PERFORMANCES OF
RESISTANCE, TRANSGRESSION AND PLAY
IN A CHILDREN'S DIGITAL STORYTELLING WORKSHOP?

Prue Wales
Visual and Performing Arts Group

National Institution of Education
Nanyang Technological University

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Dr Prue Wales

Abstract: *This paper focuses on a digital storytelling workshop for primary-aged school children that took place in an out-of-school community setting in Singapore as part of a school holiday programme. The workshop, which sought to foster multimodal literacies, and privilege children's voices, agency and authorship through the creative lenses of drama, art and digital storytelling, ran into difficulties when the conflicting educative and performative ideologies of all stakeholders were revealed. Yet, despite emerging problems, the participating children's dramatic play, which manifested as they constructed artworks for their digital stories, provided rich creative possibilities for them to explore and transgress hegemonic social, cultural and spiritual beliefs and principles. Through a variety of performative actions across art forms, the children subverted and destabilized dominant discourses, stretched existing boundaries, and developed forums in which they could present themselves as powerful, knowledgeable, and in control.*

Keywords: DIGITAL STORYTELLING; DRAMATIC PLAY; PERFORMATIVITIES; TRANSGRESSIVE BEHAVIOURS.

Deep in the heartland of the 'concrete jungle' that is Singapore, and located at the very base of an HDB (High Density Building) apartment block is one of many after-school centres that cater to Singapore Youth. This particular centre, Green Town[1], provides for the needs of working-class primary aged school children and their parents when school is 'out'. In a small room off the main classroom three researchers, two Caucasian women and a local Chinese man, are facilitating the second session of a digital storytelling workshop for eight young 'volunteers'. It is the school holidays and the centre is running a holiday programme. The digital storytelling project is an alternative course some of the youth have 'opted' to take, but things are not progressing in ways the researchers had hoped!

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[1] Green Town and the people found therein are all pseudonyms.

'I hate here,' a young boy complains, crossing his arms in irritation. 'I should have stayed at home. Sleep. Eat. Play computer.'

On receiving no response, the boy continues working and playing. Half an hour later he repeats his protest which builds into a collective grumble.

> John: I hate this, I am going to quit.
> Qing Feng: Me too.
> Bronson: Me three. It's kind of hard.
> John: Urghhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

Extract from Transcript from Day 2

After completing this roar of frustration, the initiator of the complaint looks directly at one of the researchers in the room and smiles seditiously. It is a delicious, minute moment of glory for him as he reflects upon his performative act and the monster of discord he has created. Literally within seconds the initiator's and his friends' grievances are completely forgotten as they heatedly argue over whom should be the one to cut 'stick figures' out of coloured papers and plasticine for the construction of the digital images that will become a part of a collective digital story they are working on.

In this paper I examine some of the ways in which the participating students in a digital story holiday programme performed subversive acts, such as the example above which will later be contexualised, undermining some of the hegemonic practices of the educational institution/s they attended, and destabilizing dominant social and cultural discourses. These transgressive performances occurred as the children worked in and across art forms and through everyday life practices: as they participated in the 'real world' of the classroom and in the 'fictional worlds' they created for their stories. Acts of dissidence however did not only surface in the children's behaviour but also in that of the researchers and the centre's head-teacher/manager as they each strived to manage the running of the workshop in their own ways.

Conflicting pedagogical and performative ideologies of the key stakeholders' were brought to light resulting in intermittent struggles for and resistance to power and control through a range of unfortunate acts. I apply the word unfortunate here because many of these actions defied the research team's pedagogical aspirations and intentions. Despite these challenges, the participating children not only engaged with the construction of their digital narratives but also extended that enthusiasm through dramatic play centred round the stories they collaboratively created.

In considering the performative behaviours and performances of those involved in the research project, I think it worth articulating some of the deliberations concerning these notions. Parker and Sedgwick identify many divergent meanings and intentions behind the word performative expressed over the last forty years, across a range of discliplines.[2] Two strands constantly referred to are those used by Austin and Butler. Austin defined performative as language applied for the principal purpose of 'doing' something, where the issue of an utterance or statement 'is performing an act'[3]. In her examination of the performance of gender, Butler argues that 'our bodies' are positioned in culture and are consequently influenced and constituted by such. Gender, claims Butler, 'is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*.'[4] Yet these two notions of performativity, along with others, seem to share some common ground, and that is the idea that performative is an 'act' of doing something. Govan, Nicholson and Normington point out that the idea of projecting oneself may be tantamount to 'performance' and 'is fundamental to the concept of performativity'.[5] Garaoin sees performance as something that expands the 'heterogeneous field of cultural work within which the body performs various aspects of production, socially and

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[2] Andrew Parker & Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Introduction to Performativity and Performance", in *Performativity and Performance*, eds. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick, London: Routledge, 1995, pp.1-18.

