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The struggles of everyday life:

How children view and engage with advertising in mobile games

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Abstract

Digital and mobile games are an important part of many children's daily media usage, and are used by children for, among other things, entertainment and relaxation purposes. Mobile games are commonly 'free-to-play' and have revenue models based on in-app purchases and advertising. These revenue models affect the content and structure of mobile games, and, consequently, also the gaming experiences. Drawing on group interviews with nine- and 12-year-old children, this article analyses how children view and engage with advertising in mobile games, and what consequences in-game advertising have for children's game experiences. The results show that children's engagement with in-game advertising takes the form of a struggle, and that children both resist and resign themselves to the advertising strategies. Advertising brings about negative experiences of deception, enforcement and confrontation, and interrupts moments of enjoyment, achievement and immersion during game play. These results suggest that playing advertising-based free-to-play mobile games is a demanding environment for children.

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Keywords

Digital games, mobile games, free-to-play games, in-game advertising, children, game experiences, tactics

Introduction

Playing digital games is the most common activity that children engage in online, together with watching video clips and using the internet for schoolwork (Findahl, 2014: 45–49; Aarsand, 2013: 121; Ólafsson, et al., 2014: 25). With the growing use of mobile devices, mobile games, such as *Hay Day*, *Clash of Clans* and *Candy Crush Saga*, have become popular among children (Ofcom, 2016: 59–61; Swedish Media Council, 2015: 44–46). Many mobile game apps are so-called 'free-to-play' and use revenue models based on advertising and in-app purchases (Nieborg, 2016), thus adapting to the current 'culture of free content' on the internet (Van Dijck, 2013: 40, 169). The possibility of using free content on the internet, for instance downloading mobile games without payment, is attractive for children (Nairn, 2008: 239), as it can give a sense of freedom and control. Among European nine- to 16-year-olds, 23% of children report that they download free apps on a daily basis, while only 3% report that they purchase apps daily (Mascheroni and Ólafsson, 2013: 18).

However, the use of free apps also results in a highly commercial environment surrounding children's mobile game play, and children's gaming activities take place to a large extent within an attention economy (Davenport and Beck, 2001), where advertisers with various strategies seek to capture the attention of users. The widespread use of mobile games among children and the commercial nature of many games prompt the question of what it is like for children to navigate the commercial game app ecology.

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Existing research on children, advertising and digital games deals primarily with so-called 'advergames', and are mostly quantitative and experimental studies, focusing on advertising effects and children's advertising literacy (e.g. Harris et al., 2012; Van Reijmersdal et al., 2012; Verhellen et al., 2014). Children's engagement with in-game advertising – here defined as 'explicit advertisements, such as banners, pop-ups, and streaming video-clip advertisements' (Tran and Strutton, 2013: 457) – has received substantially less attention. Existing studies deal with computer-based digital games, and have found that nine- and 11-year-old children have negative views of advertising as it interrupts their gaming activities (Martínez et al., 2013: 112–113; Marti-Pellón and Saunders-Uchoa-Craveiro, 2015; see also Saunders-Uchoa-Craveiro and Araújo Cysne Rios, 2013). Children describe how they avoid watching advertisements that appear in online games by, for instance, looking at another part of the computer screen or going away from the computer for a moment (Martínez et al., 2013: 113). Saunders-Uchoa-Craveiro and Araújo Cysne Rios (2013: 506–507) also show how advertising in online games can be used as a source of information by children. Concerning internet advertising more generally, children have also reported on the use of advertising as entertainment (Martínez et al., 2013).

Previous studies have also found that children hold negative views and engage in avoidance practices in relation to advertising in other media, such as television (Andersen, 2007: 226; Bartholomew and O'Donohoe, 2003; Buckingham, 1993). Buckingham (1993: 247, 258) shows, for instance, how seven- to 12-year-old children during the ad break could switch channel, go to the toilet or grab something to eat. In addition to these negative views, studies have shown how children also use television advertising as a source of entertainment and information (Andersen, 2007; Bartholomew and O'Donohoe, 2003; Buckingham, 1993; Lawlor, 2009).

