

# Second-hand masculinity: do boys with intellectual disabilities use computer games as part of gender practice?

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## ABSTRACT

The process of gendered practice in the pursuit of masculine identity is complex with many obstacles and hegemonic forms to negotiate on the journey. Add to this the multifaceted and diverse nature of intellectual disability (ID) and the opportunity for normalised gendered practice is further complicated. Focused on the talk of boys with ID, this paper offers an account of the development of ideas about masculinity to show how gaming may offer a space for gendered practice not available in other areas of the boys' lives. The paper tentatively argues that gaming may offer an opportunity for the boys and those working with them to explore gendered practice safely to facilitate the construction of their identities as men and to challenge problematic images of the hyper-masculine ideal found in these games.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The development of a gendered identity, its performance and refinement is a process that both boys and girls navigate to construct ideas about the men and women they will become. Research into masculinity is now an established area of study, but contemporary research considerations of the influence of gender for boys with ID and their developing identities remains limited. There has been no consequent consideration of what methods could be adopted to help boys with ID develop their ideas of the men they wish to become. In contrast the study of male identity has been considered in studies that regard this from the perspective of men who are physically disabled (Gerschick and Miller, 1994; Shakespeare, 1999; Ostrander, 2008). In these studies researchers have established the need for further investigation to consider the interrelationship between masculinity and disability. Gerschick and Miller's (1994) seminal work documents the extents to which men with physical disabilities reframe their masculinity in the face of barriers to inclusion in their communities. This reframing as part of gendered practice can take on a number of forms and aims to emulate or subvert widely held beliefs of how men should be in order to gain acceptance. The contrast of experience between able-bodied men and those with disabilities taking part in the research, is graphically illustrated highlighting that the disabled man is constantly at odds with dominant views of what it is to be a man. However, it is also apparent in research with boys and men without disabilities that the route to manhood is not without its complexities.

It is clear from the mainstream literature with regard to masculinity, that in the process of constructing a masculine identity, dominant or hegemonic forms of masculinity which protect the 'legitimacy of patriarchy' (Connell, 1995), offer a cultural and time specific blue print for men. Within the complexities of this blue print are the constructions of masculinity that are supported and those that are rejected (Connell, 2000). Whitehead (2002) indicates that the existence of dominant and subordinated male behaviour is indicative of the inequalities of gender. However, it would be simplistic to assume that all boys or all men subscribe to a dominant form of masculinity. Unfortunately, for most of these men and boys the existence of the hegemonic form, even at a distance, can be problematic as they navigate their way towards an acceptable masculine identity (Connell, 2000). Frosh et al (2002) in their research with teenagers use a construct of hegemonic masculinities which they and the boys term 'popular masculinities'. This term was utilised to reveal not only the dominance of a particular boy, but also the apparent opposing differences between boys and girls and boys and other boys who did not meet the standards of masculinity required. The location of difference and the dialogue which this creates appears to be an important process in the development of male identity. This view is supported by Swain (2003) who argues that the world of men is governed by a hegemony perceived by boys and that this is supported by visual and print media.

Considering the hegemonic formation of the masculine ideal in this way might lead one to assume that the ideas generated are somehow fixed and impermeable. However, for teenagers constructing normalized identities, place, space and time are influential (Swain, 2003; Archer and Yamashita 2003). Research also highlights the contestable nature of the construction of identity and the battles that can occur in relation to it. Paechter (2003) argues that achievement is dependant on the teenage boy's successful or unsuccessful attempts to project their developing masculine identity on new social situations (Paechter, 2003) Swain (2003) agrees with this position as he posits the physical practice of the body not as something driven by existing notions of 'doing boy' but as brought about through its performance. The challenge remains how best to help boys with ID develop their masculine identity in a safe and effective way.

Virtual reality and its potential for use in the education of people with ID has received some attention over the past two decades (Cromby, Standen and Brown, 1996; Standen and Brown, 2005; Standen and Brown, 2006). Most recently Hopkins, Gower, Perez et al (2011) have demonstrated its effectiveness in improving social skills for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The use of computer based technology as a tool to assist educationalists in their work with people who have ID is supported for school age children (Langone, Shade, Clees et al, 1999; Mechling, Gast and Langone, 2002; Mechling, 2006) and young adults (Cromby, Standen, and Brown, 1996; Lancioni, Oliva, Meazzini et al, 1993; Brewer and White, 1994; Lancioni, Van den Hof, Furniss et al, 1999; Lancioni, O'Reilly, Singh et al, 2005; Mechling and Cronin, 2006; Mechling, Gast and Krupa, 2007) with ID. Although reporting on small groups of participants, this research shows how computer based technology can be used to improve educational achievement for this group. Little current research centres on children with ID who engage with computer technology not just as an education tool, but through the choices that they make in their lives outside school. However, Orsmond and Kuo (2011) report on the use of computers by adolescents with ASD and suggest that participants were using this by choice and could access it independently.

