"To Prohibit or Permit": Strategies of Parental Behaviour in Relation to Children's Video Games in Today's Russia

Ekaterina Orekh[1, 2*]

[1]St Petersburg University, Faculty of Sociology, 1/3, entrance 9, Ul. Smolnogo, St. Petersburg, Russia
[2]SI RAS – FCTAS RAS, 190005, 7-ya Krasnoarmeyskaya str. 25/14, St. Petersburg, Russia

Abstract. The article analyses the results of the exploratory empirical research of children's video game practice. Based on the analysis of semi-structured interviews, as well as observation diaries on the theme of children's game socialization, particularly the interaction of children, their peers, parents concerning video games, some conclusions about parenting strategies practiced in contemporary St. Petersburg's families are made. It was found that the rapid expansion of computer games produces the parent's fears associated with a lack of understanding of the consequences of the video games impact on children. One of the main results is the conclusion that the parental legitimation of practices is in many ways inherited from and reproduces the Soviet attitudes towards parenting and children. Some statements, such as the 15-minute rule (allowing the use of computer per set), view of a computer as a cause of aggression and alienation, are axiomatized. However, it goes hand in hand with a (neo)liberal rhetoric in relation to the use of a computer.

Introduction

Today in the big cities of modern Russia, almost every family has gadgets allowing playing computer games. The number of playing children has increased dramatically. A modern urban child encounters video games everywhere, even if for some reason he does not play them himself. Parents are forced to take into account the entry of new gadgets into our daily life, to respond to this, develop their own attitude and behaviour strategies in relation to children's video games. Despite the surge in the research interests of social and human sciences specialists in study of the social aspects of video games, the problems of the specifics of children's computer game socialization in modern Russia are still not studied [1].

We are interested in children computer socialization, or, to be more precise, an analysis of contemporary St. Petersburg urban practices related to computer gaming, those of both children and of parents. Computer or video games are considered by us as games which are played on different digital devices, such as computers, tables, cell phones, game consoles, and so on. We intend to describe and analyse the strategies used by parents in their actions in relation towards children computer gaming. We also aim at uncovering the background assumptions about the world we live in, children, parents, childhood and parenthood that are implied by these strategies.

In this article, an analysis of an observatory study of computer gaming experience of children is presented. We have conducted a primary analysis of observation diaries and in-depth interviews with parents whose children play computer games, as well as with parents whose children do not engage in computer gaming for a variety of reasons. Interviews were conducted in 2016-2017 in St. Petersburg (30 interviews, 25 observation diaries). We intended to include parents with different social characteristics. The sample consists of parents within heterosexual families with children aged 10 or below. The presented parents are both mothers and fathers, with minimum age being 27 and the maximum 42, with different levels and types of completed education, both those who work in the specialty they trained in and those whose specialty does not correspond with their degree/specialization, and also those who are unemployed. We included families with different amounts of income (however, we have not managed to interview those with dramatically low income and the super-rich). We included parents who consider themselves practicing Orthodox Christians, and those who are secular and/or areligious. Some parents have one child, some two, some more than two; some play computer games with varying degrees of attachment towards gaming, and some have never played any videogames. Also 4 university teachers and 4 kindergarten teachers were included.

Theoretical framework: models of socialization

For a variety of reasons parents do not tend to analyse the ideas that serve as foundations of their practices, and, in a broader sense, a particular strategy of upbringing a

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[*]Corresponding author: e.orekh@spbu.ru

child. Sometimes they are unable to answer the direct questions about reasons of this and that action. We also realize that reconstruction of ideological foundations of strategies of parenthood is difficult for us due to the amount of ideas contemporary parents have about bringing up a child. In order to study strategies of parenting used in today's St Petersburg, we constructed a framework which would provide us with ideal types of various models of parenting and then compared the practices attributed to each model with the practices used by contemporary parents of St. Petersburg towards children computer gaming.

We see bringing up a child or parenting as an essential part of socialization, characterized by translation and interiorization of sociocultural norms, practices and behavioural patterns during the interaction between a child and adults, with the latter being considered the significant Others by the former [2]. The plurality and variety of existing styles of parenthood are explained by a diversity of sociocultural capitals in contemporary Russian society [3]. Ideas and values which are essential to parental attitudes to bringing up a child (and, in particular, to computer gaming) are analysed from a perspective of social constructivism [4].