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To get a better understanding of children's engagement with advertising in the digital media landscape, the present study investigates how children view and engage with in-game advertising on touchscreen mobile devices, and the consequences of advertising for children's game experiences. Drawing on group interviews with Swedish nine- and 12-year-old children, the present article focuses specifically on children's descriptions of how they try to adapt the commercial games space to their own interests and needs (De Certeau, 1984: xiv), and how they engage *tactically* as well as *non-tactically* with advertising. This analysis sheds light on what it is like for children to navigate the commercial app ecology, and it also enables reflections on children's possibilities for agency in relation to advertising-based mobile games. What the results reveal about children's agency in this context will be elaborated in the discussion part of this article.

Theoretical framework

This section outlines a conceptual framework for analysing children's engagement with advertising in mobile games. The framework takes as its point of departure De Certeau's (1984) theory on practices of everyday life and in particular the concept of *tactics*. To further understand children's views and engagement with advertising and how it affects children's game experiences, this section also discusses theoretical perspectives on digital game experiences.

Tactical and non-tactical engagement

Children's mobile game play takes place within textual structures created by powerful commercial interests. One part of this structure is the revenue model which is visualized

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through advertising messages that appear in the games. Using De Certeau (1984) to theorize the commercial game space, in-game advertising can be understood as *strategies* which the user must relate to and cannot alter. A strategies are defined based on its access to a *proper place*, where relations with defined targets can be established:

I call a 'strategy' the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an 'environment'. A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *proper (propre)* and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, 'clientèles', 'targets', or 'objects' of research). Political, economic, and scientific rationality has been constructed on this strategic model. (De Certeau, 1984: xix)

In the context of this article, advertisers can be understood as the subjects of 'will and power' (De Certeau, 1984: xix) that have the power to generate relations with children through advertising messages in the games (their proper place). In contrast to this, children do not have the same possibility to produce visibility and establish relations with an 'exterior distinct from it' (De Certeau, 1984: xix) within the commercial structure of the game, and they have limited possibilities for deciding when and how advertisements appear. However, children seek in different ways to adapt the commercial game space to their own interests and purposes (De Certeau, 1984: xx, xiv). Individuals in their everyday practices try to create their own spaces within the web of strategies by introducing *differences* which open up 'a gap of varying proportions' (De Certeau, 1984: 32) between the individual and the strategy. These differences are conceptualized as *tactics*. De Certeau (1984: xx, 36–38) understands everyday life as a site of struggle between strategies and tactics, between those in power and those lacking economic power and access to a proper place.

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While De Certeau (1984: 39–40) argues that everyday practices are tactical in nature, one must also be open to the possibility that practices also may comprise moments of *similarity*, when users do not actively create difference with respect to the strategies. These practices can be conceptualized as *non-tactics*. Discussing risks and opportunities online, Sonia Livingstone touches upon the idea that children's everyday online practices involve both moments of opposition and independence as well as moments when children give in to the structural pressures put on them:

[We] shall explore how children exert agency online, but this will also show that they do so in the context of structures set by others – usually powerful adults. ... Children creatively resist some adult pressures but at the same time they succumb to others – commercial pressures that entice and entertain, normative pressures that reward certain kinds of behavior (e.g. exam revision) over others (e.g. file sharing). (Livingstone, 2009: 32)

In this quote, Livingstone proposes that children 'creatively resist' but also sometimes 'succumb' to adults' pressures online, including commercial interests. Creative resistance can be understood as a form of tactical engagement, while 'succumbing' to adult pressures can be seen as non-tactical engagement. However, tactical engagement should not be understood solely as practices where users directly oppose and resist the strategies, but also include practices where users in a less confrontational way encroach on and appropriate the strategies (De Certeau, 1984: xxi). The analysis, hence, focuses on children's descriptions of how they engage tactically with in-game advertising, that is, how they in various ways actively resist and make transformations within the commercial structure. It also focuses on how children engage non-tactically with in-game advertising, namely, how they do not actively oppose or make transformations, but how they succumb to the commercial pressures put on them in free-to-play mobile games.