The purpose of the main study, from which the results for this paper are drawn, was to explore whether boys with ID had a culturally normal idea of what it means to be a boy, what influenced this and what ideas the boys had about their futures as men. This paper will focus on the boys' use of games as a potential space for gendered practice and their experience of second hand masculinity via the hyper-masculine characters typically found in many commercial games.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1 Participants

A qualitative methodology was adopted to elicit the views of participants with an ID about their lives as boys. Twenty one boys (see Table 1.) who were engaged in a process of transition in years 8 to 11 were recruited from a school for children with special needs. Consent was gained from the boys themselves and from their parents.

**Table 1.** number, year group and age of sample.

Number of participants	Year group	Age of participants
3	8	13-14years
6	9	14-15years
4	10	15-16years
8	11	16-17years

### 2.2 Procedure

The primary researcher initially spent six weeks in the school observing the boys and preparing materials for the group interviews. Participants were divided into five groups based on their age and friendship group following guidance from the boys themselves and teaching staff at the school. Each group took part in a sorting exercise as described below and then each individual was asked if they would like to progress to individual interview. Of the 21 participants 4 were either not interviewed as a result of their ability to engage with materials in the group interviews (n=2), or did not attend for interview at the time arranged (n=2).

**2.2.1 Group interviews.** First group interviews were conducted involving the boys sorting images of men doing various activities. The development of the bank of images used in the group was informed by the work of Frosh et al (2002) and the earlier observations made by the primary researcher. Groups were asked to sort

the images into two piles: images that the boys did not support as masculine and images they did support. Conversations between the boys while negotiating decisions were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim prior to analysis.

2.2.2 *Individual interviews.* Boys were asked, during art classes as part of the school timetable, to produce in a medium of their choice visual representations of their predictions of their lives as men. These were then used in the interviews as a trigger for discussion. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim ready for analysis.

### 2.3 Analysis

Using NVivo 9 to store and organize the transcripts, a constant comparative method of analysis was used following each episode of data collection until saturation was achieved. Six themes emerged from the analysis of the group and individual interviews supported by a seventh overarching theme which emerged from the participants' view of themselves as *'The way we do boy'*. One of the six themes which emerged from the boys' talk about the lives of others was Vicarious (second hand) masculinity. This theme has two threads; the first identified the boys as looking on, experiencing constructs of masculinity through the lives of other boys and the men in their lives; the second, which forms the focus of this paper, illustrates the boy's lives through the computer games that they played.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The scrutinized lives of the boys who participated in the research and their deep sense of being regarded as other became a focal point when conducting both the focus groups and individual interviews. Boys were eager to talk about how they conducted their lives as boys, in a very tangible and celebratory account of boyhood from their perspective. Expressing a credible account of boyhood in poignant and playful ways was an essential part of their talk. Boys were careful not to frame their accounts in the context of difference or allow their ID to dominate their accounts of their masculinity. The time spent in the school developing and then conducting the research resulted in interesting exchanges when the boys would exclaim *'you've seen us!'* This was used to remind me of the time I had already spent with them watching them play football, engaging in computer gaming and participating in curricular and non-curricular activities. An alternative and equally credible explanation of this could be that *'you've seen us!'* was an expression of the ever watchful eye of adults in their lives. So aware of being watched and scrutinized in all areas of life, the boys may have assumed that I was fully aware of everything. Interestingly the only aspect of their lives that could not be scrutinized in this way was their interactions and activity in the virtual world of games.

In their exchanges with both me as researcher and other boys, participants spoke of their games consoles and how gaming was essential to the construction of their identities as boys. Used in part by the school as a reward for the completion of academic work, gaming was also valued by the boys as an independent pursuit free of the restrictions of others. In the virtual world, inhabited by their favorite characters, the boys could be successful and heroic, achieving beyond what would be expected of them in the real world. The analysis of both the focus groups and individual interviews appears to suggest that the boys used games as a space for gendered practice and also as an opportunity to experience second hand a construction of hyper-masculinity through characters in console games.

### 3.1 Games as Space for Gendered Practice

In the school opportunities for gendered practice were limited as the school day was framed not only by the curriculum but also by the ever watchful eye of adults, who controlled both classroom areas and communal spaces. However, it was clear to the boys with ID that virtual spaces were relatively un-policed by others and could be easily accessed and some spent as much time as they could in these spaces:

Philip: Football, yesterday I played...oh was it yesterday? I think it was yesterday I played cricket on my play station. I played on my PSP on the bus yesterday and...

