Disrupting aetonormativity: involving children in the writing of literature for publication

Name of authors: Rd. Tom Dobson, Lisa Stephenson and Ana De Arede

Article Title: Disrupting aetonormativity: involving children in the writing of literature for publication

Institution: Leeds Beckett University

Address: Leeds Beckett University, Headingley Campus, 208a Carnegie Hall, Leeds, LS6 3QS, United Kingdom.

Phone numbers: 0113 8123553 (Tom Dobson); 01138123621 (Lisa Stephenson); 01138126604 (Ana De Arede)

Email addresses: t.w.dobson@leedsbeckett.ac.uk; l.s.stephenson@leedsbeckett.ac.uk; A.F.Sanches-De-Arede@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0001-5354-9150 (Tom Dobson)

Abstract:

Literary criticism of children's literature asserts a one-directional view of power, with the adult writer constructing the child reader. Using 'aetonormativity'– adult perceptions of normal patterning children's literature – this paper explores what happens to aetonormativity when children co-construct publishable fiction (Nikolajeva 2010). We analyse drama and creative writing workshops run with 8 to 11-year-old children by Story Makers Press, a University-based publishing company representing marginalised children's voices by involving them in writing processes. Our analysis shows how whilst we were interested in developing the story of the protagonist, the children drew upon their "funds of knowledge" (Moll 1992) to develop a gaming narrative. The effect was twofold: we constructed a "hybrid" text (Bakhtin 1986) which, unlike GameLit, explores the relationship between the protagonist and gaming; and a discourse counter to negative adult portrayals of gaming. As the children became invested in the fiction, they became effective editors and revisions were taken on board by the editorial team. The paper concludes that involving children in writing children's literature can result in texts which disrupt aetonormativity by representing lived experiences. The paper also acknowledges that that further research is needed into how other children read and respond to texts co-constructed with children.

Key Words: aetonormativity, power, co-construction, primary school, children, GameLit

Introduction

Literary criticism about children's literature predominantly focuses on the power relations between the adult author and the child reader. As Beauvais points out (2012), all too often these power relations are written about as one-directional, with the adult writer controlling the child reader. To redress the balance, Beauvais uses Nikolajeva's (2010) concept of 'aetonormativity' – a view that adult perceptions of what is normal pattern literature for children. In doing so, Beauvais aligns herself with reader response theorists who focus on the reader as the future meaning making of any text. The underlying assumption here is that a child reader will always already interpret the text in a way that is different from what the adult author would have intended. What has not been considered, however, is what these power relations would look like in published children's literature if children were not only readers but also writers of texts.

Story Makers Press (SMP) is a new University-based publishing company which has been set up to represent marginalised children and tell stories that are meaningful for these children by involving them directly in the writing and publishing processes. Each SMP publication is accompanied by a Teachers and Parents' guide, which in in line with the University's Centre of Excellence for Mental Health in Schools and recent government priorities (DfE 2017), provides a framework for adults to use the text to explore mental health and wellbeing issues with children. This article focuses on the involvement of 16 children, aged between 8 and 11, who attend a primary school in an area of lower socio-economic privilege. The children took part in three drama and creative writing workshops with the SMP team to develop a narrative which drew upon experiences of gaming. The workshops took place over a two-month period and resulted in the writing of text for an illustrated book, aimed at 9-12 years olds, called The Nightmare Catcher. The children were then involved in two further workshops where they had a say in the editing process as well as choosing an illustrator for their story. Here the contributions the children made to the story are analysed in relation to the extent to which they can be seen as disruptions to aetonormativity. This article considers the wider implications of co-authoring and co-publishing with children in terms of literary criticism, power and the re-positioning of the child reader.

Literature review

Power and children's literature

The way in which literary criticism has traditionally focussed on power relations between the adult author and child reader is encapsulated by Hunt: "the writers and manipulators of children's books are adults; books are the makers of meaning for their readers, and the readers are children" (1994, p.2). In line with this, critics like Knowles and Malmkjaer have considered how ideology positions the child reader as children's literature is seen as a particularly effective agent in promoting "the acceptance by the child of customs, institutions and hierarchies" (1996, p.44).

In response to these often one-directional views of power in children's literature, Beauvais adopts Nikolajeva's (2010) concept of 'aetonormativity' – a view that it is adults' perceptions of what is normal which pattern children's literature. Acknowledging that Nikolajeva's term aetonormativity was in itself an attempt to develop a more nuanced discussion about power relations between adults and children, Beauvais' article (2012) is an intervention which aims to prevent aetonormativity from slipping into the traditional one-directional discourse of power which she sees as pervading literary criticism of children's literature. In doing so, Beauvais says that there are in fact a number of

'powers' at play within the concept of aetonormativity and that these are not necessarily powers exerted just by adults upon children. She highlights, in particular, the power of 'authority' and how an adult author's 'authority' is often transgressed by child readers who become the meaning makers and, therefore, 'authors' of texts. In line with this, explaining the etymology of the French word for power ('pouvoir'), Beauvais highlights how power is linked to potential and how, regardless of authorial intention, future meanings of texts can change (what she calls 'might').

