tony Blair famously called London’s Aylesbury estate a ‘sink estate’ in a speech to Parliament.