These ideas about the significance of accessibility are echoed by another boy who describes his strategy for ensuring that he has the latest console to play games on. Cost is not an issue only that it is available and that access is assured.

Ian: Yeh, and then I had to go on E-Bay and get My PS3. So I'll be doing that with my PS2 then when I get my PS4.

Int.: So you keep your PS3 and you get your new PS4.

Ian: Yeh. Well the PS3 will be down stairs though or I might give it to my brother.

The fact that the PS4 was then and is not yet available is not important here. Ian's ideas to keep those things he loves close to him and accessible are part of a plan to maintain this in his life. The knowledge Ian possessed regarding gaming and the gaming world was incredible and he often acted as a source of information to other boys on the next game coming into the shops.

The subordination of masculinity on the grounds of ID was a regular experience for the boys.

Chris: These fights, you know these bullies at (names mainstream school) they had a fight with me, I just... and all the time I get into trouble. And you know the other time right in this lesson I accidentally wacked my hand on the teacher's face like that.

John: You accidentally wacked them on the head?

Chris: Yeh I did because (names two other boys), those two dimwits got me into trouble and they had to put me out.

Yet in the virtual world they could be dominant and competitive without fear of reprisal from others. Solitary games gave boys the assurance that their success, or lack of it, was a matter for them and could not be compared with other areas of their lives or referenced by their ID. Growing confidence opened up an opportunity for one teenage boy to explore gendered practice as part of an online gaming group. The virtual world became a space for spontaneous engagement with others, where intellectual ability was not a pre-requisite to inclusion as was apparent in other areas of the boys' lives.

John: Yeh, I do play those a lot of the time as well as others.

Int.: Do you play it on your own, or do you link up with people over the internet?

John: Well, as in the World of War Craft I can play with other players at an instant.

Int.: Right?

John: So I just Log in and there's all those people that you've got you can't go on single player mode now.

The immediacy of contact between John and others is clearly appealing. Talk centres on unfettered access and a joining of equals. The assumption is that ID is unimportant or in recounting the events in the virtual world it is not important to focus on difference. John uses this opportunity as a springboard for testing out a way of being in what he regards as a safe environment.

John: Well we do have our little chats about what's...we don't say like what our names are and everything.

Int.: No?

John: Or where we live, we just talk about things, about like what we should do on this certain place. Or, like we talk about, really complain about stuff that is really annoying on the game and everything.

Enthusiastic talk about solitary gaming or joining with others as part of a virtual world was common among those interviewed. In particular the anonymity appeared to suit the boys and gave them the opportunity to try out ways of being male that was not available to them in other areas of their lives. For those joining with others in virtual spaces to play games, this appears to help draw them away from their embodied identity as intellectually disabled, giving a sense of a gendered identity equal to others. The need to maintain this as an opportunity for the *way we do boy* also emerged in talk about age limits for gaming.

John: It is quite interesting playing it still you can still...the game that I'm playing right now you can play at a certain age, but I had someone which was 106 playing once.

Armed with this sort of information, perhaps slightly exaggerated in the account, boys could argue for gaming to be part of life well into adulthood and eventual old age. Talk of others' involvement in gaming also helped to strengthen boys' accounts of gaming as a space for gendered practice.

Simon: Shall I start with my dad's?

Int.: Yes please.

Simon: Sega, sega advanced a play station a play station 2 and a Wii and when my step brother comes we got a X-box 360 as well and a play station 3.

The maintenance of gaming as an opportunity for boys was also supported by the school and became a focus in talk regarding making the transition from the main school to provision for 16 to 19 year olds known in the school as the 16+ unit.

Int.: What's good about 16+ and staying on?

Simon: You get money.  
 Int: You get what? Oh you get some money (Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)). I can see a theme here Simon! (Had talked about making money when older, winning the lottery was a favourite).  
 Simon: No, no, no, you don't get money. It's like there's games...a play station 2 and X-box 360 and play station 3, in that big room.  
 Int.: OK.  
 Simon: No not the big room just the one you see people in.

Philip, John and Simon's accounts give a position for gaming in their developing ideas of their gendered identities. Although John's account is slightly different in that he joined with others to play games, the dominant factor is the boys' desire for autonomy and independence through an unrestricted medium for testing how to be boys without the complication of disability.

### 3.2 Games as a construct of hyper-masculinity.

Those interviewed enjoyed the experience of being part of a world populated by hyper-masculine characters where they could be a successful cricketer one minute and a superhero the next. Gaming gave the boys a great deal of excitement, escapism and a sense of anticipation as they wondered what might happen next in their virtual worlds. Games equated to living a more exciting life through the embodiment of hyper-masculine characters.