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Digital game experiences

As Kallio et al. (2011: 327) state, digital gaming is 'a multifaceted social and cultural phenomenon that can be understood, practiced, and used in various ways'. Playing games can evoke several different experiences. Poels et al. (2012: 122–123) categorize game experiences into *enjoyment, flow, immersion, suspense, competence* and *control*. Among these, the experience of immersion has been much discussed within game studies. Immersion is an experience that players commonly seek from games (Cairns et al., 2014: 339), and denotes the feeling of 'being drawn into a game world', and is related to other positive experiences such as enjoyment and fun (Poels et al., 2012: 118).

Mobile games have been thought of as less immersive than other digital games and understood as a shorter and more superficial experience (Hjorth and Richardson, 2014: 46). However, Hjorth and Richardson (2014: 69–70) question this idea and propose that we should think of mobile game play as 'ambient', namely, something that is incorporated into the activities of everyday life, and that crosses the boundary between online and offline. The integration of play into daily routines does not necessarily imply less investment by people in mobile gaming, and game play on capacitive and motion-sensing touchscreens can give the player an immersive game experience (Hjorth and Richardson, 2014: 4, 52–53). Similarly, Juul (2010: 5–10) argues that 'casual games' (such as mobile games) that are easy to learn and integrate in everyday life do not automatically imply less dedication and time investment compared to 'hardcore video games', and writes that: 'a casual game is sufficiently flexible to be played with a hardcore time commitment, but a hardcore game is too inflexible to be played with a casual time commitment' (p. 10).

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The notion of 'ambient play' is closely related to embodiment. Hjorth and Richardson propose that ambient play is 'contingent and embodied; in a phenomenological sense, it becomes an aspect of our *soma*, an ambience in-the-hand' (2014: 160). Mobile media and mobile games are integrated with 'routine bodily practices' (Beer, 2012: 361), and 'co-opted into how we negotiate and manage our corporeal being-in-the-world' (Hjorth and Richardson, 2014: 160). The specificity of embodiment in relation to mobile games also relates to the haptic intimacy and the 'up close' nature of the touchscreen, and the connection between what is seen on the screen and the movement of the hand (Richardson, 2011: 424–426).

In addition to the positive experiences, game play can also involve negative dimensions. While reaching a particular goal gives a positive sense of competence, not reaching the goals result in negative feelings such as anger and frustration (Poels et al., 2012: 123). Johnson (2015) states that frustration is an experience that emerges when the game does not work as wanted and expected, and relates this negative feeling to the concept of agency: 'Distinct from related sensations such as difficulty, frustration is perhaps best characterized as when the agency of the player becomes obstructed' (p. 593). The player starts to experience a sense of losing control when the game does not represent the actions as intended by the player. In these situations the game is experienced as a 'disobedient machine' (Johnson, 2015: 596), and the relationship between the game and the user feels unsatisfactory and confrontational.

Method

This article draws on group interviews with nine- and 12-year-old children conducted in 2015, focusing on the broader topic of advertising on the internet. In total, 12 group interviews were carried out with 46 children (25 girls and 21 boys). The main reason for including both nine-

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and 12-year-old children was to get variation among research participants, but also to be able to see possible differences in experiences between younger and older children. It was also considered important to include children in age groups that are generally considered to be able to distinguish between advertising and other media content (Gunter et al., 2014: 4–5), at least well-defined advertisements, as this makes it easier to talk about advertising with children.

The children were recruited from two different schools in two small towns in the south of Sweden, which had students from mixed socio-economic backgrounds. Sweden, together with other North European countries, has a high frequency of internet usage in the adult population, compared to countries in the south of Europe (Eurostat, 2017). Comparative statistics on children's internet usage is more difficult to find. However, older data from the EU Kids Online project (von Feilitzen et al., 2011) similarly shows that Swedish children are among the most frequent users of the internet in Europe. This could imply that interviewing Swedish children about advertising on the internet results in more elaborate stories on encounters with advertising, as they are more experienced internet users, than would have been the case if interviewing children in other countries.

The recruitment process started with contacting the schools' principals, and after gaining their permission, the teachers for the third and sixth grade classes were informed about the project and asked if they wanted their classes to participate. The children were then invited to join the study and were given an informed consent sheet to take home to their parents. All children that received permission to participate could be included in the study. Only a few children declined participation or were not given their parents' consent to participate in the group interviews. The groups were put together with guidance from the teachers to ensure

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there were no prior conflicts between the children. There was a mix of same-sex and mixed-gender groups, and most groups consisted of four participants.