To describe a continuum of models/styles of parenting, we need to discuss the main characteristics that account for the existence and current configurations of these models. Since the sociological approach focuses on the specifics of different social groups and communities, we abandoned psychological characteristics, such as, for example, the emotional state of the parent when interacting with the child, or the peculiarities of the parents' behaviour towards the child [5; 6]. We decided not to take into account the ideological foundations, both implicit and explicit, of the strategies of parenting, but intended to describe the abstract ideal types of these strategies. In order to do that, we study, 1) the objectives of bringing up a child, that are presented by parents, both implicitly and explicitly, when they speak of the expected results of their parenting (in other words their discourse about what a child should be when he or she grows up); 2) methods of parenting, which we define as the parents' general ideas on ways and reaching the expected and intended objectives of bringing up a child, expressed in their thoughts and practices concerning the way parents should treat a child for he or she to grow up the way they intend him or her to be.

The ideas parents have about the expected outcomes of parenting for their children are based on understanding what is "childhood" and "adulthood". The pioneering work of Philippe Ariès (1962) and the research of his successors such as Catherine Calvert (1992) demonstrate how conceptions of childhood are related to the practices of child upbringing [7, 8]. Viewing childhood, its boundaries and its time frame is a social construct which varies according to time and space, political and economic environment. So far, the different understandings of childhood co-exist. We view these understandings as continuum of parental positionality somewhere within the following dichotomy: one opposition is a view of childhood as a

period of immaturity (lack of adulthood, nedovzroslost') and another is a view of childhood as a distinct special part of human life. The first view implies conceptualizing a child as an incomplete, devoid of some basic features, human that are present in an adult. The second view, in turn, implies childhood being significantly different from other parts of human life, sees childhood as intrinsically valuable, and might imply a view of childhood as the happiest time in one's life.

The parental objectives differ according to the part of the dichotomy parents stick with: if the first view is exercised, parents intend to, metaphorically speaking, push a child into adulthood and promote values and qualities that make a little human a part of an adult society. If the second view is put into practice, a child is presented with opportunities of enjoying his or her childhood, a childhood which is maintained and prolonged by parents.

If parents want to help a child "overcome" the period of "immaturity", the parents' actions would be aimed at adapting a child to adulthood, teaching and training of his skills and qualities. Parents would try to accustom a child to work (in a wider sense), develop his or her skills that are viewed as relevant to a successful life in adulthood. A system of grading and evaluation of a child's success and progress would be based on a pace, intensity and depth of learning a skill, an acquirement of physical and mental (and, possibly, communicative) qualities that are viewed by parents as resulting in a competitive ability in adulthood. A child will not receive parents' praise for trying to do something, but only in case he or she did it successfully and well, "just like an adult". Children raised in this model of parenting get used to helping their parents relatively early, and they might be held accountable for their behaviour and the results of what they were asked to do (like cleaning, cooking, etc.).

In a case of parents being supportive of the idea of childhood as an intrinsically valuable period of life which has its own, distinct from those of an adulthood, forms of expected behaviour, perception of life, and pastime, parents are going to stick to the practices of raising a child which are opposite towards those described above.

Under no conditions, any extreme position of the dichotomy, either childhood as a sub-adulthood or childhood as a distinct period of life valuable on its own, should be considered as real positionalities of parents governing their behaviour; our view of these two oppositions is that they are the ideal types within the dichotomy, and every family exercises a mix of these two approaches, thus being placed somewhere between the two "poles". Parents always combine both views, holding children responsible for some actions and taking off responsibility for some others, or combining forcing children to learn skills deemed valuable in future with pardoning them for actions that might not be considered pardonable if adults did them.