The idea of 'might' in children's literature is in part based on the fact that unlike other theories of power in literature, which involve the self-colonising the 'other' (e.g. feminism, postcolonialism), aetonormativity has to acknowledge that the adult was once a child too and therefore the child can never completely be 'other' to the adult. The fiction text, therefore, always already presents the 'might' for patterns of behaviour and experience not deemed normative by adults. What these different patterns look like, however, is not explored by Beauvais - like so many other literary criticism articles of children's literature, the theory remains pure theory and, therefore, abstract.

As indicated above, Beauvais' attention to the 'might' in children's literature also includes reader response theories as a fiction text will be interpreted differently by the child reader, who necessarily constructs and 'authors' their own meaning. Rudd articulates children's response to adult speech as a process of unstable "mimicry": "adult behaviour, being emulated, becomes unoriginal, excessive, comic – which, in turn, undermines what it is to be an adult, self-contained and rational" (2005, p.22). However, just as literary criticism relating to power in children's literature is often abstract and theoretical, literary criticism relating to reader response and children's literature is often abstract and theoretical too. In an attempt to think about the actual cultural text real child readers find themselves in when they are reading books, Brooks and Browne (2012) illustrate how what they call a child's 'homeplace' – their ethnicity, their community, their family, their peers – acts a lens for the child reader to make meaning from a fiction text.

Brooks and Browne's (2012) focus on real child readers helps articulate Beauvais' concept of 'might' in aetonormativity and in doing so justifies Rudd's earlier claim that textual meaning making is somehow shared between the adult author and the child reader as meaning exists "in the space between the constructed and the constructive'' child (2005, p. 23). What this position does not take into account, however, is the possibility of initial authorship itself as a site shared by adults and children. For if children's voices are part of the text itself, then the child reader is both less likely to mimic the voices of the text and less likely to be constructed by the text. Instead, there is the theoretical potential for the writer and the reader to hold more equal power relations and be as constructive in their meaning making as each other.

Bakhtin and the novel - dialogising heteroglossia, the superaddressee and hybridity

Underpinning theories of power in relation to literary criticism of children's literature is a view of the fiction text as discourse. For Bakhtin (1981), discourse is stratified by power relations within society, with some discourses being privileged and having power over other discourses – a structuring which he calls 'heteroglossia'. A sociolinguist, Bakhtin was also very much a literary critic and he applied his theory of heteroglossia to thinking about the way in which discourse functions in the novel. In doing so, he makes two key points. Firstly, Bakhtin (1981) differentiates everyday utterances (primary speech genres), which are a part of heteroglossia, and complex forms of cultural communication (secondary speech genres), which are in themselves discrete sites of heteroglossia. Secondly, in viewing the novel as a secondary speech genre, Bakhtin (1986) identifies how when a novel is read, heteroglossia is dialogised. This process of dialogisation of heteroglossia means that the novel becomes a site of meaning making and potential change – rather than being stratified in a fossilised way, discourses are altered and become 'hybrid' (1986) as they enter into dialogue with each other through the reader. As outlined above, literary critics analysing children's literature tend to

limit the potential of the child reader to dialogise heteroglossia by seeing the child reader as positioned and manipulated by adult discourses at play within the texts. If the child reader, however, was also to some extent an author of the text, then, we would argue, this would necessarily alter the patterning of heteroglossia in the fiction text.

The idea of writing texts with children came from Author 1's PhD thesis (2014) where, as a teacher-writer, Author 1 created a 'community of writers' (Cremin and Myhill 2012) with children to co-construct texts. The co-construction of texts involved a number of pedagogical approaches which often included writing parts of texts based upon the children's interests and then inviting the children to respond to those texts. In order to conceptualise the nature of the co-authored texts which emerged, Author 1 adopted another of Bakhtin's (1981) concepts – the superaddressee. According to Bakhtin, the superaddressee is the ideal reader of the novel - someone who will respond just as the writer intended and without whom the novel itself could not exist. Whilst new criticism renders the actual existence of the superaddressee impossible, the idea became useful as a heuristic device to think about the extent to which the children in the writing of their stories apprehended what Author 1 perceived at the time to be his superaddressee. In short, what became clear was that child writers would always to some extent replace Author 1's superaddressee with their own superaddressees, creating fictional worlds and characters that were not anticipated. Similar to the way in which Brooks and Browne (2012) see a child's homeplace as key in terms of their response , the primary reason for the children having their own superaddressees in responding to Author 1's writing was due to the ways which they drew upon their own culturally situated out of school experiences – what Moll (1992) terms "funds of knowledge" (Moll 1992). As the children's funds of knowledge created their own superaddressees which were different to my superaddressees, the emerging co-constructed fictional texts were examples of "hybrid" discourses (Bakhtin 1986), where new meaning was created through the dialogisation of a heteroglossia which included children's voices and discourses. In this sense, the co-constructed texts disrupted aetonormativity by capturing the ways in which children experienced their worlds in response to the way Author 1 experienced his world (Author 1 2015).