The interview method was considered relevant due to its usefulness for gaining insight into people's experiences of everyday life and their perspectives and interpretations of these experiences (Freeman and Mathison, 2009: 88; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 24). The group interview method was considered suitable as interaction with peers can help children talk about their experiences, and thus aids in eliciting information (Freeman and Mathison, 2009: 104–105; Lewis, 1992: 414–417). However, group interviews also have potential disadvantages in this context; they may produce data that favours ad scepticism, as children might want to present themselves as critical individuals to their peers and the researcher (Buckingham, 2000: 152–154), and as peer pressure can affect the answers (Freeman and Mathison, 2009: 104–105; Gibson, 2012: 152). However, these potential disadvantages were not noticeable in the interviews.

The children were ensured anonymity before the interviews, and it was emphasized that their participation was entirely voluntary. The interviews, which on average lasted for about one hour, started with a general discussion on what they liked to do on the internet when they could choose freely. Thereafter, concrete and open-ended questions were asked which were aimed at eliciting information about their experiences of advertising, such as if they had noticed adverts when using the internet, and if they remembered any particular advert they had seen. The descriptions were rich and detailed, and advertising in mobile games, and how advertising affects their game play, emerged as one important dimension of children's experiences of advertising on the internet. The interviews and a questionnaire the children

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filled in after the interviews showed that free-to-play digital games in general, and mobile games in particular, were popular among the children, and that they predominantly used mobile devices (mainly the iPad) to access the internet. The children spent, on average, two hours on the internet on a regular weekday after school, which is similar to other nine- and 12-year-olds (Swedish Media Council, 2015: 27).

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and indications of laughter and significant tones of voice were included in the transcripts (Schröder et al., 2003: 167). The analysis focused initially on identifying the various experiences of in-game advertising that children brought up during the interviews, the differences and similarities between the groups, between gender and age, and how these experiences were jointly constructed by the children. The children described their experiences mainly in the form of 'short stories' (Bazeley, 2013: 113–114) that centred on different encounters with various forms of advertising. These short stories involved descriptions of their practices with respect to advertisements, and what they thought and felt about these encounters in connection with their gaming activities. The analysis centred on these short stories and coded the various attitudes, feelings and practices described by the children, and the language used to express these experiences (Bazeley, 2013: 169–170). Tactical engagement was identified by analysing how children's practices produced differences in relation to advertising, namely, how the aims of advertising (such as watching and clicking/pressing advertisements) were opposed in different ways. Non-tactical engagement was identified by analysing how children did not actively create difference with regard to the intent of advertising, such as children's descriptions of how they watched and pressed advertisements, or used them as a source of information.

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Results

When discussing their experiences of advertising on the internet, the children described advertising in mobile games as particularly annoying, tiresome and hard to cope with. They expressed how advertisements appear frequently and in an unpredictable manner, and described in detail how many seconds and minutes they missed of game play. One nine-year-old girl said that just by entering the game *My Boo*, she was 'bombarded with advertisements'. Comparisons were made with other online spaces where advertising appears more predictably: 'On YouTube it is good that it [advertising] just comes once, at the beginning. In games it comes at any time' (boy, nine years old). One 12-year-old girl reflected on the whole genre of free-to-play games and the large amounts of advertising: 'Almost all free games are like this, you get them for free, you can play them but there appear adverts like every tenth second.' However, the children nevertheless stated how they wanted to play free-to-play games, as they did not want to, or were unable, to purchase game apps.

The results section is structured around children's different forms of engagement with advertising in mobile games. The section initially discusses how children's engagement with advertising takes the form of a struggle. Thereafter, the analysis focuses on how children produce difference through avoidance tactics. Following this, the section discusses how children engage non-tactically with in-game advertising and how they experience a sense of resignation. Finally, the section discusses how children engage tactically with advertising through critique and laughter. The consequences of advertising on children's game experiences are discussed throughout the section.