The second idea, which is crucial for the typology of models of parenting, is the parents' ideas about methods of raising a child. Parental style of interaction with a child might be more or less "liberal", by which we mean

the level of freedom allowed to a child when it comes to decision-making. Methods of raising a child are based on the parents' ideas about the extent to which the child needs control. So the dichotomy is closely connected to the parents' (in)ability of acknowledging that a child has sustainable personality of his or her own, which has its own values and agency. One of the poles of dichotomy will be the idea to see the child as a partner of adults (Daria Dimke says about the formation of such view of the child in the so-called utopian communities [9]), which has the right to decide, the right not to listen, the right to choose.

If we are to propose a model of differentiation between the positions on this dichotomy, the possible "extremal points" could be sketched out as "autonomy" and "control", or, to put it into concordance with the first dichotomy, a view of a child as a different person who has the right to decide on his own versus a view of a child as subordinated to an adult.

Now we have an ideal-type construction of models of parenting.

Table 1. Models of parenting.

Parental attitudes	Control	Autonomy
Childhood as preparation to adulthood	Authoritarian-pragmatic model	Liberal-pragmatic model
Childhood as valuable on its own	Authoritarian-romantic model	Humanistic model

In a vertical direction is a continuum of parental attitudes towards importance and value of childhood and adulthood; horizontally, parental attitudes towards degree of freedom allowed to a child are presented.

Methods of research

If we want to reconstruct contemporary parenting models on the basis of practices of digital gaming, then we have to understand how parents view video games. Parents' attitudes to video games, which vary from complete rejection to acceptance and approval, do not matter for us. The "pragmatically oriented" parents view games on a scale from useful to harmful for children development. This type of parents may even completely prohibit playing computer games if they consider games as harmful or useless. If they view games as useful and developing the skills of a child, they might allow playing games as much as possible.

Another option for parents is viewing games as enjoyment, or leisure, pastime which is interesting, although might be at times completely useless. This type

of parents might allow their children to play computer games because they see it as a way of recreation or distraction from the routineness of the everyday life, or, inversely, restrict the use of computer if they view it as threatening child's eyesight or back posture. We suppose that viewing games through the dichotomy of "usefulness – harmfulness" is much more prevalent in parents who view childhood as a "sub-adulthood", and evaluation of games through a category of enjoyment is more widespread among parents viewing childhood as a distinct period of life.

Analytic diversification of parental attitudes towards a degree of autonomy in decision-making will be based on parents' declarations about practices of control or regulation of child's computer gaming activity.

So, the research questions were:
- What are the strategies used by parents in relation to children video gaming?
- What are the background assumptions behind these strategies?

For data collection we used a combination of methods. These were the observations in families and in-depth interviews. Parents were watching their children and filling standardized diary bringing the facts about computer gaming practices of their child during the day. After filling the one-week diaries, we met with the parents and conducted in-depth interviews. Our sample was presented in the introduction of this paper.

Results and discussion

To date, there are no unambiguous opinions of researchers on the question of what view of the child existed during the Soviet period was, how it evolved, what views dominate now [5, 9, 10, 11]. The list of models of upbringing offered by modern researchers is based on a survey of parents and clarification of their views on the family and upbringing. It most often comes down to the dichotomies "authoritarian - anti-authoritarian", "traditionalist-modern" [11]. In order to study strategies of parenting used in today's St. Petersburg, we constructed the ideal types of models of parenting, and then, from the conducted interviews we detected the practices used by parents in the domain of children computer gaming. After that, we assigned these detected practices to each model. And then, we made some conclusions about the most widespread model of parenting used by our respondents.

Firstly, our results allow seeing a variety of opinions about the role of computers, about problems in connection with video games. Among our respondents, there are also those who believe that any computer games for children are harmful, those who believe that only educational games are useful, and those who believe that any games are good, since they allow children to rest. We think this diversity is connected with the ongoing process of acculturation and domestication of computers in the life of modern Russians [12]. Despite the fact that our respondents were residents of a large city of Federal importance – St. Petersburg (with a relatively high degree of computerization and the spread

of the Internet), from a number of interviews it becomes clear that in some families the process of computer domestication is not completed, the habitualization of computer and similar gadgets has not happened. There are some examples, when a computer or smartphone is bought into the house under the influence of the social environment. This is mostly the case in families where the employment of the parents does not imply an active daily use of the computer for work. These families are incorporating the computer or another gadget in their everyday life, looking for excuses and justifying its presence in their house. Among these families, the idea that children's computer games should be educational and developmental is reproduced. These people want to get "benefit" from the computer, explaining to themselves why they need this gadget in the house. Computer games as a leisure and entertainment practice can be evaluated negatively by them (along with the fact that many other practices that are entertaining rather than educational – for example, watching TV – are not forbidden, as we see, because the TV has become an invisible thing of everyday life).