[3] J. L. Austin, "How To Do Things With Words", in eds. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2nd edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.

[4] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, 2d edition, London: Routledge, 1999, p. 179.

[5] Emma Govan, Helen Nicholson and Katie Normington, *Making a Performance: Devising Histories and Contemporary Practices*, London: Routledge, 2007, p56.

historically constructed behaviours that are learned and reproduced.'[6] Thus the acts of teaching and learning are cultural performances and in the context of this research project and 'educational practice, performance represents the teacher's pedagogy, the students' interaction with that pedagogy, and their mutual involvement in school'.[7] In this paper I discuss the ways in which children interacted with the researchers, teacher, and each other; and the ways in which the teacher-manager interacted with the researchers and students. I highlight how the children developed fictional roles for a story and assumed some of those roles during play. I identify ways in which the students became audiences of each others' play and for their own work in the form of digital stories. Thus the key stakeholders in the research all played a range of roles and in their acts of doing were performative.

Before moving on to examine the performativities of the stakeholders of the Green Town project, I would like to map out the local context, briefly sketching Singapore, its education system, and the aims of the research project the children took part in. Referring back to the work of Butler, it is essential to understand the ways in which the subjects have been 'constituted in time' and 'instituted' in the space that is an out-of-school learning centre in Singapore. Throughout the article I apply the pronouns I and we. As the author of this paper, the opinions expressed are my own. However as one of three researchers in this project, I use 'we' to refer to and acknowledge the collaborative work done on this project and my fellow researchers.

Mapping the Terrain

A multicultural island nation republic that emerged after years of occupation, Singapore has a population of approximately 5 million people that is comprised of Chinese 76.8%, Malays 13.9%, Indians 7.9%, with others 1.4% .[8]

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[6] Charles R. Garaoin, *Performing Pedagogy:Toward an Art of Politics*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1999, p.8.

[7] Charles R. Garaoin, *Performing Pedagogy:Toward an Art of Politics*, p,8.

[8] Singapore Government Metadata Standard, Singapore Census 2000 at URL http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/c2000adr/chap4.pdf

It is considered that much of the present ethnicity stems from its occupation by the British: many Indians were brought in to work in administration while the Chinese, early boat refugees, sailed in to find work and escape hunger, only the Malays were here. The mixed ethnicity of the population resulted in the selection of four national languages when Singapore became a republic: Mandarin, Tamil, Malay (regarded as mother tongues) and English. However since 'English is the dominant language of administration, business and education'[9] and is considered the 'interracial' language in which Singaporeans communicate, great importance is placed on its proficiency. The majority of Singaporeans however speak a local dialect known as Singlish.

Regarding its population as its chief resource, Singapore's government invests vast amounts of money into its education system which focuses intently on economically driven subjects, particularly mathematics, sciences and technology as well as English Language[10]. These four subjects together with Mother Tongue constitute the five core subjects in Singaporean schools. From the first year of schooling, all classes, apart from 'Mother Tongue', are conducted in English. Yet the 2000 Census found that only 23% of Singaporeans speak English at home, a rise of 4.2% from the 1990 Census. The majority of Singaporean's converse at home in their 'Mother Tongue', which for many is actually something other than the 'official languages' of Malay, Tamil or Mandarin (such as Urdu, Hindi, Hokkien or Cantonese). Thus, for many Singaporeans English is their second or third language.

The Singapore education system largely operates as an examination culture[11]. From as early as Primary 4 (9-10 years) students begin a basic form of streaming.

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[9] Dennis Kwek, James Albright, & Anneliese Kramer-Dahl, "Building teachers creative capacities in Singapore's English classrooms: A way of contesting pedagogical instrumentality", *Literacy*, 41, (2007) pp. 71-78, p. 72.
[10] Yin Mee Cheah, "The Examination Culture and Its Impact on Literacy Innovations: The Case of Singapore", *Language and Education*, 12 (3), (1998), pp. 192-209., and Kwek et al., "Building teachers creative capacities in Singapore's English classrooms: A way of contesting pedagogical instrumentality".
[11] Cheah, "The Examination Culture and Its Impact on Literacy Innovations: The Case of Singapore"., and Jeanne M. Wolf & Wendy Bokhorst Heng, "Policies of promise and practices of limit: Singapore's literacy education policy landscape and its impact on one school programme", *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 7(3), 2008, pp. 151-164.