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The (haptic) struggle of everyday life

In the group interviews the children expressed how they found it difficult to adapt the game space to their own interests and purposes. Children in both age groups described how they engaged in involuntary haptic interaction with advertisements on the touchscreen, in other words, they involuntarily touched advertisements as a result of the advertisements' design and sudden appearance in the games. This haptic interaction sometimes took the form of a tiresome struggle, where children moved back and forth between involuntary non-tactical engagement (pressing advertisements) and tactical engagement (tapping their way back to the game).

This struggle involved situations where children accidentally pressed advertisements that appeared suddenly and unpredictably when they were about to touch the screen to perform some form of activity, such as starting the game, driving, or feeding an animal. Due to this, the children came out of the game app and into App Store, Google Play, or the web browser Safari, and they had to tap their way back to the game. Some children thought these strategies were intentionally designed to lure them:

Anna: They usually try to lure people, that is, the games, to touch the adverts. If you enter an app it can take up to three seconds and then an advert appears and you press it and enter App Store ...

Sara: Yes, sometimes it [the advertisement] just comes up...

Anna: Yes.

Sara: ... without you knowing it.

Anna: So when you are about to press 'play' you accidentally touch the advert instead.

Sara: It's really annoying.

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In the quote, the 12-year-old girls express how they experience this situation as frustrating, and how their goal-directed activities in the games are obstructed by advertisements that appear suddenly. These 'surprise-based' strategies can be said to impede the users' possibilities to avoid commercial messages, and make the user act in line with the intention of the strategies, namely to press the adverts.

According to the children, advertisements did not only interrupt their game play and lead them away from their gaming activities, but sometimes also changed the course of events in the games. Due to unanticipated adverts that blocked children's abilities to play, or adverts that suddenly disappear, children's goal-directed activities had unexpected and undesired outcomes. Children described how they died in the games, got lower scores, or had to replay the games to catch up with previously achieved scores. In this conversation, three nine-year-old girls describe how they die in a game due to appearing adverts:

Johanna: When I play *Subway Surfers*, I press the screen to start and when it has started an advert appears, and then you usually die.

Yasmin: You get caught by the police.

Interviewer: You get caught by the police?

Yasmin: Yes because you stand and spray on the trains ...

Emilia: ... and you are not allowed to do that, so they catch you ... but when adverts appear, then you want to go, but you cannot do that so you press the 'X' but then you have already been caught by the police.

The children also described how moments of challenge-based immersion (Ermi and Mäyrä, 2005) were interrupted by adverts that lead to lower scores in the game:

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Amir: On the iPad, when I press a game and when I have played a few minutes there usually appear adverts, and sometimes it comes so fast that you accidentally press it. ...

Interviewer: What do you think when that happens?

Amir: That it's very tiresome, because you are so focused on the game, and then an advert appears.

Marcus: That's why my record on *Flappy Bird* got much lower. ... When I was on 94 an advert appeared [laughter].

In the quote, the 12-year-old boy Amir says 'it's very tiresome, because you are so focused on the game'. This indicates that interrupted immersion is a highly negative experience for the boy. A nine-year-old girl also expressed how advertisements that interrupt immersion are particularly bothersome: 'If you are absorbed in something, it [advertising] can really bother you.' The quote above also shows how children's achievement and the pleasure of succeeding and winning were hindered in the games by appearing adverts, thus interrupting important motivations for game play (Hamlen, 2011, 2013: 112; Olson, 2010: 180–181).

When children lose or get lower scores due to appearing adverts it can also be argued that children's agency is obstructed in the games, something which commonly leads to frustration (Johnson, 2015). No gender or age differences could be seen in the present study as both boys and girls in both age groups mentioned how they were annoyed by adverts that impeded their achievement in mobile games.

The children also expressed how they struggled with advertisements which hindered their avoidance tactics. According to the children, the adverts' close buttons were often so small that they accidentally pressed the adverts instead. One nine-year-old girl described the close button as 'smaller than a finger – it's like a breadcrumb'. In the following quote, two nine-year-old girls explain what happens when they try to click away adverts:

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Maria: When I play games, there appear squares in the middle of everything when you press 'play' or when you just press the game. It is really annoying because sometimes there is a very small 'X', that you have to hit precisely to get it away, and then you accidentally press one millimetre on the side and you enter App Store. Yes, so there is chaos and you have to press 'home' and go back into the game again. And so it happens again and again, all the time. It's pretty tiresome.