Ian: I've finished Ironman.  
 Int.: Oh have you?  
 Ian: Yeh. So I've got to wait to get the Incredible Hulk now.  
 Int.: Yeh? So you like things that are real action that you have to work through.  
 Ian: The Black Knight's coming soon as well.  
 Int.: The Black Knight? What's that?  
 Ian: Batman.

Favoured characters populated games which included sport, superheroes or the anti hero (villain or criminal). The un-problematized representation of the hyper-masculine and the actions of characters were particularly attractive to the boys.

Andy: The action and the adventure.  
 Int.: Yeh?  
 Andy: Stuff like that. Sword fighting games.  
 Int.: Sword fighting games. Are they your favourite?  
 Andy: And shooting games.

Preferences were often underlined by those interviewed.

Andy: I've got some fighting games. I've got Prince of Persia, South time for the PS 2, halo 2 for the X-Box, for the normal X-Box, and I'm hoping that I might get my X-Box 360 to get Halo 3 and Assassins Creed.

The types of characters in these games are tough and in control of their destinies, something that the boys admired and wanted to emulate.

John: 'cause there's different areas with as many people and you can join up with them as well. So I was in this instance and all of a sudden this creature we killed it of course and then something happened it just went off and then on and then she was there again and of course we were at full house so we had to kill her again. It just kept on happening so we had to run out of the instance and reset it all and everything.

Later on in the interview John describes another occasion when those on line had to collaborate to fix a problem.

John: There was like two dead bodies there when we came back and then we went there again it didn't happen again but with other ones it did and we were quite annoyed at it. We weren't annoyed 'cause we got extra things with it, but we were annoyed that it actually did happen when we were resting and everything.

Talk of success and dominance over others was something that was in stark contrast to the lives of the boys in the real world.

These findings raise interesting issues regarding the boys' developing identities and their masculinity. Time spent using computers appeared to be driven by the boys' enthusiasm for games and the opportunity to engage in activities independently. Similar to the view of Orsmond and Kuo (2011) who suggest that although solitary, computer use by people with ASD indicated independence, the boys were able to control this for themselves free from the interference of the adults in their lives. The development of independence and control by the boys differs from the finding of Foley and McCubbin (2009) purely as a result of the lack of external control over how they used the computer and what games they played. It could be suggested that this independence and control could be linked to gendered practice and that the boys, who lacked opportunities to try out aspects of dominant forms of masculinity, were using computer gaming as a conduit for testing this out.

The effect of gaming on the boys' persona is another aspect that should be questioned as a result of these findings, particularly as they favoured games that allowed them to embody hyper-masculine characters. Although changes in the perception of violence could not be identified in this study as in Deselms and Altman (2003), it could be argued that games played by the boys strengthened ideas of power and control as aspects of masculinity. In addition, the hyper masculine characteristics of male characters in the games and the boys' view of them may be problematic in the development of future ideas of gender roles as found by Dill and Thill (2007) in their research with teenagers. However, these games may offer the opportunity, as part of a clear strategy, to help the boys to question both desirable and undesirable aspects of masculine identity. Although the images of men and women in the games are problematic (Burgess, Stermer and Burgess, 2007), the games may offer a way of challenging thinking about masculinity and the objectification of female characters that engages the boys in a medium that they enjoy. The practice of popular masculinity in the work of Frosh et al (2002), in which they offer 'hardness' as a representation supported in activities with other boys, may offer opportunities for working with boys with ID who enjoy gaming. For the boys with ID in the study this could mean testing out their experience of being 'hard' or tough through the computer games they play. The image of the lone assassin roaming the virtual world in search of his next victim is a representation of toughness that could be successfully achieved by any of the boys in the study. Hardness could be indicative of successes on a virtual level, offering equality of access to the world of boy and eventually the world of men. The challenge would be in working alongside boys with ID to help them analyse the representation of masculinity in the games and contrast that with the reality of their developing gendered identity.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The narratives developed by the boys in the sorting exercise and interviews offer an invaluable insight into their lives. Through their talk the participants have given form to *the way we do boy* in the school and the experiences, changes and influences that have and continue to shape this. The boys' insights are illustrations of their lives now, but also offer a glimpse of how they wish to shape their lives as men in the future. Their understanding of themselves and their interpretation of the lives of others, although referenced by limited experiences, paint an extraordinary picture which brings both opportunities and restrictions into sharp relief.

Gaming is an important part of the boys' lives and is perhaps indicative of a developing independence and control not available to them in the real world. Through the boys' talk their enthusiasm for the games is clear and solitary games offer the opportunity for freedom and a chance to practice aspects of gender identity. It is suggested that the engagement with games by boys with ID can be used to widen their opportunities for gendered practice and question aspects of dominant masculinities including their construction. Further research needs to be carried out to establish how boys with ID use games and if these are in fact influential in the formation of gendered identities.

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