This is formalized at the end of Primary 6 when students take the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) that determines which steam they will enter in secondary school – gifted, express, normal-academic or technical streams. Once in a stream there is little to no movement. Consequently teaching tends to be instructional and didactic rather than student-centred, and enormous pressure is placed on young people's academic success by parents, teachers and institutions. After school tutoring is the norm for countless middle class students while many community centres offer enrichment programmes for those in middle to lower socio-economic groups that encourage a learning culture. These centres may assist children to catch up on school work, organise additional classes and facilitate young people's interactions. This constant pressure on children to learn in and out of school leaves little time for self expression and play and this was at the forefront of my co-researchers' and my thoughts when we began our digital storytelling project[12].

Contextualising the Project

Digital stories are constructed by layering still or moving pictures, with a voiceover and/or soundtrack and/or written text, such as titles, subtitles, captions and credits, using computer software like *Windows Movie Maker*. Concerned that traditional notions of text and literacy (reading and writing) and the pervading examination culture in Singapore had no room for diverse and engaging ways of learning, we sought to provide a space in which youth could assume multiple positions with texts, as readers, writers, critics, and authors, that differed from the normative school model[13] through the use of digital texts. Our research focus stemmed from our belief that English learning could be improved if young people were given the chance to work with a variety of stimulus, subject matter and equipment that they were either familiar with in their everyday practices and/or interested in. As advocates of the New Literacy Studies[14] which have built on ideas of literacy as the ability to read and communicate through multiple form of texts we place great importance on visual, written, oral and aural semiotics and codes, as well as

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[12] Kate Anderson & Prue Wales. Paper in development. Contact authors.

[13] Kate Anderson & Prue Wales. Paper in development. Contact authors.

[14] New London Group, "A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures", *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), (1996), pp. 60-92.

multimodal approaches to meaning-making[15], We hoped that working with digital texts would give young people the chance to be active, rather than passive, participants in their literacy practices. We wanted them to value their multimodal forms of storytelling and recognize connections between their school, home and social lives, by including pursuits that engaged them in their free time such as playing on the computer, music, games, and play[16].

Our interests were in the multiple subjectivities expressed by Singapore youth in their stories of self. We wondered how they articulate their thoughts and feelings; communicate and express who they are to their peers outside the pressures of school. So we sought an informal learning environment. We could provide help and assistance to those who needed or wanted it, and encourage creative ways to express their identities. Our particular interest was 'at risk'[17] youth marginalized within the school system. We wondered how students' digital and multimodal literacies might develop if we provided them with an informal digital learning environment in which to tell stories. Initially we sought to work with teenagers (14-16 years of age) at an after-school 'drop in' centre.[18] This fell through when the institute's administration recommended Green Town, its partner association catering to primary students, as better suited to our project.

Located in one of the older government housing development areas, Green Town arranged activities/classes for working class children needing after-school care and/or affordable additional classes. Green Town initially seemed enthusiastic about accommodating our study, which we needed to get underway quickly due to funding commitments. Offered a place in their holiday programme, Green Town volunteered to provide eight keen children aged 8-10 years old, all from Chinese speaking backgrounds.

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[15] Gunther Kress, *Before Writing: Rethinking the paths to literacy*, London: Routledge, 1997. , and Kate Pahl & Jennifer Rowsell, *Literacy and Education: understanding the new literacy studies in the classroom*, London: Paul Chapman, 2005.

[16] Kate Anderson & Prue Wales. Paper in development. Contact authors.

[17] The terms 'at risk' and 'marginalized' are used to convey those at risk of leaving school, who display at risk behaviours, eg. truancy, bullying, failure, etc., and/or are socially, financially, and/or academically disadvantaged.

[18] This study was a pilot project that we hoped would feed into an ongoing study to examine the ways informal learning platforms could be applied in developing a design for an engaging English curriculum using digital platforms for students in the lower (Normal/Technical.) achieving school streams.

We would be allocated 6 x 2 hours sessions over a three week period. After settling when to proceed, we were a little horrified to be asked to provide the centre with detailed lesson plans and learning objectives. Green Town had assured us that they understood and supported the projects goals of young people freely expressing themselves in an informal out-of-school setting. Now it was beginning to sound like a formal 'school' workshop! Not wanting to make a fuss before we had even entered the site, we agreed to Green Town's conditions and developed what we hoped would be six vibrant creative storytelling sessions.

