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Gallagher, Robert  (2018) Minecrafting Masculinities: Gamer Dads, Queer Childhoods and Father-Son Gameplay in A Boy Made of Blocks. *Game Studies: the international journal of computer game research*, 18 (2). ISSN 1604-7982

Publisher: Game Studies

Version: Published Version

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Additional Information: This is an Author Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Game Studies: the International Journal of Computer Game Research* by Game Studies.

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Minecrafting Masculinities: Gamer Dads, Queer Childhoods and Father-Son Gameplay in A Boy Made of Blocks

by Rob Gallagher

Abstract

Keith Stuart's 2016 novel *A Boy Made of Blocks* tells the story of dad Alex and son Sam. Both characters are grappling with what it means to be(come) a man: where Sam's autism casts doubt on his capacity to lead a 'normal' adult life, Alex's personal and professional issues have shaken his sense of his own masculinity. The pair find relief in *Minecraft* (Persson and Mojang, 2011), discovering that the game offers a space where they can learn more about one another while rehearsing strategies for dealing with the problems they face. In its portrayal of a father-son relationship mediated via a videogame, Stuart's novel testifies to the increasingly important role games play in contemporary discourses of gender, ability, education and parenting. Drawing on Kathryn Bond Stockton's work on gaming and queer childhood, and on discussions of development and temporality from queer theory, crip theory and disability studies, this article interprets *A Boy Made of Blocks* as an attempt to imagine modes of masculine identity that depart from normative understandings of 'manliness' while eschewing the juvenility, solipsism and 'toxic' prejudice long seen as hallmarks of geek and gamer masculinities. Ultimately, however, the developments Stuart's protagonists undergo are more about accommodating themselves to the cultural changes wrought by post-Fordism than they are any radical reimagining of masculinity. While this failure is disappointing, it also underlines the important role that game studies has to play, not merely in charting the course of gaming culture's development, but in illuminating what has been happening, in recent decades, to the very concept of 'growing up'.

Keywords: Masculinities, Fatherhood, Childhood, Playbour, *Minecraft*, Life-Writing, Queer Theory, Crip Theory, Autism, Literature

Introduction

David Sudnow begins his 1983 book *Pilgrim in the Microworld* with a scene set in a video arcade. Sudnow, a musician and academic, has spent the afternoon grading term papers in a café, and is waiting for his son to finish a game of *Missile Command* (Atari, 1980). As the boy frantically fends off virtual ICBMs, Sudnow experiences a flashback to his own youth. He remembers being in a poolroom in the Bronx, "in the midst of running three straight racks on my favourite table in the back corner, and a couple of kids are watching, when my father comes in... Now here I am, on the other side of the stage in that drama" (p.9). One might think that this vision would be reassuring, an affirmation of continuity in the midst of change. But in fact Sudnow seems unsettled. His unease is only heightened when he looks around to see "a kid, maybe ten at the most, stand[ing] right next to some preppy law school type at least twice his age. From my perspective they behave identically" (ibid. p.10). Simultaneously fascinated and appalled by this elision of the differences age and education are supposed to make, Sudnow realizes that digital games have the capacity to challenge – if not overturn – the understandings of skill acquisition and development, maturity and inheritance that obtain in

the world he knows. The video arcade, he concludes, is not just somewhere you play; it is also "[some]where you learn" (ibid.).

So what exactly does Sudnow learn at the arcade? One answer would be that he learns videogames are queer, and that children are too. Kathryn Bond Stockton, who has written at length on the subject of "the queer child" (2009), holds that the very newness of digital games – a newness re-newed with each hardware generation, each gameplay innovation – forces us to acknowledge "that children do *not* reproduce us" (2017, p.228, italics original). Reading over scaremongering journalistic accounts of children's gaming habits, Stockton finds in them a testament to the way that "those bundles of queerness called children" can inspire "fear" rather than fond recognition in their parents (ibid. pp.228-9). The child happily conversant with a game utterly alien to her progenitors confronts us with the troubling fact "that those who reproduce differentiate themselves from themselves... making 'reproduction' a striking misnomer" (ibid. p.228) – that, in Hester's words "neither the genetic inheritances nor the carefully orchestrated upbringing of the embodied child can ensure smooth generational continuity or exact duplicability" (2018, p.67). We catch a glimpse of the fear Stockton describes in Sudnow's vision of the video arcade superimposed over the pool hall – a vision that vacillates disconcertingly between the poles of sameness and difference, then and now. We get a better look at it in the game *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories* (Climax Studios, 2009), which features a subplot concerning a dad who takes his son hunting. The dad, Joel senior, wants to make his boy into a man: an intrepid provider comfortable with using violent means to put food on the table; a grandson who'll "make his grandpa proud"; the sort of man one can imagine holding his own as the player-character in a post-apocalyptic, post-*Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) videogame. Joel junior, however, is recognizable as the kind of queer child Stockton describes. Late blooming or precociously carnal, tomboys or sissies, they are united by their failure to develop along straight lines, a failure that defies dominant understandings not just of gender and sexuality, but also of time. For Joel senior, his son's failure to kill a deer marks him out as a "pussy" and a "queer", unable to reconcile himself to "how the world works." As the vitriolic intensity behind these slurs hints, however, what is actually unsettling about Joel junior is the challenge he poses to Joel *senior's* understanding of "how the world works", his embodiment of possibilities his old man holds unthinkable.

In these examples, father-son relationships mediated through videogames ask us to consider how games figure in – and how they might portray – processes of growing up. They also ask us to consider how gaming culture itself has developed, and where it might be going. This article addresses these questions through another text about fathers, sons and videogames: Keith Stuart's 2016 novel *A Boy Made of Blocks*. The book's plot centres on dad Alex and son Sam, both of whom are grappling with what it means to be(come) a man. Alex has been all but unmanned by the traumatic death of his brother, a foundering marriage and the loss of his job. Sam has autism, which renders him illegible and unpredictable, raising doubts over his ability to lead what his parents consider a 'normal' life. The two become closer by playing *Minecraft* (Persson and Mojang, 2011) together online, finding in the game a space where they can learn more about each other while evolving strategies for dealing with the challenges they face. As this synopsis should suggest, there is much here that resonates with Stockton's work on queer childhood, and with the ideas of other queer scholars who've interrogated heteronormative notions of "development," rhetorics of "reproductive futurism" (Edelman, 2004, p.17), and other forms of "chrononormativity" (Freeman, 2010, pp.2-3). There is also much that resonates with work emerging from disability studies and "crip theory" (McRuer, 2006; Kafer, 2013). Taking inspiration from these fields, this article uses *A Boy Made of Blocks* to assess how gaming culture is developing, to explore the cultural phenomenon that is *Minecraft* and to ask what's been happening, in recent decades, to the very concept of 'growing up'. In so doing it aligns itself with the goals of queer game studies, heeding Ruberg and Shaw's call for scholars to supplement accounts of "LGBTQ content, players, or game creators" with analyses that

address questions of gender and sexuality, play and queerness more broadly (2017, p.ix). I will begin by situating Stuart's novel in relation to a wider concern with fatherhood in contemporary gaming culture.