A key difference, however, between those texts and the text under discussion here is that *The Nightmare Catcher* has undergone a full publishing process with the idea that it will be a marketable product. This means that whilst the initial story was co-constructed by SMP, including the 16 children, and whilst the children's responses to the first draft and the initial illustrations were part of the editing processes, there were also several other adults involved in the editing process. Adult involvement in the editing of texts written by children can serve to silence the children's voices as illustrated by Todorova's (2017) analysis of how a child's experiences of war became westernised for publication. Rather than elide this editing process, in the analysis of the data below attention is paid to the dialogic relationship between the adults and the children in all stages of the writing and editing processes. Accordingly, this paper also reflects upon how children's voices could be given more authority in publishing future texts using a similar methodology.

Representations of gaming in children's literature

The children were given the authority to decide the focus of the book and they decided that the book would be about gaming. In relation to representations of gaming in existing children's literature, it is perhaps unsurprising that there has been a surge in the number of books published which feature gaming. The website Goodreads (2019) listed 79 recent books within the new 'GameLit' genre as well as 709 books and 1,250 books within the associated Virtual Reality and Role Player Game genres respectively. In terms of the GameLit genre, this includes books that are either purportedly authored by famous gamers (e.g. Joe Sugg (2015); Ali A, Scott and Sotirovski (2017)) or books which directly turn an existing game into a narrative (e.g. Pokemon I Choose You! (Takamisaki 2019) and Plants vs Zombies (Tobin 2018)). Also popular within GameLit, are books where the protagonist exists within

a gaming world and has a quest to solve in line with the fantasy and science fiction genres (e.g. Lu (2018) and Bagwell (2016)).

Literary criticism has yet to engage with the recent rise of GameLit and associated genres in children's literature publishing. The most recent exception is Dudek and Johnson (2011), who take as their premise the negative portrayal of gaming in children's literature. Set against this context, Dudek and Johnson analyse two teenage fiction books which focus on the character of the 'hacker'. The hacker character is given agency for actions of social justice within a dystopian capitalist society and this, they argue, serves to disrupt negative discourses of gaming in children's literature. Since Dudek and Johnson (2011), the more recent surge in GameLit outlined above indicates how gaming is no longer represented in a negative way. Instead, gaming experiences have been directly translated into textual narrative form by publishing companies who are aware of these books' marketability. Such books are, therefore, neutral in terms of exploring either the positive or negative aspects of gaming: they often are simply a translation of the game onto the page. What are less visible, however, are GameLit books which are character based and which explore the relationship between the real life of the gamer and their participation in the gaming world.

Methodology

Workshops

In line with the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education's (CLPE 2018) review of books published in the United Kingdom in 2017 which shows that only 4% feature Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic characters, SMP co-constructs stories with children to give voice to under-represented groups. For *The Nightmare Catcher*, two academic practitioners in Higher Education and the SMP Publisher worked with sixteen 8-11-year-old children from diverse ethnic backgrounds who attended an inner primary school which is located in an area of lower socio-economic status.

As outlined in Table 1, we ran a total of five 2-hour workshops with the children over a five-month period. The first three workshops were informed by our own practitioner research (Author 1 and Author 2, 2017), where we utilised process drama to give children an embodied experience which they captured in writing and drawing. Process drama is a child-centred pedagogy which uses drama conventions to facilitate children actively co-constructing meaning as they fluidly move between the roles of authors, actors, directors and audience (Edmiston 2014). Working within the fiction, the children were given writing journals and we encouraged them to use these to write and draw from the perspective of the characters they were portraying. As Crumpler (2005) illustrates, writing in the fiction rather than outside the fiction adds a dramatic quality to children's writing as the immediate translation of experience into writing and illustrations means that what is captured are "dramatic textual events". The last two workshops gave the children a chance to be involved in the editing process, responding to first and proof drafts of the story and helping select an illustrator from final undergraduate design and illustration students studying at the University.

TABLE 1

Session Date	Activities	Outcomes following workshop
October 2018	Whole class task: discussion of 'Imagine a wood'. Group task: body sculpt wooded scene.	Story theme (gaming) determined. Write focus group discussion questions.

	Whole class task: discussion of bag and items stimulus. Group task: draw and then create a freeze-frame of moment of tension in the story.	Develop gaming setting and protagonist profile.
October 2018	Focus group discussion by year group: gaming and reading. Group task: draw 3 challenges for gaming world; freeze-frame moment in gaming world of tension with a caption.	Synopsis written and sent to illustrators. Character profiles developed.
November 2018	Group task: body sculpt object from bedroom. Group task: draw bedroom and give verbal explanation. Group task: construct a role on wall for protagonist.	First full draft of story written and sent to illustrators.
December 2018	1) Children shown different illustrations of The Warden Tree and the protagonist's bedroom. 2) Reading of first draft of text to children.	Illustrator selected. First draft edited.
February 2019	1) Children shown full draft proofs.	Final edit of text prior to publication.