Permission slips to carry out the research were forwarded to parents through Green Town's administration stating that a range of data would be collected from this small-scale design ethnography. Data included emails to and from Green Town, video tapes of the workshops, fieldnotes, reflective journals, photographs, stories, storyboards and the children's constructed images in addition to their completed digital stories.

Having assured Green Town the participants would 'complete' a digital story by the end of the course, we decided it would be more time effective to divide the students into two collaborative working groups rather than have them work independently. Each group would collectively produce one narrative that could be fictional or based on real life stories. I would begin by running a Drama workshop with simple activities for beginners that would encourage negotiation and collaboration, stir the students' imaginations and generate story ideas that could be completed at home. The next two days would be taken up with editing the story, developing storyboards and creating 8-10 images to convey the narrative. During this time students could collaboratively create artworks with paints, crayons, coloured paper and plasticine, which would be duly photographed as digital images. Chosen images would then be uploaded into the software programme during the fourth session, when they would also plan and rehearse voiceovers and sound effects for their narratives and work on titles and credits. The fifth day would be spent recording the voiceovers and sound-effects, and students could continue to work on transitions. Their stories would be completed and presented to the students, researchers and centre-manager in the final session.

Performances of authority and control at Green Town:

Unearthing some ground rules

Our initial sense that Green Town neither shared our educative values nor understood our project's aims were confirmed almost immediately through the performative behaviours of the students and teachers. We were given two tiny rooms, each branching off the main classroom, which allowed little room for movement: an awkward L-shaped space on route to the toilets and another filled with tables.

Despite being a highly experienced drama educator, the first lesson which took place in the L-shaped room next to the toilets was problematic and chaotic. With no culture of 'doing' drama the students struggled to manage simple pair discussions let alone any role-play. When asked to "Tell your friend about 3 things you like to do," one student picked up a book while another moved away from her partner to check what was happening next door in the main classroom. Every time the participants settled, a student or teacher from the other room walked through to go to the toilet, and any focused activity dissolved. The children managed to construct a 'shared story' during that first session through which sitting in a circle one started a narrative and the story was picked up by the student next to her and then taken over by the next student and so on. This proved successful only in that it provided the stimulus for Group 1's (4 boys) story based on the character of Long John Silver and seeded an idea for Group 2's (3 girls and 1 boy) narrative, a kidnapping soap opera. Wanting the children to play and explore ideas, I was a little concerned when the volume of voices rose, but this resulted in appearances by the head teacher, Michael who would discipline the students on some pretext. By the second day of the workshop it became very clear our expectations of student behaviour differed.Rather than speak to us, Michael disciplined the students.

Fixated on the need for informality for the success of the study, and wanting to build rapport with the children we began each session with new ideas about how to develop a bond and trust but this proved to be a continuous tension. We were heartened when a couple of students developed their stories overnight and brought them in to the next session but we were concerned our objectives of an informal learning environment would

not be met. Michael kept coming into the room to check up on the students and, we suspected, us! In the main classroom next door there was order and control. We could hear children reciting things from the whiteboard. Learning seemed to happen by rote with the teacher loudly chiding students when they said something incorrectly. When we looked through the window in the door, we saw children sitting crossed legged on the floor in neat rows, backs straight. Having moved into the room with the tables we were happy for the children in our workshop to move around at will, talk out of turn, leave the room to get something and socialize with each other as they constructed their artworks! This, we came to realise, was a completely new experience for them. We were thrilled with the work they were creating. The boys constructed a delightful storyboard, the groups enjoyed working collaborating and their stories were lively. Yet, a continual tension existed: we were concerned we were making too much noise and the centre disapproved of our work style. Each time Michael entered the room we would discover a new unspoken rule. This, however, was never voiced to us but rather to the children, leading us to feel that we were the naughty ones.
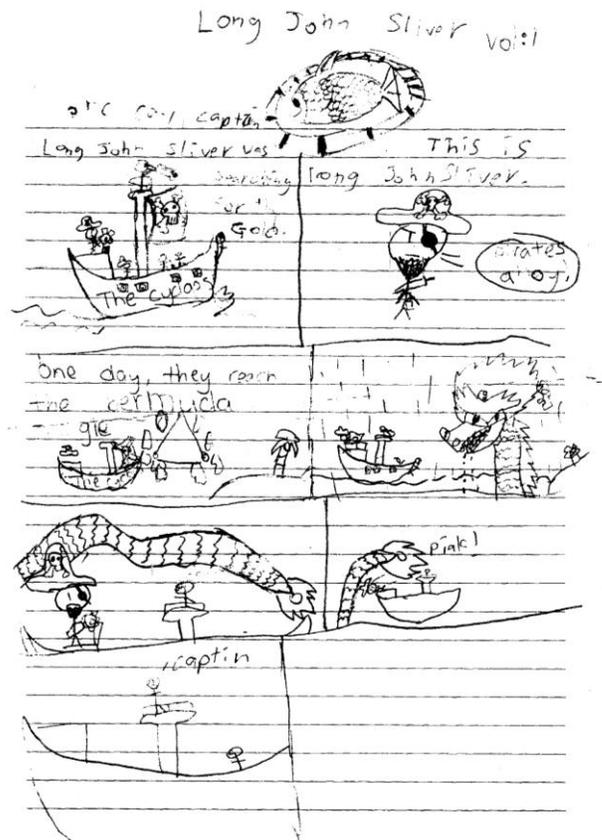
We had been quite happy for students to code switch from English to Mandarin as it suited them. However, on entering the room and overhearing conversation in Mandarin Michael exclaimed, "I say already right? English lesson. All speak English. Understand?" While we had informed the centre that the stories would be carried out in English, it had never been our intension to ban the use of Mother Tongue and/or Singlish.