'Dadification' and Its Discontents

Videogames have long been seen as an inherently juvenile, innately masculine medium, providing spaces in which geeky growing boys can rehearse culturally valorized models of "masculine performance" while grown men can indulge in a "regressive" retreat "back to a type of always-accessible boyhood" (Burrill, 2008, pp.2-3). Today, thanks in part to a "casual revolution" that has seen the games industry courting other kinds of players and experimenting with new platforms, pricing models and gameplay styles (Juul, 2010), one might have expected that videogames would have shed these associations. According to the Entertainment Software Association (2017) "the average gamer is 35 years old" nowadays, and "women age 18 and older represent a significantly greater proportion of the game-playing population than boys under age 18" (p.4). Caveats notwithstanding (the ESA is an industry-affiliated, US-based organization whose modes of gathering and analyzing data remain opaque), these statistics suggest how dramatically practices and attitudes have changed. Families now game together, adults are no longer expected to outgrow gaming, and there is greater acceptance of the idea that games can be educational and even artistic. As Kocurek observes, however, these shifts have hardly "eliminated the common perception of the gamer as a young white man with a penchant for technology and an impulse for entrepreneurial pursuits" (2015, p.196). Gaming culture is still rife with machismo and misogyny, while the videogame medium remains dogged by the sense that it never quite succeeded in fulfilling its expressive potential and maturing into a credible cultural form (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p.125; Goetz, 2015, p.239).

These circumstances help to explain the deluge of narrative-driven, post-apocalyptic action games starring "'dadified' protagonists" that have hit shelves in recent years (Stang, 2017, p.163). Titles like *The Last of Us*, *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios, 2012), *Bioshock: Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013) and, more recently, *God of War* (Sony Interactive Entertainment Santa Monica, 2018) court thirtysomething male gamers by purporting to offer both exhilarating action and a 'grown up' engagement with difficult ethical questions, casting players in a paternal, protective role. Stang, however, is dubious of the idea that such games "demonstrate [the games industry's] 'maturation'", offering a damning account of how action games focused on father-daughter relationships tend to "remove, marginalize, or vilify mothers; cast violent men as heroes; and turn daughters into moral barometers, moral compasses, helpful tools, and means for paternal redemption" (2017, p. 171). As I have argued elsewhere (2014), we should also be troubled by the way that such games' vaunted moral complexities often boil down to implicit endorsements of the logic of "reproductive futurism" (Edelman, 2004, p.3), "whereby the imperative to protect 'the Child' and perpetuate the species sanctions violence against those who pose a perceived threat to family life".

These games are not the only evidence of gaming culture's growing concern with fatherhood. Indie developers have also addressed the topic from a variety of angles, whether in autobiographical games like *Papo & Yo* (Minority Media Inc., 2012) and *That Dragon Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016), slapstick stealth titles like *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (Young Horses, 2014) or "dad dating simulator[s]" like *Dream Daddy* (Game Grumps, 2017). Meanwhile, representations of gamer dads have become increasingly common in other media. *A Boy Made of Blocks* emerged from a series of *Guardian* articles in which Stuart described "how I connected with my autistic son through videogames" (2016b) and how *Minecraft* "gave my autistic son a voice" (2015) - articles which now stand alongside a vast array of online texts about gaming, parenting and growing up, from thinkpieces to scare stories, personal essays and parenting tips to Amazon product reviews. The novel that followed them can, moreover, be seen as part of an emerging microgenre in which videogames afford sad dads a means of managing estrangement, grief and guilt. Other exponents include the mawkish 2007 Adam Sandler

vehicle *Reign Over Me* (in which Sandler's character, who lost his family in the 9/11 attacks, finds catharsis in *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico, 2005)) and Dennis Cooper's 2005 novel *God Jr.*, which sees a weed-addled suburban dad immersing himself to the point of dissociation in a platformer based on *Banjo-Kazooie* (Rare, 1998) as he struggles to take responsibility for the car crash in which his son died. While one would be hard pushed to argue that *Banjo-Kazooie*, *Minecraft* and *Shadow of the Colossus* have much to say about fatherhood in their own right, they become, in these texts, means of exploring or expressing conceptions of heteropatriarchal masculinity, of asking what it means to be a grown man and a good dad today.

These questions are tricky ones. For while it's all very well to argue for or against the idea of videogames as childish wastes of time, to do so supposes that we have a stable sense of what being 'grown up' looks like nowadays. In fact, the period for which digital games have existed has seen many of the markers and milestones that used to ground conceptions of adulthood falling away. The lack of affordable housing in many parts of the overdeveloped world mean that children are living with their parents well into their twenties and even thirties rather than flying the nest and buying properties of their own. Marriage rates are declining, as are birth rates, and those who have children are doing so later in life. From the advent of feminist and gay liberation movements to the greater accessibility of contraception and abortion to an explosion in the numbers of women entering higher education and work, the period since World War II has seen a host of changes that have disrupted the cyclical tempo of heterosexual reproduction and challenged both the cultural centrality of the two-parent nuclear family and the privileges accorded straight white males.