Yasmin: Yes, the same happens to me.

Maria: Mmm.

Yasmin: The X button is so tiny [shows how small it is with her fingers] and you have to press right in the middle of it, and if you don't, you enter App Store.

In the quote, Maria describes how her haptic struggle with advertisements results in 'chaos', which constantly leads her away from the place where she wants to be, namely, the game. De Certeau speaks of tactics and strategies as the 'everyday art of war' (De Certeau, 1984: 39). In the quote, Maria reveals how 'you have to hit it [the close button] precisely', reflecting a sense of conflict between her and the strategy. Other children spoke about their struggle with tiny close buttons in even more explicit warlike terms, something which can also be understood as part of a gaming rhetoric: 'It's bad. You have to be able to defeat the advertisements and play [laughter]. It's fighting spirit' (boy, nine years old).

The children also described how dysfunctional close buttons impeded their avoidance tactics, as told by this nine-year-old girl:

Malin: Sometimes when I play, adverts appear that cover the whole [screen], and then you press the 'X' but it does not work anyway, because sometimes it happens that it isn't an 'X', you can't touch it, it comes on the outside.

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Interviewer: You accidentally press on the outside, why?

Malin: Yes, even though you press the 'X'. It makes you touch outside it.

In the quote we can see Malin feels the strategy deliberately intends to lure her. Another girl (12 years old) revealed a similar experience of being enticed:

Sometimes they do such ugly tricks. That in the middle of the game adverts appear that you want to click away, but there is a cross that is a fake cross, and when you press it you enter the advert. And then there is a tiny cross that you can't see, which is the one that actually takes it down [laughter].

Hjorth and Richardson (2014: 52–53) argue that the intimate haptic engagement with the touchscreen during game play can result in an experience of pleasurable immersion. From the children's descriptions it becomes evident that haptic interaction with the touchscreen can also break immersion, and that the intimate relationship with the touchscreen can convert into an adversarial relationship. Hjorth and Richardson (2014: 160) speak of the haptic intimacy of mobile game play as 'ambience in-the-hand'. Advertising in mobile games can, in contrast to this, be said to introduce a moment of deception into children's gaming activities, and, instead, gives a sense of 'deception in-the-hand'.

Tactical engagement with advertising through avoidance

In the interviews, the children also described how they were able to evade advertisements that they felt interfered with their gaming activities. By performing avoidance tactics the children produced a distance and difference with respect to the strategies, as they opposed one central purpose of advertising; to gain and keep the media users' attention (Li and

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Leckenby, 2012: 205). These avoidance tactics were described in relation to the abundance of advertising in mobile games, and also with regard to advertising that put the user in forced exposure mode (Edwards et al., 2002). The children, for instance, revealed how they deleted games that had too much advertising. One nine-year-old girl said: 'I have had games where adverts appear all [emphasis] the time, and then I just delete them.' One 12-year-old boy described how turning off the internet connection blocked adverts: 'If the internet is not needed to use it [the game], I usually turn off the Wi-Fi. Then it [adverts] doesn't come out.' Drinking a glass of water was an option for one 12-year-old girl: 'I ignore them [adverts] and go and drink a glass of water instead. It feels much better.'

Avoidance tactics were also described in regard to advertising strategies within mobile games that encourage children to press a button and thereby allow advertisements to be shown on the screen. In exchange for this, the player receives an award that has value and creates new opportunities in the games, such as game currency, more energy, and the possibility to advance to a higher level and to get extra chances or extra lives. Some children perceived this as a voluntary 'opportunity' to gain advantages in the games while others saw this as an involuntary 'must' that they had to do to be able to play. When discussing this advertising strategy, some children revealed how they pressed the button and then avoided watching the advertisement. One nine-year-old girl said:

Maja: I just press the advertisement ... and I don't watch. I just look, 'Okay, it's one minute', and then I do something else during this minute.

Interviewer: What do you do then, for example?

Maja: Maybe read a book, a page in a book.