It was becoming clear however that the centre viewed our 'classes' as formal English lessons. Michael's catch-phrase, "No Mandarin" would be repeated often, so much so the children began to mimic and report on this rule which was continually broken as they developed the images for their stories. They gained delicious pleasure in 'dobbing' each other in.

Hock Boon:	Eh *wait. I did the man wrongly.*
Ailing:	SHHhh…
Qing Feng:	Orh… Mandarin! (shouted, pointing at Hock Boon on other table)
Ailing:	Mandarin!
Xue Li:	Orhh… (pointing her finger at HB)
Bronson:	Ah there! *They got more than us.*
All:	Orh!
Ailing:	Mandarin!
Bronson:	*This girl thing, you do lar.* (whispered to May)
Boys:	Orh… Mandarin!

Extract from Transcript from Day 2

Italics signify words spoken in Mandarin

Behavioural issues continued over the remaining sessions leading to ongoing appearances by Michael, who, seeking quiet, would restore order because the students next door where either partaking their Chinese language classes or sleeping. During these entrances we would be informed of a new rule. Sometimes the children would want to see what was going on outside of the room and run out to say hello to their friends, get a drink, visit the bathroom, or get equipment, such as extra pairs of scissors. Michael would enter dramatically, ordering them to stay in the room.

Michael:	How many scissors you all need?
Xue Li:	Hundred
	(May looks shocked at Xue Li. Xue Li giggles)
May:	*Don't say senseless things* leh.
Ailing:	Er … *two, three*
John:	(walks over to table, takes scissors) Thank you (and walks off)
Ailing:	*Enough already.*
Xue Li:	*Each person use one* lor.
Michael:	OK. No more coming out, ok? … I don't any, allow anybody to go out again hah.
May:	Drink Water?
Michael:	No!
Ailing:	*Take water into here* leh?
Michael:	No!

Extract from Transcript from Day 2

The hostile, angry tone of Michael's voice set us, the researcher's, on edge. The children seemed to be used to this behaviour. They were clearly frightened of Michael and would often wince when he entered the room but some of the children like Ailing would still find ways to subvert his power over them. One afternoon, one of the researchers helped a group, open a tin of sweets. When Michael entered the room he started speaking in English before interestingly falling into Mandarin, demanding, "Now is lesson, *you dare eat sweets? You asked* {name of one of us} *or not*"[19]. One researcher confusedly claimed no remembrance of allowing the students to eat sweets, while the tin opening culprit kept quiet, too intimidated to say anything!

We came to dread Michael's entrances, disliking his authoritative and disciplinarian stance. In his absence we performed as if we were running an informal workshop allowing the children a certain amount of freedom and informality until we got concerned about noisy behaviour. The children had little experience of informality around adults and they enjoyed playing up. We generally allowed this.

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[19] Italics in quotes signify the use of Mandarin.

Yet at times we were aghast to find ourselves manipulating the hegemonic power structures and colluding in Michael's authority by threatening to call him in to restore order. In these circumstances the children inevitably blamed each other.

Researcher 3: I'm going to call, I'm going to call um Michael in.

John: No…don't call

Researcher 3: I'm going to call Michael in. Do you all want to behave?