These changes have proceeded in step with a reorientation of overdeveloped economies around the leisure, service and entertainment industries – a shift that reflects the revolutionary impact of new technologies. In many sectors workers are now expected to show more creativity, spontaneity and initiative, learning to manage themselves even as they watch the benefits and securities that accrued to long-term employees in the 'job for life' era disappear. [1] Millennials whose parents spent their lives diligently climbing corporate career ladders now scrabble from gig to gig, while experienced professionals are vulnerable to downsizing and deskilling if they fail to stay flexible. These changes have had an inevitable impact on gender roles, and on understandings of identity more generally. The Fordist 'family wage' essentially functioned as a "mechanism for the normalization of gender and sexual relationships" while also shoring up "the midcentury organization of labour, race and class" (Cooper, 2017, pp.8). Men in general and "low-skilled and poorly educated young men" in particular have however struggled to adapt to post-Fordist "labour markets characterized by the continued growth... of bottom-end service jobs in which servility and deference – stereotypically feminine characteristics – are highly valued" (McDowell, 2001, p.455). As "the certainty of permanent life-time employment for all men has... crumbled" discourses of "male disadvantage" and crisis have proliferated (ibid. p.461, 455-6). [2]

Kocurek (2015) asserts that gaming culture has been bound up with "anxieties surrounding broader cultural and economic changes" since its inception – anxieties, in particular, "about the state of our young men, who were coming of age in an era of rapid computerization and increased economic insecurity" (p.xiii). Kirkpatrick (2013) likewise argues that the games industry is inextricably entangled with the emergence of new and more "playful" forms of computerized post-Fordist capitalism (pp.23-29). Today, games are a core component of the digital entertainment sector, and the industry has become notorious both for its track record of exploiting a passionate young workforce and for its pursuit of new ways of monetizing play (Whitson, 2013, p.127). Whether they are seen as providing an apprenticeship in skills crucial to success in the digital economy, or as an addictive distraction that saps productivity and stunts potential, videogames figure prominently in contemporary discussions of work, education and parenthood. It should not surprise us, then, that *A Boy Made of Blocks* puts *Minecraft* – a phenomenally popular game widely

considered "well-suited to support not only educational lessons but also creative development" (Nguyen, 2016, p.475) - at the centre of its efforts to get to grips with shifting conceptions of masculinity and to imagine a more positive social function for games. Before turning to the book's portrayal of *Minecraft*, though, I want to say a little more about what is stake in the concept of the queer child, which will provide the article's primary theoretical framework for unpacking Stuart's novel, Mojang's game and the cultural conjuncture to which they belong.

Play, Delay and Queer Becoming

The queer child is an intentionally provocative, even paradoxical, concept (Stockton, 2009, pp.8-9). To the extent that we understand adulthood in terms of reaching sexual maturity, one might say that individuals can only become fully queer when they have left childhood behind. And yet, thanks in no small part to Freud (for whom, notoriously, homosexuality was the result of a failure to successfully complete one's sexual development (ibid. p.8)), there is also a sense in which *all* kids are queer until 'proven' straight. This confusion over how and when one becomes queer has been troublesome for queer politics, which has long debated the relative merits of asserting LGBT+ individuals are 'born this way' (and so claiming legitimacy for orientations which might otherwise be dismissed as revocable 'lifestyle choices') versus arguing that queer identities, like all identities, are shaped and reshaped by individuals implicated in particular sociocultural contexts. Questions of queer becoming also underwrite the controversy sparked by Dan Savage's It Gets Better campaign^[3], which has been criticized for perpetuating normative models of development and rhetorics of optimization, for prioritizing appeals to personal resilience over calls for structural change, and for implying that the experiences of wealthy, white, metropolitan gays provide a model that other queers can and should follow (Halberstam, 2010; Puar, 2011). While Jesse Matz (2015) concedes many of these points, he also proposes that critiques of Savage suggest how limiting post-Edelman queer theory's blanket rejection of anything that smacks of narrativity, teleology or futurology can be, blinding us to the potential of speculative storytelling as a "mode of queer pedagogy" and to the strains of negativity and ambivalence found in many It Gets Better narratives (p.231).

The concept of the queer child, then, bears on some charged, if theoretically generative, points of divergence among queer thinkers. These rifts, however, pale in comparison to the faultlines Stockton exposes in heteronormative conceptions of development and maturity. Preceded by a period of "delay" perpetually under threat of being prematurely truncated or unduly attenuated, straight subjectivity is beset on all sides by queerness (Stockton, 2009, p.4). Rather than "growing up," the queer child "grow[s] sideways," recasting its state of delay as an alternative mode of being rather than a prologue to adult maturity and "reproduction" (ibid. p.6). In so doing it foregrounds not just our society's conflicted attitudes to sex, but also its complicated relationship with money – which, Stockton claims, "queers children as much as sex does" (ibid. p.222). For if the law seeks to protect minors from sexual predation, Stockton notes, it also "delay[s] children's moneyed relations to systematic labour" (ibid.). While "we let [children] 'play' at [working] in ways we don't let them play at sex," we also mandate that "work-for-pay, like sex, is something delayed for them": "legally, children cannot expend their energy in ways we call 'work' *and* be systematically paid for those expenditures" (ibid. *italics original*). They *are* however allowed to "perform certain labours – run a cash register, stuff envelopes, mow a lawn, shoot hoops – that are the basis of some adult work" (ibid.).

These ironies and ambiguities are heightened for individuals in economically straitened situations, and for those facing other forms of prejudice and structural inequality. If this includes members of ethnic minorities (ibid. p.219), it also includes people with disabilities, and *A Boy Made of Blocks*' story of a neurotypical dad raising an autistic son enjoins us to pay particular attention to the intersection of childhood,

queerness and ability. Here the work of "crip theory" scholars like Alison Kafer and Robert McRuer is illuminating. For the latter, "the system of compulsory able-bodiedness, which in a sense produces disability, is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness" (McRuer, 2006, p.2). And while, as Kafer cautions, attempts to think queerness and dis/ability in tandem can result in reifications, elisions and "flattening[s] out", her own work shows how such an approach can complicate normative conceptions of development and becoming, while simultaneously contesting the ableist notion "that disability prohibits a full life" (2013, pp.16, 2). Highlighting disability's entanglement with "imagined futures", Kafer argues that in order to understand how Edelman's "Child" comes to embody the prospect of a glorious heteronormative tomorrow we must also consider how "the disabled fetus or child... becomes the symbol of [an] undesired future", a "future no one wants" (ibid. pp.1-3). The relationship between imaginaries of childhood, futurity and disability becomes especially complex in the case of autism given its status a "disability [that] is frequently infantilized" (Stevenson, Harp and Gernsbacher, 2010). As Stevenson, Harp and Gernsbacher observe, "when members of the public envision the disability of autism, they most likely envision a child, rather than an adult" (ibid.). Decrying a pervasive tendency for fundraising appeals, fictional representations and news coverage to focus on autistic children – and, in the rare cases where they *do* represent autistic adults, to do so through a "stereotype of the 'eternal child'" – these authors argue that such representations hinder the attempts of autistic adults to attain financial independence and social acceptance, perpetuating a vicious "cycle of infantilization" (ibid.). Autism is also, as Jack (2011) notes, commonly "associated with the science, computing [and] hi-tech industries", and "with masculinity and fathers"; for her "contemporary understandings of geek masculinity have become one of the more common, gendered terministic screens through which autism is now understood", consolidating the same gendering of technology that has seen women and queers marginalized within gamer culture.