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In the quote, Maja describes how engaging in other offline media usage is used as an avoidance tactic. Other ways to avoid advertising included putting away the telephone or tablet, going to the toilet, social interaction (such as talking with siblings), or turning off the iPad.

While some of these avoidance tactics involved bodily movement in the offline space, other tactics were haptic-based avoidance tactics performed within the virtual space, as described by this nine-year-old girl:

Alicia: I don't put away the telephone [laughter], but I maybe go out from the app and then I sigh [laughter] and then I enter again, but then the image is all black and I must go out again [laughter] and then I had to close down the app, so I don't know what I do, maybe enter another game.

Interviewer: You enter another game?

Alicia: I think it's tiresome. I just sigh.

Alicia expresses how she moves around in the app ecology and sighs. She describes how it feels tiresome to go in and out from the game app in order to avoid advertisements, and how this can result in her leaving the app for another game. However, there were also children who described their avoidance tactics in more neutral terms and who did not seem to be so bothered by these pauses in the games.

Avoidance tactics can be said to create a *gap* between the individual and the strategy in the more concrete sense of the word, as the children distanced themselves from the touchscreen device. A spatial and visual distance was created through bodily movement, such as going to the toilet or putting away the iPad. Some of these tactics appear to involve a movement back

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to the game, while other tactics, such as deleting the game or turning off the iPad, made the distance to the game space and the advertising strategies more permanent.

Non-tactical engagement with advertising

When discussing their experiences of advertising in mobile games, the children also described how they sometimes just 'sat there' and waited while adverts were shown in the games. The children often used words like 'sit' and 'wait', and the modal verbs 'must' and 'have to', when they spoke of in-game advertising. The modal verbs 'must' and 'have to' express a sense of obligation and enforcement placed on them by the commercial strategies in the games. These descriptions clearly contrast to the more active 'doing' words that were used in relation to avoidance tactics.

One nine-year-old girl said:

It's like this: 'From 11 seconds and down' or '20 seconds and down'. Then you have to wait until you are allowed to press the 'X'. Because you must see it, because they want you to have that app, inspire you to have that app. But it's very tiresome because you just sit there. I want to play instead of watching apps that I don't want to have, advertising.

In the quote the girl describes a situation where the advertisement is shown in forced exposure mode; a certain amount of time has to pass before the advertisement can be pressed away. Sitting and waiting unwillingly can be seen as non-tactical engagement as no difference is produced in connection with the aim of the strategy, that is, to stay and watch the advertisement.

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The children also expressed a sense of being enforced and steered by the advertising strategy which encourages children to watch advertisements in exchange for an award. When asked if they watch the advertisement after pressing the button, one 12-year-old boy said:

Maxim: When I press an advert to get a diamond, I don't want to watch it because I don't like the advert, but I must [watch it]. I don't know why, but I just want to watch it, even though I don't like it and I have seen it before.

Interviewer: Why do you think that you watch it even though ...?

Maxim: I just watch. I don't know. It just makes me watch. I can't put it [the iPad] away. I just can't.

In the quote, Maxim expresses how he feels forced to watch the advert, and how he is unable to perform avoidance tactics. The statement 'It just makes me watch' indicates a sense of being steered by an outer force. The children also described how they watched the advertisements because the advertisements told them to do so. When asked if they watch the adverts after clicking on them, one nine-year-old boy said:

Sam: Yes, I have to.

Interviewer: Do you have to watch it?

Sam: Mmm, otherwise I don't get it [free 'gems']. It even says 'Watch a video if you want a reward' [last part said in English].

The boy expresses how he has to watch an advert to get the 'gems', and refers to a text clearly stating this condition. Remembering these words, in English, indicates that the boy has paid considerable attention to this text, and stressing this quote in this context may indicate that

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the boy took these words literally, and thus refrained from performing avoidance tactics. When watching adverts against their will, the children can be said to act non-tactically with the strategy, and in the words of Livingstone (2009: 32), the children in these situations succumb to the commercial pressures.