John: I behave, but these two (*pointing to 2 other boys B & QF*)

Bronson: You lar!

Researcher 3: I send you to Michael ok?

Qing Feng: No…

Researcher 3:   Then sit down please.

Qing Feng: Okay (*Both QF and B move to table*)

John: You see I told you.

Extract from Transcript from Day 3

During Michael's many entrances to restore order he used sarcasm and shame as forms of control and we found this particularly irksome. Places of education can appear to be uncaring systems when they produce feelings of shame and powerlessness, and students lack agency. The power of shame can be debilitating and seriously impact learning.[20]

However, when students resist feelings of guilt and shame they can challenge the system. Guilt (and shame) is logically dependent on the notion of wrongdoing. In resisting, the sense of the moral is perhaps more obvious. The child who does not feel guilty challenges the everyday understandings, the taken-for-granted, the dominant common sense; one challenges the moral order.[21] This we found to be particularly evident in Ailing who often challenged us and Michael. The most telling aspects of Michael's demands for control and order was that he would code switch himself and conduct most of his shaming in Mandarin, so the two Caucasian researchers had no idea what was happening.

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[20] bell hooks Author, : Circus Acts: Performativities of Women who Teach Drama, PhD Thesis, Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 2006.

[21] June Crawford, Susan Kippax, Jenny Onyx & Pam Benton, *Emotion and Gender: Constructing Meaning from Memory*. London: Sage Publications, 1992.

Michael:	Are you working or talking?
Qing Feng:	[Working]
Bronson:	[Talking]
Michael:	So? So finish everything can start talking ah? Cannot keep quiet?
John:	Can
Michael:	*You all want to eat pacifier?*
Qing Feng:	Hah?
Michael:	*You all want to eat pacifier?*
Qing Feng:	*Don't want.*
Michael:	*If I hear your voice again, you will eat pacifier.*

Extract from Transcript from Day 3

We found the idea of children being forced to 'eat pacifier' even symbolically completely grotesque, far more so than the children's dinner menus that were invented for the pirate's vessel which I discuss later. We could not help but wonder if Michael did carry out his threat and make them 'eat' pacifier what that might be. Physical punishment? Having their mouths washed with soap and water? These kinds of threats horrified us.

Flouting the system: Resistence and transgression through play

The children found creative ways to manipulate, satirize, and resist the centre's rules, Michael's demands and our un/desired 'authority'. This was particularly apparent during the construction of the artworks – plasticine and collage on paper – for the digital images. The children subversively made noise by banging on the tables as they moulded and shaped the plasticine. They ran out of the room on pretexts despite Michael's wrath. They even mimicked and made fun of Michael, usually after he left the room, but sometimes openly, "Teacher, you failed your English."

And they found ways to push boundaries with us: playing with words, sounds and puns around our names and instructions, ignoring us, openly defying us and enacting scenes with the plasticine objects they were making that were bawdy, rude and frequently dealt with taboo subjects. It was not until well after the project finished and we were analysing the video-taped data however, that we realised we were observing some extraordinary children's projected play[22].

In his research into Child Drama, Peter Slade[23] identified two distinct forms of play – personal and projected. Personal play can be recognised through physical movement and characterisation. It involves the child's whole body. Projected play on the other hand involves the use of artefacts such as toys and art works. Here the child thoroughly engages in the fiction of the play in the mind but not necessarily through the entire body. The children at Green Town used the artefacts they were constructing to developed and extend the narratives they were creating dramatically through play.

Often impatient and irritated because we believed our strict schedule allowed little time for experimentation, play and socialisation, we came to realise that the collaborative nature of the workshop and the children's growing impression of our 'low status' (clearly we were not figure of authority) permitted them to do just that – experiment, socialise and play with issues that were culturally considered taboo. These included play around death, sex, bodily functions and violence, most of which did not make their ways into their digital stories, becoming instead embodied performative responses to the fictional representations they were constructing. Group 2's story was about a girl who gets kidnapped shortly after her parents die in a car crash. As the children developed the characters of the parents, one of the girls, Ailing, spent considerable time and pleasure constructing two plasticine coffins big enough to house the bodies while her friends constructed the parents who die during the story.

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[22] Peter Slade, *Child Drama*, 11th ed., London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980.
[23] Peter Slade, *Child Drama*.

As the coffins and parents were being constructed the boys in group on overhearing what the girls were doing decided to make some hell money for the characters to support them when they reached the underworld.