It should be clear, then, that queer work on childhood, in combination with concepts from crip theory and disability studies, can afford us valuable perspectives on the construction of gamer masculinities, the cultural function of videogames, and the question of where play shades into work. But while it is certainly true to say game studies has yet to acknowledge the extent to which queer theory might illuminate discussions not just of representation, but of ludification, gamification and playbour too, it is also fair to say that gaming culture poses salutary challenges to certain queer orthodoxies – or, at least, to some of the oppositions into which queer critique, for all its antipathy to binaries, is occasionally wont to slip. For if queer theory has traditionally rejected teleology, productivity and the imperative to grow up, the growth of gaming and the development of ludic capitalism threaten (as Stockton herself acknowledges) to rob this refusal of its oppositional character. These issues all inflect Stuart's depiction of a dad in crisis reconnecting with his autistic son via videogames. Providing a counterpoint to discourses that associate gaming with addiction, anomie and bigotry, the novel strives to show how digital play can foster inclusion and understanding, equipping adults and children alike to expand their conceptions of gender and ability while helping them adapt to shifting social, cultural and economic norms. As admirable as this might sound, however, *A Boy Made of Blocks'* treatment of these issues is ultimately disappointing. While Stuart invites us to celebrate Alex's metamorphosis, we should be cautious about accepting this invitation. As Connell insists, masculinity is "inherently relational" and subject to "mutation" (2005, pp. 68, 238); defining hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy", he highlights the fact that new alibis for masculine privilege must be developed in response to changing sociocultural circumstances (ibid. 77) [4]. With this in mind, what Stuart is keen to represent as a matter of Alex sloughing off outmoded, stultifying masculine norms to become a 'better man' should, I will argue, be seen instead as the construction of a new form of masculinity better suited to the demands of post-Fordist culture,

one that reaffirms his claims to legitimacy as a husband, patriarch and provider. But if Stuart's novel fails to offer wholly convincing solutions to the problems it addresses, it still rewards analysis as an exploration of gaming's role in contemporary culture and of the extent to which ideas of what it means to live a 'normal' life are underwritten by sexist and ableist, as well as "hetero- and chrononormative", assumptions (Freeman, 2010, p.35). Grappling with the status of masculinity in a world transformed by "the ludification of culture" (Raessens, 2006) and "the feminization of postindustrial work" (Ngai, 2013, p.215), Stuart's characters invite a consideration of the kinds of futures games like *Minecraft* encourage us to imagine – for ourselves, for games as a cultural form and for future generations.

Bildung Blocks

As I have proposed, Alex's attempt to rethink his masculinity can also be seen Stuart's attempt to envision a truly 'grown up' gamer. In the wake of #gamergate such attempts have a renewed relevance. The bigotry that the hashtag brought to light shocked those who had assumed that gamers had outgrown such things, even if it came as less of a surprise to scholars who have long been warning that 'toxic masculinity' continues to pervade gaming culture (see, for example, Consalvo, 2012; Braithwaite, 2014; Jenson and de Castell, 2011; Kirkpatrick, 2015)). The man Stuart's Alex strives to become – emotionally literate, thoughtful but playful, devoted to his family and friends, pursuing a career that matters to him in a field where he believes he can make a difference – is not just a modern vision of the 'good dad'; he is also a counterpoint to the figure of the immature, socially isolated, toxically prejudiced gamer troll.

Here it becomes relevant to consider Stuart's tenure as gaming editor at the *Guardian*, approvingly described by Stuart as a "left-leaning" newspaper with "a sort of liberal agenda" (Pearson, 2013). In his final piece as editor Stuart listed what he termed the "eight best advances in gaming" during his time with the paper. Asserting that it is entirely possible to be a liberal gamer parent who appreciates shooters and action games as much as he does indie and avant-garde fare, Stuart's article heralded commercial hits like the controversially violent *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013) while also celebrating the emergence of an independent games sector producing "deeply personal" and "deeply political games" and applauding a movement towards "greater diversity and representation" in the industry (Stuart, 2017). In a pointed riposte to gamergate's framing of 'progressive' independent, experimental and DIY games as threats the continued existence of 'real' games, the piece insisted that such changes have not "happened at the expense of the mainstream games industry... Nobody took those toys away" (ibid.).

These details help to contextualize the portrayal of gaming culture in *A Boy Made of Blocks*. As I have said, the novel originated from a series of *Guardian* articles in which Stuart described *Minecraft*'s role in helping his "socially awkward and withdrawn" autistic son Zac become more confident and communicative (Stuart, 2015). These articles garnered a warm response on social media. They also caught the eye of publishers Little, Brown, who contacted Stuart to ask if he had "thought about writing a novel, using my story... as the template" (2016a, p.395). The interview and afterword included in *Blocks*' "book club edition" help to clarify what the publishers hoped to achieve with this approach, framing it as an attempt to bring first-hand authenticity ("a lot of what happens... is drawn from our lives and what happened to us" (ibid. p.402)) to a story more suspenseful, eventful and emotive than a mere recounting of Stuart's experiences would have been ("I was determined that I wasn't writing a memoir – the characters and events in *Boy Made of Blocks* are semi-inspired by things that have happened to me and my family, but I'm definitely not Alex, and Zac is definitely not Sam" (ibid. p.395)). These paratexts establish Stuart's credentials as a guide to the book's themes. Positioning him as a sensitive dad (jacket quotes describe the novel as "incredibly poignant" and "one of those books that makes you laugh and cry at the same time" (ibid.)) who also happens to know a lot about videogames, they present him as the ideal person to show how a medium still associated in the minds of many parents with violence

and addiction can (as Stuart puts it elsewhere) furnish "modern families" with a "permissive space in which to chat, play and be creative" (2016b).