Prior to the first session, we spoke with the children's teachers (3) and the Deputy Headteacher to inform them of the project, but also to ascertain their ideas on the potential focus of the book. We were aware here of a potential conflict between the teachers' involvement and the children's subsequent authority in the co-construction of the book. Rather than adopting the teachers' ideas, from a research perspective we were more interested in how the teachers' ideas about the book might differ from those of the children. The teachers spoke about the lack of "relevant" literature and how this presented them with difficulties in terms of using literature to explore mental health and wellbeing issues with children. As discussed below, they also discussed a range of factors, including gaming, body image and social media, which they felt had a direct negative impact upon their pupils' mental health and wellbeing.

This discussion was formative in terms of framing the first workshop with the children. Here the children were presented with a stimulus – a bag which had been left in the woods and which contained artefacts which gave the children clues about the protagonist and which were aligned with some of the concerns expressed by the teachers in our preparatory meeting. Amongst other items, the bag contained a mobile phone, a mirror, a pair of Nike trainers and a gaming stick. Whilst the items correlated with the concerns of the adults, they were all artefacts with which the children were familiar – they were artefacts which populated the children's out-of-school cultural worlds. Through the pedagogy of process drama, the children exhibited authorship and authority over these items, creating freeze-frames to help develop their protagonist's backstory.

Data Generation and Collection

The workshops positioned the children as active participants who had agency in co-constructing their emerging narrative for the book. Here, data was generated through the use of writing journals where the children used writing and illustrations to capture their ideas as they worked in the fiction through process drama. The ways in which the children participated in process drama activities were captured through video recording the sessions. Following each workshop, SMP team members met to review the video footage of the session alongside the children's writing journals. During these meetings decisions were made about the characters, the setting and direction of the narrative which incorporated the children's ideas and which helped to plan the subsequent workshop activity.

These SMP meetings also had the dual purpose of reflecting upon the process as a whole – a reflection which forms the basis of this research paper. Here we are aware that whilst the children had highly participatory roles in the co-construction of the story, they were not our co-researchers and this is something we will look at in future publications. In reviewing the video footage and the children's writing journals, we kept a reflective journal which explored the following research questions:

1) What narrative choices did the children make and to what extent did these choices shape the emerging narrative? (workshops 1-3)
2) What discourses did children draw upon to develop the narrative? (workshops 1-3)
3) How would children respond to the emerging written and illustrated text? (workshops 4 and 5)

In session 2 we also collected data through a focus group discussion with the children which we ran in 3 groups of 6. The idea of the focus group discussion was to begin to explore some of the decisions the children had made about the narrative and the protagonist in the initial session and to compare the reasons behind their decisions with the perspectives of the teachers whose earlier input had help create the stimulus. Whilst the stimulus presented a number of narrative options to the children, all 3 groups were most interested in those artefacts which related to gaming (a notepad featuring a reference to a famous gamer, KSI, and a gaming stick) and we were interested in exploring why this was the case and how the children felt about and participated in gaming as well as how this was different from the perspectives of their teachers. The focus group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed and helped us to think about research question 2 above.

Ethics

Having received institutional ethical clearance for the project, the headteacher gave their informed consent and the children were recruited in three phases: firstly, children who were interested in the project volunteered to participate following an assembly in which the book and the research was explained by the SMP team; secondly, from those children who had volunteered, the class teachers selected a group of 16 to participate in the project based on being representative in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and ability in English and drama; thirdly, verbal assent was sought from the children prior to each workshop and in a way that was ongoing, both in relation to the book and the research project. We also agreed with the headteacher and the children that, as the book was co-authored by the children, the author would be listed as The Story Makers Collective and inside the book the school would be listed as part of that Collective. At the same time, we ensured that we adhered to the ethical guidelines of the British Education Research Association by protecting confidentiality through anonymising all of the children when writing about their contributions.

Data analysis

Following each session, we discussed our research journal entries and thoughts about the research questions both in order to develop about the story we were writing and in order to investigate our own processes. In terms of the latter, this was in part a form of practitioner enquiry as we sought to reflect

upon how successful the workshops had been in encouraging and harnessing the ideas of all the children in the group. In doing so, we also began to analyse the data, synthesising our reflections with theory (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993), in particular with notions of aetonormativity, heteroglossia and hybridity, as well as what this meant in terms of the emerging narrative. These early analyses were also written up in our respective research journals. Once the project was completed and we had reflected upon the children's response to the proof drafts of the story (session 5), we undertook a further analysis of all the data – our journal reflections, artefacts produced in the workshops, video recordings of the sessions, transcripts of the focus group discussions with the children and the teachers – in relation to the research questions above.

This, combined with our theoretical frame, resulted in four key themes being identified. Each theme is underpinned by the idea of the children having authority over the writing and editing processes and each theme is sequential in relation to our lived experience of these processes. Theme 1 - Determining a focus for our story: gaming and children's funds of knowledge – relates to how the children made initial decisions about the focus of the book. Theme 2 – Reclaiming the woods – looks at how the children gained authority over decisions made by adults about the setting of the story. Theme 3 – Superaddressees and dialogising heteroglossia – identifies the ways in which adult and children's authority was negotiated and resulted in a hybrid text being constructed. Theme 4 – Editing with meaning - seeing themselves in the text – gives examples of how engaging children in the co-construction of published fiction leads to meaningful engagement with editing text.

