

# The Games Children Play: An Analysis by Title, Gender and Age

**Jane Mavoia**

Microsoft Research Centre for Social Natural User Interfaces  
University of Melbourne  
+61 3 9035 5596  
jmavoia@student.unimelb.edu.au

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## INTRODUCTION

Digital gaming is an increasingly prominent part of contemporary childhoods, with the vast majority of children, including the very young, now playing some form of digital game(s) regularly. In response to this, and historical questions about the ‘effects’ of media on children, research efforts are underway to understand relationships between children and digital games (Straker et al. 2014). Having previously issued internationally adopted time based recommendations about screen media use, including digital games, the American Academy of Pediatrics are now urging researchers to look at *content* and *context* as crucial variables when considering newer mobile and internet enabled devices and their use (Brown, Shifrin, and Hill 2015).

However, in terms of adequately interrogating the *content* of video games, there has been little quantitative information available thus far regarding specific kinds of digital play young children engage in. Large data sets have captured information about how much time children spend gaming, and what genres they play (Houghton et al. 2015; Ofcom 2015; Rideout 2013), as well as information about the apps preferred by children aged five and under (Marsh et al. 2015). However, to date there have been no quantitative data sets, post the release of the Apple iPad in 2010, that have captured gaming information at *title level* in children older than five.

We will present data from a survey of the parents of 753 children aged between 3 and 12 in Melbourne, Australia. In one section of the survey parents were asked to list up to three of their child’s favourite digital games at the time, on any device whether connected to the internet or not. Preliminary results show a core group of frequently mentioned, ‘staple’ titles, within and across age groups. In addition, there was a strikingly large group of titles which were each mentioned only once or twice across the sample. A brief description of some of the more notable findings is presented below, and will be expanded upon in presenting this work to DIGRA conference attendees.

In terms of trends across age, we found that games with an explicitly educational focus were dominant in the younger age group (3-5s), as were transmedia games tied to either television shows/movies (such as Peppa Pig and Frozen), or physical toys (such as Lego or Shopkins). The most striking feature of the games listed by parents of 6-8 year old children, was the dominance of Minecraft which was mentioned more than twice as much as the next most popular group of games (Lego titles). Minecraft retained dominance in the 9-12 year old group, however other titles also gained in popularity, particularly MMO strategy game Clash of Clans (and derivatives), and sporting games such as Fifa titles.

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Gender differences were present across all age groups, most notably however in the 6-8 and 9-12 age groups. For example, in the 6-8 group, significantly more boys played Minecraft, Lego games and Angry Birds, whilst girls more often played numeracy games (for example Mathletics) and simulation games like My Talking Angela, or Toca Boca games. For 9-12s, the popularity of Fifa, NBA and Clash of Clans titles with boys and the corresponding lack of mention of these titles by parents of girls, are the most dramatic gender differences.

Several caveats must be noted when interpreting this data. For example, the survey methodology involved participants self-selecting which could have resulted in the collection of information about children with gaming habits not representative of the general population. Also, because we asked parents rather than children to list games (though with instructions to consult the child if necessary), there is the possibility that the titles listed represent factors other than solely the children's preferences. However, the study has several significant strengths, including a large sample size, comprehensive age range and title (rather than device or genre) level information, therefore allowing for more meaningful and nuanced interpretation.

Factors possibly contributing to actual and perceived title preference in children, raise important issues around parental and societal attitudes toward gaming, gender and play, as well as the positioning of young children in a broader, shifting, 'gamer culture'. These issues will be explored further during my presentation. Overall, the information presented through this work provides a picture, albeit quantitative, of trends in children's digital gaming habits beyond measures of time spent gaming, device used or researcher-determined genre popularity. This will be of interest to games researchers and points to the need to consider age and gender as crucial variables when asking questions about children and digital games.

## OPTIONAL BIO

Jane is a PhD candidate at The University of Melbourne. Her research is about children's use of digital games and the way that digital technology is reshaping children's play in terms of its form, location, sociality and role in development.

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