A Boy Made of Blocks essentially dramatizes this claim. Importantly, it places almost as much emphasis on how games can benefit parents as it does how they can help children. At the beginning of the book Alex faces a number of challenges: he wants to get back together with his wife Jody, to establish a stronger rapport with his autistic son Sam, to find a new job, and to come to terms with his brother George's death in a traffic accident when they were children. Stuart implies that all that stands between Alex and these goals is his adherence to outdated models of masculinity. For one thing, Alex clings to the Fordist idea of the male breadwinner, delegating childcare to Jody even though he knows she harbours her own professional ambitions. For another, Alex refuses to acknowledge and express his feelings, placing anything that sounds too much like therapy discourse in scare quotes ("we haven't 'confronted our issues' or 'dealt with the past' or whatever..." (2016a, p.171)). He also hangs on to what are presented as anachronistic attitudes to work, having failed to adjust to a climate in which workers are expected to be ambitious and emotionally invested – and in this respect *Blocks* begs to be read in relation to other texts which dramatize the experiences of men forced to reconcile themselves to a new "culture of work" that they find "confusing and awkward" because it necessitates a "confrontation with gender" (Ngai, 2013, pp.211-212). The loss of his sensible, supposedly secure 9-5 job as a mortgage broker (a job which puts him in the paternal position of shepherding young couples through the daunting process of becoming grown-up homeowners) not only robs Alex of his alibi for not spending more time with Sam, it also serves as to underline how radically the world has changed in the transition from "solid modernity" to "liquid modernity" (Bauman and Haugaard, 2008, p.115).

These changes trouble Alex, who manifests a deep-seated love of structure, confessing "play doesn't come easily to me" and bridleing when a therapist challenges him "to be childish" (Stuart, 2016a, pp.24, 294). In this, as in other respects, he is much like Sam. Indeed, as the book progresses it becomes increasingly obvious that Sam's issues – his volatile temper, his preoccupation with routine and his desire for control, his difficulties with expressing himself and his inability to handle emotional situations – are shared, albeit to a lesser extent, with his dad, who confesses at one point to having "wondered if *I'm* on the spectrum" (ibid. p.275, italics original). But then most of Alex's male friends are similarly out of touch with their feelings. Capable of holding conversations about football, movies and music characterized by an obsessive focus on arcane details, these men struggle to discuss their *real* issues, much to the chagrin of their female partners. At times, indeed, the novel almost seems to conflate masculinity with autism, evoking Baron-Cohen's (2009) contentious "extreme male brain" theory and other discourses that verge on framing "masculinity itself... as a disability" (Jack, 2011) [5]. But while Stuart could do more to challenge the cultural prevalence of neuroessentialist perspectives that reductively yoke autism, masculinity, 'geekiness' and a lack of empathy and social skills together (ibid.), ultimately his novel portrays gender identity as a matter of culture, upbringing and socialization rather than neurology or endocrinology. Through Alex and Sam's story he suggests how conceptions of appropriate masculine comportment inform and are informed by domestic habits, understandings of national identity (the novel frequently pokes fun at the UK's culture of 'mustn't grumble' stoicism, as expressed in 'Keep Calm and Carry On' mugs and what Stuart calls "the popular British parlour Game, 'Let's pretend everything isn't completely fucked'" (2016a, pp.43, 104)) and rhetorics of dis/ability (to name but three factors), insisting on the possibility of revising gendered cultural norms.

As part of this process Alex must learn to accept activities he would once have dismissed as juvenile or "pretentious" – and thus, it is implied, effeminate. While he spent his university years reading "Dickens [and] Derrida" and "running an alternative music society" (ibid. p.87, p.17), he initially seems to feel that such childish things

must be put aside when one becomes a man. Making slighting references to "bizarre" experimental cinema and "incomprehensible" contemporary art (ibid. p.71-72), Alex evinces a suspicion of creative pursuits that only deepens when Jody, who has begun working as a curator, rekindles her relationship with arts administrator Richard, an erstwhile university friend (ibid. p.310). Stuart's sketch of Richard, with his "black blazer with dark skinny jeans and a brown tartan scarf" (ibid. p.238), is presumably meant to code him as smart and stylish; Alex, by contrast, is incapable of understanding why his friend Dan would need a full-length mirror (ibid. p.203). Where Richard inevitably turns out to be "arrogant, pretentious" and full of "bullshit" (ibid. p.310), it is Dan who comes to embody the possibility of a different kind of masculinity – one capable of internalising the ludic and aesthetic logics of the 'new capitalism' without lapsing into the kind of narcissistic frivolity Richard represents. "Drift[ing] from one vague freelance gig to the next," with a portfolio that encompasses web design, marketing, music production and club promotion, Dan gives Alex a room in his flat when Jody kicks him out (ibid. p.83). That flat turns out to be a bachelor pad full of electronic gadgets and toys – including the Xbox on which Alex will begin playing *Minecraft* with Sam. But if Dan's lifestyle suggests that he is less 'grown up' than Alex, he also lacks Alex's fear of losing control. Alex quickly confesses that he is in awe of Dan's ability to negotiate contingency and stay determined (ibid. p.39), to deal, as Bauman would have it, with the "haunting uncertainty and insecurity" of the contemporary world (Bauman and Haugaard, 2008, p.112).

Videogames help Alex to acclimatize to these conditions and become more like Dan. The shift, however, is by no means immediate. Alex initially tells Sam that "daddies don't play computer games" (Stuart, 2016a, p.54), and at first gaming is presented as fundamentally incompatible with playing a productive role in adult society: Dan returns home to find Alex engrossed *Grand Theft Auto V* and asks "why are you playing video games?", to which Alex responds "I got made redundant" (ibid. p.74). Gradually, however, Alex comes to see games as a means of connecting with Sam while reconciling himself to what Jody calls "the uncertainty of everything," the fact that "there's no such thing as stability any more" (ibid. p.329). By the last chapter Alex has rebuilt himself as a new kind of man: caring and emotionally literate, playful and open to experimentation, ambitious and inured to uncertainty. But what Stuart represents as positive personal growth is perhaps more accurately seen as an example of how, under neoliberalism, "the individual must engage in particular practices of the self - those that help one learn to contend with the risks that accompany competition in the marketplace" (Catlaw and Sandberg, 2018, p.8). Significantly, one of the most prominent symptoms of Alex's metamorphosis is his decision to take on ownership of a local coffee shop – the kind of entrepreneurial venture he would never have considered before.