Findings and Discussion

Determining a focus for our story: gaming and children's funds of knowledge

In the initial session, we noted that as the children removed the items from the bag that had been left in the woods, they were most interested in the iPhone, the gaming stick and the reference to the famous gamer, KSI. The objects served, therefore, to activate the children's funds of knowledge and they spoke about their knowledge in relation to these items with great enthusiasm. Although the appearance of the iPhone generated the most immediate interest, it was the picture of the X-box gaming stick and the notepad with the reference to the famous gamer (KSI) which captured the children's interest for the rest of the workshop. Here, at least half of the group were keen to share their funds of knowledge about the gamer, talking about his boxing, his rivalry with a fellow gamer and their resulting boxing match, his sports car, how much money he earns, the number of subscribers he has and the games he plays. It was, therefore, not a surprise to us that when in the same workshop we asked the children to work in mixed year groups of 6 and create a freezeframe of a moment of tension in a story relating to the discovery of the bag in the woods, all groups included KSI as the protagonist. These stories were murder mystery stories: one focussing on the assassination of KSI; another on the existence of a fake and a real KSI, the latter being eaten by a mythical creature called Sycerasops; and the last featuring the stabbing of KSI in a hostage situation.

As we reflected on this session, it was clear to us that as 'digital insiders' (Johnson 2009) the children were most interested in a story about gaming and our subsequent focus group discussion in Workshop 2 confirmed this. Here all of the children were naturally positive about gaming, some claiming they gamed 6 hours every week day and 12 hours at the weekend. When prompted, they were able to think of some of the problems associated with gaming, but these were predominantly issues that occurred within the games themselves, namely being 'hacked' and 'online bullying'. Only two children mentioned problems resulting from gaming too often in the form of 'being tired' and being 'bad for your eyesight'. In this sense, the children's perceptions of gaming were completely the opposite of the perceptions of their teachers, who had felt that gaming meant that children did not 'play outside', that they became 'unhealthy', 'addicted' and 'tired'.

The children also felt there were a lack of books about gaming or any lessons in school where they could discuss gaming. In this sense, the school did not appear to encourage or value the funds of knowledge children held outside of school. For SMP, we became interested in how we could harness the children's positive view of gaming, which ran counter to the teachers' negative views, and in doing so give voice to the children's funds of knowledge in the development of the fiction text.

Reclaiming the woods

Throughout the project, the narrative was co-constructed with some choices made by the children and others made by the SMP team. In planning for Workshop 1, for example, we made a decision that the bag should be left in the woods and that the woods could become a key setting for the story. There were two key reasons for this choice of setting: firstly, the teachers concerns about the children gaming and not going outside; and secondly, the obvious narrative potential the woods held in terms of a setting. Reflecting upon this decision, we could have allowed the children more authority in deciding where the bag was left by the protagonist and found by them. Having said this, how the children responded to our choice of setting was particularly interesting in terms of illustrating one of the ways in which they reclaimed authority over the story from us.

Prior to the introduction of the bag which had been left in the woods, we asked the group to "Imagine a wood" and we selected three children to model sculpting a tree in these woods. The children were familiar with the idea of sculpting and they stood close together, raising and interlocking their arms in such a way as to suggest the tree's branches. We then invited the rest of them to comment on what the tree looked like. One child immediately said that the tree had "3 scary faces" and this comment was met with 'eager laughter' from the rest of the group as well as the 3 children who were body sculpting the tree. We then prompted other responses from the group and a different child said the tree had "six eyes". Again, this comment was met with 'cries of laughter' from the whole group and, aware that the children were not taking the activity seriously, we recast their responses, suggesting a tree with three faces and six eyes would be "very scary indeed".

Working in three groups of 6, the children then created further body sculptures of the woods. These sculptures depicted: threes wolves praying to what one of the children called a "God tree"; someone hiding under a bed to escape from Granny (from a computer game, Granny Horror Game); and a mythical creature Sycerasops killing people. What was interesting was that only one group referenced the woods setting in their sculpture and it was perhaps unsurprising when at the end of the lesson one piece of paper used by the children to write ideas said: "I don't care about the woods".

The children's near rejection of the wood setting was interesting to us, particularly in the way they responded to the initial sculpting undertaken by the three children. Describing the tree as having 'three scary faces' and 'six eyes' was clearly transgressive and signalled a refusal to use their imaginations to create a wooded setting. This kind of transgression is similar to how Rudd (2015) describes children's use of the adult voice as "mimicry" – the children were mimicking us and our desire to create a wooded setting. As indicated above, Workshop 1 was useful to us in terms of determining a gaming focus for the book. Our initial efforts in Workshop 1 to recast the children's mimicry and suggest that a tree with 6 eyes and 3 faces would be 'very scary indeed' therefore gained credence in Workshop 2 when we established with the children that the wooded setting with a three-faced tree would be part of a gaming world experienced by the story's protagonist. What had started off as mimicry of an adult-enforced traditional setting, therefore, became a setting which contained a type of "God tree" which was central to our co-constructed story. The extent to which this mimicry became something in which the children invested was established when in Workshop 4 we shared some of the illustrations of what we were by then calling The Warden Tree. Indeed, the children preferred the drawing of the illustrators who had captured the three-faced nature of their tree, discarding the drawings which did not contain what for them was now a crucial detail. Whilst some recognised that this drawing of the Warden Tree was 'good', they wanted the illustrator to include

their ‘faces’. For us, this transformation from mimicry to authorship indicates the ways in which children appropriate and take ownership of adult discourses and how this process of appropriation by mimicry can lead to different narrative patternings in co-constructed fiction texts.