Since the constant work on the computer – the routine only a small part of the Russians, there is a desire less involved in the use of gadgets people to evaluate video games in terms of benefit and harm, as well as broadcast all kinds of myths associated with the use of gadgets. In the interview, several times there was a point of view that sitting at the computer for more than 15 minutes reduces vision. Some parents mentioned the harmful effects of computer monitor radiation on children's health. Parents also spoke negatively about psychological influence of computers. Many parents are convinced of aggression formation as a consequence of the influence of video games. The number of interviews taken by us does not allow us to extrapolate data and talk about the percentage of parents' opinions about threats from video games. However, we can state that the motive of harm to health (vision, posture, child's psyche) met without exception by all parents who practice to limit computer games in general or for the most part, and almost absent from those parents who allow a look at computer games as a means of entertainment, evaluate the game positively or neutrally. It is obvious that the information learned from the Soviet time about the possible harm to health from prolonged sitting in front of the screen, relevant in the period of thirty years ago for the situation of watching TVs with a ray tube, works perfectly today as the legitimacy of a certain line of parental behaviour. There was also a motive for comparing computer games with harmful substances that cause addiction – alcohol, nicotine.

If summarized, preliminary results of analyses are as follows:

1. There is imbalance in parental attitudes:
- Most view a child as subordinated to an adult;
- Most view childhood as sub-adulthood and a lack of maturity.

So the authoritarian-pragmatic model prevails.

2. Some parents practise hybrid strategies: childhood might be practiced as both preparation for adulthood and valuable on its own in the same family.

3. The control strategy is diverse: there are "soft" and "hard" variants.

4. There is a connection (positive correlation) between parents' involvement in gaming and their attitude to children's gaming.

However, these theoretical elaborations should be taken with a pinch of salt in a way that they are based on a study with quite a small sample. For a follow-up study, these observations should provide a solid base for hypotheses we intend to verify. As we noted previously, more elaborate conclusions, both empirical and theoretical, will follow after a more advanced study takes place.

Conclusion

In spite of the limitations imposed by the small amount of families studied, we would like to state some findings that might be useful for a following research in this field. We intend to use them later as hypotheses, which we want to prove correct or wrong in a follow-up study. There is a remarkable disbalance noticed in parental discourses in practices: 1) most parents view childhood as sub-adulthood and 2) most parents view a child as subordinated to an adult, thus resulting in larger degrees of control exercised by parents. We have not managed to find families leaning towards the view of childhood as a distinct period of life, but there are some families who combine the view of childhood as a preparation for adulthood with practices of childhood as a period valuable on its own. In all cases, parents are inclined towards pushing up a child from childhood to adulthood, viewing one as a "little adult", albeit with varying degrees of intensity of such practices. There are only two cases in which a strategy of giving more freedom to a child is salient. It is interesting that there are two ways the "control" strategy is practiced: 1) "soft control" (persuasion, subtle trickery) and 2) "hard control" (voiced restrictions, bans). This strategy is justified with a very diverse argumentation, which is often contradictory, which shows a broad spectrum of parental attitudes to videogames.

Another possible hypothesis for a follow-up study is a connection between parents' gaming experience and their overall positive attitude towards child's gaming. At the same time, the frequent use of the computer by parents at work does not necessarily entail a positive attitude to video games and the involvement of the child in them. The parental legitimation of practices and strategies of parenting of St. Petersburg parents in families with less than 10 years old children is in many ways inherited from and reproduces the Soviet attitudes towards parenting and children. Some statements, such as the 15-minute rule, view of a computer as a cause of aggression and alienation, are axiomatized. However, it goes hand in hand with a (neo)liberal rhetoric in relation to the use of a computer.

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