Crafting Social Spaces

A Boy Made of Blocks, then, departs from alarmist accounts of gaming to frame videogames as a medium capable of promoting personal development – and even of detoxifying masculinity. *Minecraft*, in particular, is presented not as an escape from or an alternative to 'real life', but as a space in which Alex and Sam can learn lessons and establish connections that carry over into their offline worlds. Of course, in framing *Minecraft* as a driver of development Stuart is hardly unique; much critical and journalistic discussion of the game "is concerned with its potential educational uses" (Watson, 2017, p.77) and how it might be used to foster forms of youthful creativity that can be "funneled into [a] future of scientific creativity and technological innovation" (Nguyen, 2016, p.475). So what exactly do Alex and Sam learn from the game? As Stuart has observed elsewhere, *Minecraft* has "properties that a lot of children on the autism scale seem to crave and respond to," encouraging exploration and experimentation in a low-consequence environment (2016b). Spatially estranged but connected to the shared server 'Sam and Daddy's world', his protagonists undertake a series of quests (building castles, finding buried treasure) that bring them closer while also teaching them to think strategically and manage their mutual hatred

of surprises. Unabashedly coarse grained and regimented, *Minecraft's* blocky universe has "very clear rules and boundaries – everything has a logic that doesn't change... [and] within these logical and comprehensible environments the player is also free to explore and mess about" (ibid.). For Stuart's son Zac, this combination proved irresistible, as it does for Sam. Alex initially worries that videogames will exacerbate Sam's issues, reasoning that, in games, "the player is at the centre of the universe and every action is about them" and that this is "the opposite of what Sam needs to know about life" (2016a, p.31). In practice, though, *Minecraft* socializes Sam, who finds in-game chats easier than face-to-face conversations. Importantly, moreover, *Minecraft's* gameworld is not a *totally* risk-free environment. A disastrous early excursion sees Sam and Alex losing a cache of building materials they've spent hours amassing, but it also provides a vocabulary for talking about contingency, consequence and control. Other encounters offer lessons about the risks and rewards of 'letting people in': when Sam's replica of the Tower of London is wrecked by older boys who trick him into granting them access to his gameworld, he almost quits *Minecraft* for good – until the boys (who had thought they were playing a prank on someone else) rally round to rebuild the structure under Sam's direction, forging friendships that make him feel less isolated at school.

Countering pessimistic perspectives on gaming's role in young people's lives, Stuart offers an account of digital play aiding, rather than impeding, a child's reconciliation to reality. Admittedly, the reality portrayed bears the distinct stamp of neoliberal "capitalist realism" (Fisher, 2009), emphasizing risk and uncertainty as factors that resourceful individuals must learn to manage. But Stuart also offers hints of a more communal vision of play. Indeed, whether it is playing *Minecraft*, playing chess or watching football, *A Boy Made of Blocks* consistently portrays games as a means of bringing people together. Notable here is a scene set in The Old Ship Inn, a "little local pub" and "lonely relic of the area's industrial past" that Alex and Dan frequent (Stuart, 2016a, p.34). One of the pub's regulars is a working-class pensioner named Sid, whose strange mannerisms and standoffish demeanour have earned him a reputation as an antisocial eccentric. It's only when Sam visits the pub and manages to engage him in a game of chess that Alex realizes that Sid is also autistic. Unfortunately, Sid turns out to be little more than a "narrative prosthesis" – a disabled character deployed "to lend a 'tangible' body to textual abstractions" (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000, p.47). The abstract principle he embodies – that there is value in maintaining spaces where people can enjoy games together regardless of class, age and ability – is however a worthy one. This principle also factors into Alex's decision to take on the coffee shop, which, like the pub, is portrayed as a space where chance meetings and playful interactions can foster sociability, solidarity and even erotic possibility: it's here that Alex first meets Isobel, who is also raising an autistic son, and who is presented as a potential love interest before becoming a friend and confidante. In the novel's representation of such spaces there are (albeit faint) echoes of Samuel R. Delany's (1999) assertion that "given the mode of capitalism under which we live, life is at its most rewarding, productive and pleasant when large numbers of people understand, appreciate, and seek out interclass contact and communication conducted in a mode of good will" (p.121). While, for Delany, it is queer cultures of public sex that offer a model for these kinds of contact, in Stuart's case it public playspaces, from football stadia, cafés and pubs to networked gameworlds and gaming expos. But where Delany's account of the gay porno cinemas of pre-Giuliani New York (whence he derives his program for a queer urbanism) poses a stern challenge to sexual norms and capitalist orthodoxies alike, Stuart's portrayal of post-industrial Bristol is less radical in spirit. Implying that all it will take for contemporary cities to become more hospitable is for caring entrepreneurs like Alex to follow their dreams and open more independent coffee shops, *A Boy Made of Blocks'* account of space, like its accounts of masculinity and the nuclear family, downplays the possibility of systemic change or radical transformation, instead following the neoliberal propensity to ask what enterprising individuals might make of themselves.

Moreover, while Stuart's portrayal of *Minecraft* emphasises how much it has to offer autistic children, looking at critical accounts of the game in combination with Erin Manning's theorization of "autistic perception" suggests that we must also acknowledge how *Minecraft* might reinforce neuronormative conceptions of subjectivity and ability (2016, p.14). Manning frames the difference between "autistic perception" and "neurotypical accounts of experience" in terms of "parsing" and "chunking": where in the latter "there is a tendency to organize feeling forms into articulations that parse experience into manageable bits", people with autism tend not to "parse the world into subjects and objects" so readily or rapidly (ibid. pp.135, 130). Her work suggests why *Minecraft* might be particularly appealing to children like Sam, who experience a "world that refuses to settle itself into a stable locus where objects and subjects are clearly differentiated" (ibid. p.143). Abstracting space into a rigidly ordered, highly malleable model, *Minecraft* also has players communicate via boxy, garishly-costumed avatars with a limited range of gestures and expressions – straining out some of the affective complexities and semantic ambiguities that can make face-to-face communication overwhelming for people whose "feelings do not... land in any kind of predictable formation" (ibid. pp.140, 134). But while *Minecraft*'s pre-chunked world has proven hospitable to autistic gamers, the game arguably goes against Manning's call for neurotypical culture to cultivate modes of perception that do not "hurry towards form" (ibid. p.134). For Manning it is only by forcing ourselves to "chunk *less* quickly" that we can become attuned to the complex play of forces elided in neuronormative visions of reality (ibid. p.138, *italics original*). Privileging individual agency, such visions distort our sense of "what the human should be and... what a human subjectivity might look like", ensuring "disabled people are infantilized" and endorsing narrowly ableist conceptions what is and "what is not a worthwhile life" (ibid. p.136).