Superaddressees and dialogising heteroglossia

As outlined above, in Workshop 1 the children were keen to draw upon their funds of knowledge in relation to gaming in order to create murder mystery stories which featured real gamers like KSI. We became interested in how these funds of knowledge could be harnessed to produce a publishable fiction text – in Workshop 2 we acknowledged the children’s status as digital insiders, giving them the task of thinking up three challenges that would be faced within the game before creating a freeze frame illustrating a moment of tension relating to one of these challenges. Interestingly, with the exception of the character Sycerasops who had been created by one of the groups in Workshop 1, all of the groups drew upon their funds of gaming knowledge to transpose gaming characters from other games into their game. The challenges, therefore, were populated with characters like John Wick, Drift, Bushman and Granny. Other characters came from other aspects of popular culture and appeared to be included for comic effect, most notably Baby Shark. The challenges involving these characters mainly centred around fighting and fighting skills, but within contexts that included defeating a ‘room of your worst nightmares’, collecting ‘armour’, ‘getting the Holy Grail’.

In our initial discussion with teachers and the deputy headteacher, there had been a consensus about the children’s “lack of imaginative reserves in writing”. Whilst it would be possible to see the way the children tended to draw upon their actual experiences of gaming as symptomatic of their “lack of imaginative reserves”, we felt that this was more to do with the children exhibiting their funds of knowledge and in doing so asserting their digital insider status – they wanted us and each other to know what they knew. We were able, therefore, to recognise these funds of knowledge in relation to the challenges in the game (the cave of nightmares, the armour, the Holy Grail) in our writing of the gaming scenes. Equally, where their characters were not derivate – notably Sycerasops – we were able to include these characters in the gaming world; and where one suggestion for a gaming character was derivate – Drift, an assassin from Fortnite – we were able to use this name as it had thematic resonance as the avatar for our protagonist.

The children, therefore, were on the whole interested in developing a story directly shaped by their gaming experiences and the superaddressee for the stories they were creating would have been someone their age who loved gaming. Whilst we were interested in this dimension to the story, we were also interested in developing the character of our protagonist who would be playing the game they were creating. Aware as we were that most GameLit tended to be a direct translation of games onto page, we wanted our text to explore the relationship between our protagonist’s real life and our protagonist’s experiences of gaming. Given the children’s overwhelmingly positive gaming discourse, we also felt that was important that the protagonist’s experiences of gaming in some way helped the protagonist deal with the problems they faced in the real world.

Ahead of Workshop 3, therefore, we risked taking some authority away from the children by making some decisions about our protagonist’s home life. We said that his mum was unwell, his dad had to work extra shifts to earn money and he had fallen out with his friend. Our superaddressee, therefore, was a reader who could empathise with the plight of our protagonist and who would care about whether or not these issues were ultimately resolved for them. Accordingly, we asked the children to develop another setting – the protagonist’s bedroom – and in doing so begin to think about characterisation and backstory. With their superaddressee in mind, all three groups initially sculpted different versions of “gaming chairs” for the protagonist’s bedroom. The gaming chairs were fancy and had “arm rests” and “embedded speakers” and through discussion the children came to an understanding of how the protagonist might have been “spoilt” before his mum fell ill and they had

less money. As well as a gaming chair, one of the sculptures featured a Unicorn which, through discussion, became a way of the protagonist remembering a time before mum fell ill.

This sense of the past being better than the present was reflected in the ways in which the children went onto develop the rest of the bedroom setting: the wallpaper was "ripped"; paint was "chipped"; the gaming chair had been "scratched with anger"; there was a "bunkbed" where his best friend "used" to stay; the room was littered with "fast food". Interestingly, when it came to naming the character, for all groups the protagonist was male. He was: "self-conscious", as he had put on weight due to his diet; "jealous" of his best friend, who had more money that him; affected by his mum, who either had "cancer" or was "depressed".

This development of the protagonist marked a turning point in the development of our fiction text. Whilst we had made initial decisions about the protagonist, the children had gained authority over the developing the protagonist's backstory. There was real depth in their understanding of his situation and following Workshop 3 we were able to write the first draft of the story. What this demonstrated was that perhaps because we had recognised and valued the children's superaddressee in the form of someone their age interested in gaming, the children had been willing to recognise and value our superaddressee in the form of a child their age who was also interested in the wellbeing of protagonist in the real world. The story we wrote, therefore, acknowledges both superaddressees and, we would therefore argue, is an example of a hybrid text which dialogises children's discourses on gaming with discourses around the wellbeing of a child experiencing problems at home. In this sense, aetonormativity is disrupted as more adult discourses on gaming are marginalised and whilst there is a sense that the protagonist is 'tired' at school because of his gaming, this does not lead to the emergence of a cautionary discourse about gaming habits in the text.