Death is something that is not referred to or spoken about casually by many Chinese in Singapore for fear of bad luck and the children relished exploring the gory details of death, burial, and ghosts. During the ghost month, which occurs each year, the gates of hell open and hungry ghosts walk among the living. Buddhists and Taoists burn paper money called hell notes along with paper images or effigies of houses, household items and maids that the ghosts can use in the underworld. This helps appease them and prevent haunting. It is taken very seriously and I often see fires burning in pots outside houses and apartment buildings during the ghost month.

Qing Feng:	Hundred dollar, hundred dollar (speaking to XL)
Xue Li:	There, there, there.
Bronson:	*Give us* hundred dollars *of hell notes*. **<u>NOW</u>**.
Mark:	*Hell notes* is not real you know.
Bronson:	So we can offer to the spirits, then off- then the spirits will give us good luck what right?
John:	Is there such good luck?
Bronson:	Yes, there is such a thing as good luck. I believe in luck.

Hell notes were also needed for characters in the boys' story. In their tale Captain Long John Silver and his crew are attacked by a sea dragon while searching for treasure in the Bermuda Triangle. The crew all die at sea leaving Captain Silver the only survivor. Number four in Hokkien sounds like the word 'see' in English. It is also an unlucky number and considered a taboo word because it sounds like death when spoken in Hokkien and Mandarin. If the number four is used out of context it is often regarded as sinful, a curse. The boys took great delight in some word play.

Hock Boon: Eh don't see! See see lah! Pull your eyes out ah!

Mark: See see lor.

Hock Boon: I never see-see

Qing Feng: I see-see eh. I go and see the sea eh. There!

Bronson: You are very rude eh!

Bronson wasn't the only one to find this rude. A shocked Ailing, one of the most vocal girls, was horrified and spent some time ticking the boys off for their subversive play with the number four. However she was quite happy to put the plasticine parents in their coffins and take a photograph of them outside the family home. Ailing and her friend , May were really quite shaken though when they realized they needed these 'dead' characters to be photographed 'alive' for an earlier scene in the story. May held the tiny coffins up to her mouth and nervously addressed the characters saying, "I'm so sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry" before taking them out of their coffins. Apologising for interrupting their rests in death, May sought their forgiveness, begging them not to haunt her! Later on however she was disparaging about how the parents and other characters in the story, live ones in fact, had emerged from the grave as she organized them against the backdrop for a photo-shoot of the family outside the home.

May: *The father. The daughter here. He crawl out from the grave yard. Mother too fat already, cannot crawl out. The daughter crawl out. Uncle crawl out from the graveyard already. I haven't put finish yet! Uncle bent already!*

Extract from Transcript from Day 3
(dialogue spoken in Mandarin)

As one group worked with coffins and kidnappers, the other group modelled ships, pirates and sea dragons. They also moved into projected play with their constructed images and objects. Great enjoyment was had when the tentacles of the sea-monster transformed into male genitals which were placed dangling off the upper thighs of some of the boys.

And as they worked on the destruction of the pirates' ship by 'symbolically' setting it alight with coloured papers, the boys assumed the roles of crew members moving in and out of the real world as they shifted from being narrators to characters in the story.

John:	Then he said, "Ah Captain! He crow is on fire. Help!"
Bronson:	The bird's nest is on fire
Qing Feng:	Eeeeeeee!
Bronson:	Then that "Captain I'm on fire, my butt is on fire, my underwear is on fire."

Extract from Transcript from Day 3

As the boys could not all work on the computer at the same time and became bored watching each other they began to organise the pirate ship's provisions. They became 'ship's chefs' who developed some interesting and grotesque menus.

Mark:	It's dangerous!
Bronson:	You had the burger!
	Mark hands over his shaped plasticine to Bronson
Bronson:	What's this?
Mark:	Shark
Bronson:	Ooooh it's just a shark
Mark:	Kill it
	Bronson makes shark killing noises
Bronson:	Yeah, you're dead! Sorry shark. Today's menu will be grilled shark sandwiches

As their cooking drama developed the ingredients became more and more fantastic and carnivalesque. The meals included dragon meat, dog heart and human meat. The boys made a toilet bowl and faeces found its way on the menu in a range of guises.

Qing Feng:	What's this?
Mark:	The vegetable's alive! Take that, vegetable! (pokes the 'vegetable' with scissors)
Qing Feng:	Nah! (throws some plasticine to Mark)
Bronson:	Here's the poo
Mark:	Nose pegs! (he laughs, takes a strip of plasticine and places it on his nose bridge)
Bronson:	Nose Pegs (he uses scissors as a nose-peg instead)
Mark:	Who need some vegetables?
John:	Chicken Nugget
Mark:	Grilled and roasted poo on the pie.