Videogames are deeply invested in the myths Manning critiques, incessantly celebrating the agential individual subject who bends the environment to his (and it tends to be *his*) will. While *Minecraft* might seem benign compared to more violent games, or to games less geared towards collaboration and creativity, for Bart Simon and Darren Wershler (forthcoming 2018) the game also constitutes a uniquely powerful articulation of the ideology of colonial modernity, presenting a pre-gridded world crying out for administration, management and manipulation. Nguyen agrees (2016, p.489); situating *Minecraft* as a descendant of that "urtext of Western 'man's' conquest of the wilderness" (Markley, 2005, p.32), Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Nguyen holds that "discussions of creativity around *Minecraft*" demonstrate the extent to which "contemporary understandings of creativity and creative development" remain indebted to "the Robinsonade tradition... emphasiz[ing] individuality amid precarity, rooted through persistent Maslovian models of creativity and psychological development" (2016, p.499). While these critiques do not invalidate Stuart's account of how enriching and empowering the game has proven for autistic players, they do suggest the need for gaming culture to think not just about widening participation, but about the ideological implications of the scenarios in which it invites us to participate. Like Simon and Wershler, Nguyen stresses that it is possible view *Minecraft* through other, less individualistic lenses, lenses that bring forms of sharing, collaboration and community into focus. For him, however, the game is more often mobilized to promote notions of agency, creativity and self-actualization that are "highly individual rather than social" and to reaffirm the need to liberate ourselves from "dependence and tradition" (ibid. pp.472-473) – a key tenet of dominant neoliberal doxa.

Taking It Down a Notch

These same doxa help to explain *A Boy Made of Blocks*' ending, an ending that might otherwise seem strangely inconclusive. Sam and Alex may have become better adjusted by the time the final chapter rolls round, but they also face big challenges. Sam is starting a new school, Alex is about to take on the café, and, while he and Jody seem to be on the road to reconciliation, they are taking things slowly. To the extent that the book is about Alex acclimatizing to a world

characterized by precarity and uncertainty, however, finding out whether he succeeds in turning the café around and winning Jody back would be superfluous. What matters is that he's learned to take risks. And of course, to give Sam too happy of an ending would risk discounting the challenges faced by people with autism and their families. Alex still worries about Sam's future, expressing his concern in terms that speak to the intersection of disability and queerness, and to how play stands in relation to these categories: when he notes "Sam definitely likes girls, but all things considered he prefers... *Minecraft*. I don't know if that'll be different in ten years. People are tiring and complicated to him" (Stuart, 2016a, p.198), videogames are associated with a pre-sexual limbo state in which the figure of the queer child shades into the stereotype of the autistic adult as "eternal child" (Stevenson, Harp and Gernsbacher, 2010). Elsewhere, however, games are presented as drivers of development, a means of fitting queer and neurodiverse kids for the adult world of sex and work: a shared love of *Minecraft* underwrites Sam's friendship with schoolmate Olivia, a friendship close enough to suggest that entry into the rhythms of "repronormative time" and the routines of neurotypical culture may still be on the cards for him some day (Freeman, 2010, p.15). And it is thanks to *Minecraft* that Alex and Sam have a conversation about urban planning during which Sam tells Alex he might want to become an "arttiteck" some day, suggesting how play can orient children towards possible future careers (Stuart, 2016a, p.259).

Writing of his own son Zac, Stuart observes that he is "in middle school now, and although he lags behind his peers in lots of ways, he is doing OK. We're wondering perhaps if one day he will make his own videogames" (ibid. p.403). This positioning of the game designer as someone the child gamer might grow into is, I think, worth unpacking – especially as, in one of his first articles about Zac's love of *Minecraft*, Stuart interweaves his family's story with that of Markus 'Notch' Persson, the game's creator (Stuart, 2015). The article was, in part, a response to a recent *Forbes* magazine feature on Persson. *Forbes* implied that, having sold *Minecraft* to Microsoft for \$2.5 billion, Notch was struggling to acclimatize. Where prior press coverage had lauded him as an exemplary innovator and entrepreneur, this article portrayed Notch as (in Stuart's words) an "unhappy billionaire" whose wealth had made him distant and self-indulgent. Stuart, however, remained insistent that, whatever Persson's faults, he would remain "a goddam hero to me" for having created a game that meant so much to Zac (ibid.). Given Persson's subsequent track record of spouting misogynistic abuse and endorsing right-wing conspiracy theories (Murray, 2017; Byrne, 2017), it's entirely possible that Stuart's assertion was premature. The question of whether or not Stuart still considers Notch a hero, though, is less interesting than that of why he felt the need to make the statement in the first place. His article evinces a queer mixture of childlike enthusiasm, comradely identification, and paternal indulgence. Notch is credited with bringing Stuart and Zac closer while also being held up as a model for what Zac might become; Stuart insists that Notch is "only human" (and that critics should take mitigating factors like Notch's father's suicide and the breakdown as his marriage into account before finding fault with his behaviour) even as he portrays him as heroic and exceptional. The sympathy and admiration Stuart is able to muster speaks, I would argue, to the ease with which one white, cis-gendered, heterosexual male can recognize himself in another – and, by extension, assume the best of that other, see in that other a template for what his son might become, find that other to be both remarkable and relatable, etcetera. In this article as in his novel, Stuart proves regrettably susceptible the kind of "straight male self-pity" Sedgwick has described (2008 [1990], p.145). This strain of sentimentality (which is, she notes, often encountered in representations of father-son relationships) carries the implication that straight men simply feel more deeply, and are more worthy of sympathy and admiration, than other people (ibid. p.146). While Stuart challenged gamergate and championed progressive viewpoints and diverse voices as the *Guardian's* editor, and while his fiction suggests an earnest desire to rethink both gaming culture and masculinity, his soft spot for Notch suggests how easily even those

with good intentions can fall prey to homophily and perpetuate homogeneity. This, of course is how systems reproduce themselves, how narratives (like that of the brilliant young man whose innovations transform his medium) repeat themselves, how sectors like the games industry remain inhospitable to those whose faces don't fit.

As Stuart's piece shows, Notch's experiences of striking it lucky in the digital play business^[6] can be spun as a success story or a cautionary tale. From one perspective, Notch was fortunate enough to escape the precarious, gig-to-gig grind characteristic of careers in videogame development (Bulut, 2015). His current condition, however – that of a man playing at working, lacking motivation and direction, embodying a sense of arrested development – also makes it seem like success has stunted him, preventing him from growing up. (As Stuart (2015) comments, "He has a new development studio, Rubberbrain, but it seems to be just a hobby, a place to hang-out. 'It's like a day care for us-grown-ups,' he told *Forbes*."). Notch's malaise suggests how contemporary confusion about what it means to be a 'grown up' is linked to an economic system that more or less arbitrarily bestows huge rewards on a few while ensuring that others must struggle frantically to maintain themselves. As Nguyen observes, *Minecraft* can be read as endorsing this system: for many pundits the game only came into its own with the addition of a "Survival Mode" that, by forcing players to build or perish, supports the view that risk and precarity "produce the chaotic conditions necessary for individualist manipulation of the world by motivating players to secure safety" (2016, p.489). Rather than challenging conditions of generalized precarity, Stuart seems content to hope his own son will follow Notch's trajectory – an ambition that suggests how pervasive these habits of thought have become, even among notionally progressive advocates of gaming culture.