Editing with meaning – seeing themselves in the text

A recent survey of primary school children's experiences of writing (Lambirth, 2016), concludes that due a curriculum and testing policy which puts the emphasis on the technical aspects of writing, children are "alienated" from the writing process. Within this context, research into engaging children in school writing focuses upon the importance of teachers drawing upon children's out-of-school experiences and writing practices (Gardner 2013; Chamberlain 2019). By allowing the children in the workshop to draw upon their out-of-school funds of knowledge in relation to gaming and through recasting their mimicry of our woodland setting, the children in the workshops were not alienated from our writing process but instead had agency and became invested in the story. In Workshop 5, we asked the children how they felt about being involved in the project, they were overwhelmingly positive. One child said they felt "happy and special because I get to be part of something truly amazing in real life to be involved in it" and another child said that the experience "makes me feel like I want to write my own story now". This level of engagement was also evident in Workshop 4 when we showed the children some initial illustrations for the book and read the draft of the text we had written. The children listened with 'rapt attention' and valued the ways in which their ideas had been used. They also gave high quality editorial feedback which, alongside feedback from a development editor, we used to produce a second draft. These points included:

- *Not using nicknames because they are confusing.* In Workshop 3 one of the groups had named the character Jay and we had used this. Jay's surname became Khan and in the first draft we had the idea that Jay could also be called Jay K as this would be an allusion to the writer JK Rowling, indicating that Jay had a great imagination. However, because Jay was also Drift when playing the game, we agreed with the children that this was confusing and removed Jay K.
- *When Jay fights with his friend, develop this a bit more. Perhaps his friend could chase him into The Wilderness.* The story opens with the two friends falling out and we agreed with the children that Jay's friend should respond to his attack and we revised this scene accordingly.

- *Jay should be angrier when his parents interrupt his gaming.* We felt that this idea was demonstrated a good understanding of the character's feelings and made changes to the text.

- *The cave could become deeper after the spider is killed.* One of the groups had included a spider in workshop 2 and in writing about the game we included this with the idea that the spider should not be killed as the spiders' webs could be used to catch the nightmare in the 'cave of nightmares'. The idea of the cave getting deeper was a good visual representation of what might happen if the spider was killed in the game.

Another point that several children made was that they wanted to know what was wrong with mum. One girl explained: "if we know what's wrong with her, we can help her". We discussed this following the session. Our idea was that mum was an alcoholic but that the child narrator might not be aware of this or might not understand this and we therefore did not want to be explicit about this in the text. However, we acknowledged that the reader needed more clues and, at the end of the story, this situation is made explicit to the reader.

As indicated with the earlier discussion of the three-faced tree, the children were so invested in the story that when images did not contain some of the details they had decided upon in workshop 3, they were 'bothered' by these omissions. One image of the bedroom, for example, did not feature either a Unicorn or a gaming chair and this was fed-back to the illustrator, along with the idea that the gaming chair could be scratched due to the protagonist being angry. This detail did feature in the second draft but the scratching was subsequently removed when the line editor pointed out that it would be physically challenging to scratch a chair whilst playing a game. This was shared with the children in workshop 5 and they understood the reason for this change, demonstrating that their own understanding of the editorial process had been enhanced firstly by their investment in the story and then by their involvement in responding to the drafts. Indeed, in Workshop 5 they still had further substantial ideas of how the story could be improved - two children, for example, asked us to "add more characters" to the school scenes and thus we entered into meaningful discussion about the nature and length of the book.

Reflections and Conclusion

Reflecting upon the process of publishing stories in this way has brought to the surface some of the challenges of co-constructing fiction texts with children. The main change we would make is to have more workshops in order to involve the children in more plot related decisions. As it stands, the children in these workshops mainly helped us to develop character and setting and further workshops would have enabled us to break up the writing process, share openings, middle sections and then endings to stories and asking the children to contribute and respond. This, we believe, would lead to even greater investment in the story and the subsequent editing process. Extra workshops would also allow for children to be more individual in the development of their ideas through responding to the emergent text with their own creative writing pieces in line with some of our earlier research (Author 1 2015). Here, the children tended to work in groups and their time for written responses was limited. Because we see children's creative writing as problem-solving (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1987) in the form of an attempt to find a form to express their embodied drama experiences, children's further engagement in creative writing would, we think, lead to the children ultimately having a greater influence on the story as a whole.

That being said, the discussion above demonstrates how using process drama and writing journals with children to co-construct a fiction text can disrupt aetonormativity. In this example, we argue that allowing children to draw upon their gaming funds of knowledge in the development of a story acknowledged their own superaddressee and served to marginalise negative adult discourses

about gaming. At the same time, subsequently inviting the children to engage with our superaddressee as someone interested in the wellbeing of the protagonist meant that the children were able to develop a well-rounded character and help us to construct a hybrid text with two different but not mutually exclusive superaddressees. This hybrid text, we argue, is different from other GameLit books on the market as it uses a gaming story as a way to explore aspects of the real world in relation to a protagonist.