While none of these enactments made it into the final narratives, it became clear the children were creatively engaging with their narratives in a similar ways to how they are said to respond to picture books. Mallan states, "The verbal and visual codes of pictures books necessitate a widening of the application of the performative in order to see how visuals similarly encode and perform the narrative"[24]. I believe that in constructing their own visual codes, the children experimented with the performative aspects of their stories on a range of levels. They created their own picture books albeit in digital form, narrating their own stories with images and sound effects of their own making. In addition the children explored scenes outside of their immediate narratives of:

- pirates perishing when their ship is attacked by a sea dragon while searching for treasure in the Bermuda Triangle; and
- a girl being kidnapped and ransomed after the death of her parents, but ultimately rescued and her kidnapper jailed

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[24] Kerry M. Mallen, "Picture Books as Performative Texts: or how to do things with words and pictures", Explorations into Children's Literature, 12(2), (2002) 27-37, p.27.

These external scenes such as the pirate ship's cuisine, the preparation of the dead, funerals, and a burning ship gave the children an opportunity to investigate and consider a range of subjectivities considered taboo in structured learning environments. Yet, these kinds of explorations would not seem out of place in an Australian schoolyard or playground. Unfortunately, Singaporean children are not allocated a great deal of time to play and thus little time for the exploration of social and cultural issues. Certainly there were "transgressive, excessive moments" during the process of creating and constructing the digital stories that pushed our comfort zones and exceeded "teacherly, adult notions of appropriateness"[25] However, we felt that the students had learned an enormous amount about creating their own stories, expressing their ideas through vision, sound and the written word, using digital platforms and working collaboratively. We found that despite having no culture of 'doing drama' students could create their own imaginative, dramatic worlds in play.

Enormous pleasure and much laughter were had by the children in watching their stories over and over again during the final showing. Both students and researchers were delighted with the digital products created yet the same could not be said for Michael who watched the stories and barely said a word. Nicholson says that:

> Pedagogies designed to encourage interactivity and collaboration have been seen to be in direct opposition to authoritarian and didactic approaches to learning and, as a collaborative form, drama has been particularly well placed to contribute to such an educational project.[26]

We found this to be true also of the cross arts environment we created for the children. Unfortunately, the performativity of the personnel at Green Town demonstrated that they valued authoritarian and didactic approaches to learning. Another discovery we made was that the children had not volunteered to come to the digital workshop as we had requested rather Green Town had volunteered them.

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[25] Donna J. Grace & Joseph Tobin, "Pleasure, Creativity, and the Carnivalesque in Children's Video Production" in The Arts In Children's Lives, eds. L. Bresler and C.M. Thompson, 2002, pp. 195-214, p.198
[26] Helen Nicholson, *Applied Drama: the gift of theatre*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan ,2005, p.38.

They had begun the programme feeling angry and hard done by. This paper began with children expressing their desire to quit the project – which is not surprising considering they didn't want to participate in it in the first place. However after analyzing the transcriptions of the workshops it was discovered that every time a child expressed the desire to quit they had been just been chastised for behavioural issues. I can only surmise that the children gained control and felt powerful in punishing 'us' the representatives of authority and in resisting the hegemonic structures that made them feel powerless by telling us at that moment they would rather not be there. As Goffman states:

> It should be understood that the cynic …may obtain unprofessional
> pleasure from his masquerade, experiencing a kind of gleeful
> spiritual aggression from the fact that he can toy at will with
> something his audience must take seriously.[27]

Cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha suggests that 'it is in the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated'[28]. Our entrée into Green Town disrupted the dominating culture and brought two diverse worlds together. The dominating formal pedagogical world of lesson plans and rote learning was interrupted by a world of informal, unstructured, unpredictable and adaptable learning practices; the structured authoritarian crossed paths with the moderate and indulgent; and unimaginative order was confronted by chaotic creativity. As the students, researchers and teachers occupied these two diverse worlds they were able to create what Bhabha refers to as a 'Third Space' in which the dominant culture could be temporally subverted and its structural systems of power and control renegotiated[29]. This exploration into liminality presented a space from which to examine ways in which the hegemonic practices of the institution oppressed the key stakeholders, record how they resisted them, and explore ways to move forward and beyond opening new possibilities of signification.

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[27] Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959, p. 59.
[28] Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994, p.2.
[29] Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*.