Conclusion

A Boy Made of Blocks attempts to refute stereotypes of gaming as developmentally detrimental while imagining a more inclusive future for gamer culture, showing how constraining masculine norms can be while affirming the value of videogames as spaces where young and old alike can socialize and express themselves. These goals are, to be sure, admirable ones. Its manner of pursuing them, however, leaves much to be desired. As McRuer argues, calls for tolerance are hardly revolutionary in a context where "neoliberalism... increasingly need[s] able-bodied, heterosexual subjects who are visible and spectacularly tolerant of queer/disabled existences" (2006, p.2). And while clichés of games rotting children's brains can and should be challenged, Stuart's counternarrative makes gaming seem like a means of turning troubled kids into economically and (hetero)sexually viable members of neurotypical adult society – a vision that largely denies what Stockton sees as gaming's queer potential. While it might be tempting to see Alex's transformation in queer terms, in reality he is merely adjusting to the pressure post-Fordism has put on gender norms, refashioning his masculinity to become the kind of playful, entrepreneurial, emotionally literate, technologically adept subject the new economy wants him to be. Stuart's interest in alternative visions of gaming culture is doubtless genuine, and his acknowledgement that the future cannot simply be a rerun the past is a welcome one – especially given gamer culture's status as a staging ground for "technostalgia[c]" fantasies of "regression" to a lost golden age of masculine supremacy (Burrill, 2008, p.3). *A Boy Made of Blocks'* liberal faith in the possibility of self-motivated progress, however, comes across as myopic and unrealistic – especially by the standards of queer critics suspicious of "narrative temporality," "teleological futurity" and "normal optimism" (Matz, 2015, pp.233-4).

That said, at a time when many share Matz's concern that such "queer negativity" has become counterintuitive, perhaps we should not be so quick to dismiss Stuart's belief in the possibility of positive change (ibid.). The quandaries his protagonists face prove Matz's point that even the 'straightest' stories are fraught with loops, loose threads and knotted skeins. And, while the book's mode of fictionalized memoir seems, on the basis of Stuart's account, to have had more to do with publishers' sales projections than the expressive possibilities of

autofiction[2], it also complicates the relationship between author, characters and reader, lived reality and fiction, in a way that opens spaces for projection and identification, comparison and counterfactual speculation. As with the videos Matz addresses, a narrative that initially seems to effect "a linear imposition – the innocent child will become the experienced adult" turns out to proffer something more like "a pedagogical proposition: learn how to think futurity as yourself-to-come speaking to yourself-today" (ibid. p.242). If anything, the novel's belief that videogames can equip us to build better futures needs to be pushed further; as it stands, Stuart frames masculinity and the nuclear family less as anachronisms in need of dismantling and more as venerable institutions that must be reworked just enough to ensure their continued viability. But insofar as *A Boy Made of Blocks* portrays play as a matter of adopting new roles, experimenting with unaccustomed strategies and forming unlikely alliances, it also leaves the door open to more radical conceptions of gaming, closer to Stockton's queer pleasures or Manning's experiments with alternative modes of apprehension. Returning to Sudnow's description of the gameworld as a place "where you learn" (1983, p.10), we must ask whether games can teach us not just to reconcile ourselves to the inevitability of change, but to embrace queer "mutation[s]", fomenting alternatives to gendered identity and incubating "means of survival beyond the nuclear family... new formations of the socially reproductive unit that can enable the spread of a different system, of futurity" (Hester, 2018, p.68).

Endnotes

[1] It might be objected that this analysis rings true only for the comparatively lucky few employed in the creative industries or other forms of knowledge work. To some extent this is true; in their work on the games industry, de Peuter and Dyer-Witherford concede that while the dominance of "immaterial labour... is not quantitative" because "not everyone works with computers or in a creative industry", it is nonetheless "the activity that advanced capital depends upon in its most dynamic and strategic sectors" (2009, p.4). But it is also true that those in less prestigious sectors of networked economies are increasingly encouraged to find 'creative' means of attracting custom, differentiating themselves from rivals and making ends meet. Here we might think of Preciado's contention that the truly exemplary avatars of contemporary capitalism are not cognitive labourers but "the migrating whore, the transgender sex worker, [and] the porn actress or actor" - figures who trade on "their somatic and affective capital" to survive (2013, pp.287, 285), and are, as such, very much implicated in the broader "aestheticization of work" (McDowell, 2001, p.456).

[2] As McDowell argues, these discourses tend to elide the more complex realities of inequality and identity, downplaying questions of class and glossing over the fact that women are still expected to take on a disproportionate share of reproductive labour (2001, p.457).

[3] A response to suicide statistics among queer teenagers, the campaign initially took the form of an appeal for LGBT+ adults to post videos describing how their lives had improved since adolescence.

[4] Connell's model of hegemonic masculinity has not gone unchallenged (for an account of and response to some of these challenges see Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), but his claim that shifting masculine norms should be considered in terms of the search for new rationales for patriarchy remains instructive.

[5] Grounded on a conception of "the male brain type as biased toward systemizing" where "the female brain type is understood to be biased toward empathizing", and of "persons with autism... as hyper-systemizers and hypo-empathizers", Baron-Cohen's theory proposes that those with autistic spectrum conditions manifest in heightened form tendencies characteristic of 'male brains' in general (Krahn and Fenton, 2012, p.93). The theory been critiqued for "map[ping] cultural norms first onto masculine and feminine activities, and then onto male and female brains, and then present[ing] these differences as natural

or biological", propagating, in so doing, misconceptions of autism and reductively binary understandings of gender while entrenching "the gendering of computer and electronic technology as masculine" (Jack, 2011). For Krahn and Fenton (2012) the extreme male brain theory perpetuates the very conditions that see autism going underdiagnosed in girls and women in the first place.

[6] *Minecraft*'s success is at least partly attributable its departure from the normal rhythms of videogame development and play. The game helped to popularize the early access model, whereby, rather than waiting until a game is 'finished', the developers release a beta version which is augmented and refined via patches and updates. And, of course, where other games can be 'completed', *Minecraft*, especially in its earliest iterations, is less a game than a toolkit, its appeal tied to its ability to serve as a platform for innovations on the part of its player base.

[7] Autofiction "deliberately blur[s] the boundary between life writing and the kinds of stories told in the first-person novel" (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.10).

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