In relation to one-directional views of power in children's literature, we would argue that our engagement of children in the co-construction of a fictional text adds a different dimension to the discussion. Rather than being ideologically constructed by the text, the children in this project saw themselves in a text they had co-constructed. Their authority as writers and editors was increased and this gave them more agency and 'might' when it came to reading the text. What this means for other child readers – i.e. child readers who were not part of SMC – remains to be seen and will be a source of future research. We would suggest, however, that whilst other child readers will read the text differently from these children, who were also authors and editors, the fact that children's discourses are given prominence within the text would mean that they as readers would be able to dialogise the text with 'might' and in a way that is both empowering and meaningful.

Reference List

Ali-A, Scott, C., and Sotirovski, A. (2017) *Ali-A Adventures: Game On!* London: Puffin.

Author 1 and Author 2 (2017) Primary Pupils' Creative Writing: Enacting Identities in a Community of Writers. *Literacy.* 51(3), 162-168.

Author 1 (2015) The mad genie in the attic. *Gender and Education*. 27(1), 37-52.

Author 1 (2014) *Naming the Unnamable – Researching Identities through Creative Writing*. Rotterdam: Sense.

Bagwell, T. (2016) *Awaken Online: Catharsis*. London: CreateSpace.

Bakhtin, M. M. (1986) *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Bakhtin, M. M. (1981) *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Beauvais, C. (2012) The Problem of 'Power': Metacritical Implications of Aetonormativity for Children's Literature Research. *Children's Literature in Education*, 44, 74-86.

Bereiter, C., and Scardamalia, M. (1987) *The psychology of written composition*. Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaurn.

Brooks, W., and Browne, S. (2012) Towards a Culturally Situated Reader Response Theory. *Children's Literature in Education*, 43, 74-85.

Chamberlain, L. (2019) Places, spaces and local customs: honouring the private worlds of out-of-school text creation. *Literacy*, 53(1), 39-45.

CLPE (2018) *Reflecting Realities – Survey of Representation within UK's Children's Literature 2017*. Accessed 25 July, 2019 from https://clpe.org.uk/library-and-resources/research/reflecting-realities-survey-ethnic-representation-within-uk-children.

Cochran-Smith, M., and Lytle, S. (1993) *Inside/outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Cremin, T., and Myhill, D. (2012) *Writing Voices: Creating Communities of Writers*. London: Routledge.

Crumpler, T. (2005) The role of educational drama in the composing processes of young writers. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 10(3), 357–363.

DfE (2017) *Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision*. Accessed February 15, 2019 from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664855/Transforming_children_and_young_people_s_mental_health_provision.pdf

Dudek, D., and Johnson, N. (2011) Return of the Hacker as Hero: Fictions and Realities of Teenage Technological Experts. *Children's Literature in Education*. 42, 184-195.

Edmiston, B. (2014) Dialogue and social positioning in dramatic inquiry: Creating with Prospero. In S. Davis (Ed.), *Dramatic interactions in education - Vygotskian and sociocultural approaches to drama education and research* (pp.66-79). London: Bloomsbury.

Gardner, P. (2013) Writing in context: reluctant writers and their writing at home and at school. *English in Australia*, 48(1), pp. 71–81.

Goodreads (2019) GameLit. Accessed February 8, 2019 from https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/119828.LitRPG_GameLit.

Hunt, P. (1994) *An introduction to children's literature*. Oxford: OUP.

Johnson, N. F. (2009) *The Multiplicities of Internet Addiction: The Misrecognition of Leisure and Learning*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Knowles, M., & Malmkjaer, K. (1996) *Language and control in children's literature*. London: Routledge.

Lambirth, A. (2016) Exploring children's discourses of writing. *English in Education.* 56(3), 215-232.

Lu, M. (2018) *Warcross*. London: Penguin.

Moll, L.C. (1992. Literacy research in community and classrooms: A sociocultural approach. In R. Beach, J.L. Green, M.L. Kamil, & T. Shanahan (Eds.) *Multidisciplinary perspectives in literacy research* (pp. 211–244). Urbana: National Conference on Research in English & National Council of Teachers of English.

Nikolajeva, M. (2010) *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*. London: Routledge.

Rudd, D. (2005) Theorising and Theories: How Does Children's Literature Exist? In P. Hunt (Ed.), *Understanding Children's Literature* (pp. 15–29). Basingstoke: Routledge.

Sugg, J. (2015) *Username: Evie*. London: Hodder.

Takamisaki, R. (2019) *Pokémon the Movie: I Choose You!* San Francisco: VIZ.

Tobin, P. (2018) *Plants vs Zombies.* Milwaukie: Dark Horse.

Todorova, M. (2017) Children's Voices from War Zones: Muted by Adult Mediation. *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*. 55(2), 20-27.