Moments of 'sitting and waiting' were also connected to a sense of resignation among the children. Resignation is here understood as an act of giving up (Waite, 2006: 733), and involves a feeling 'that something unpleasant is going to happen and cannot be changed' (Merriam-Webster, 2016). When talking about advertisements that appear suddenly after entering a game app, one 12-year-old girl said: 'I always, I sit and wait around 10 seconds before I dare to touch anywhere [laughter among the children], because I can't stand it'. The girl describes how she refrains from touching the screen because of adverts that appear without warning, indicating a feeling of mistrust and a moment of resignation with regard to the commercial game space. A sense of resignation was also described in the context of advertisements that directly interfered with and changed the outcome of the gaming activities. One nine-year-old girl said:

When adverts appear, then you want to go [in the game], but you cannot do that so you press the 'X', but then you have already been caught by the police. So it's not worthwhile to play again then, because it's always the same.

In this quote the girl describes how the need to press away advertisements that appear when she plays the game Subway Surfers results in her losing the game. In the last sentence, she says 'it's not worthwhile to play again then, because it's always the same'. By stating this, the girl expresses a sense of resignation in relation to the game space, where advertisements interfere in such a manner that they directly render the gaming activities rather meaningless.

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These moments of sitting and waiting, and the sense of enforcement and resignation, contrast to the more active struggle and the performance of avoidance tactics described above. Important to stress here is that no difference in terms of gender or age could be seen regarding these different modes of engagement. Both boys and girls, and nine- and 12-year-olds, described how they struggled, resisted and resigned in connection to advertising in mobile games. The same child could also describe these different forms of engagement, showing that there is a fine line between resistance and resignation. In the quote below, a nine-year-old girl describes how she can sit, bored, and watch advertisements, but how she can also turn off the game:

On my iPad at home there is a game called Littlest Pet Shop, and to get hearts that make the pets feel good, you have to watch a film that takes about 20 minutes, and then I just have to sit like this [showing how she waits and is bored]. Many times I just turn it off.

This indicates how tactical and non-tactical engagement should not be thought of as enduring qualities or something that has clear boundaries, but rather something that the children oscillate between when playing mobile games. However, the idea that turning off the iPad is tactical resistance can also be problematized here; to stop playing might as well be understood as an act of giving up.

Children's use of advertising as information can also be understood as a form of non-tactical engagement. The children said in the interviews that they sometimes actively and voluntarily watched advertising in search for information about new free-to-play games. This shows how advertising functioned as a vehicle in the commercial app ecology, promoting further (free) mobile game play. When asked if they had pressed adverts, one nine-year-old boy said: 'I did it the other day when I wanted a game that I like, and then my little brother also played

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it.' By using advertising as information, the children create a similarity with the strategy by fulfilling one goal of advertising, namely, consumption (Li and Leckenby, 2012: 205–207). However, the children expressed how they selectively choose to press adverts that advertised games that they liked. By making selections in the mediated material, the children can be said to introduce a difference in the overall web of strategies, thus lending a tactical component to the use of advertising as information.

Discussing their engagement with advertising as information, some children also described how they felt that this form of engagement was not entirely voluntary. One 12-year-old girl said:

There are some adverts where you think 'This looks fun', and when you have seen it, like, 20 times, you just think: 'Oh, okay, I'll download it then.' Then you download it and try it, and very rarely it's fun.

The statement 'Oh, okay, I'll download it then', indicates a sense of being unwillingly persuaded and pressured to comply with the advertising strategy. It is the constant repetition that, according to the girl, made her download the game shown in the advert. In contrast to this, other children expressed how the continuous repetition of advertisements made them avoid advertisements.

Tactical engagement with advertising through critique and laughter

As discussed above, through their avoidance tactics the children produced differences that in various ways opened up spatial and visual gaps between the individual and the strategy. In addition to this, the children produced differences by performing what could be called 'tactics

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of the mind'. These tactics did not involve a spatial or visual distance to the strategies, but rather a mental distance through critique. This critique could, for instance, be produced by thinking of swear words. Two 12-year-old boys said:

Hector: When you play, adverts appear and then I accidentally press them. You know those adverts that just come.

Fredrik: Yes.

Interviewer: What do you think when that happens?

Hector: [silence, smiling].

Fredrik: 'Fuck off' [laughter].

Hector: Exactly, exactly [laughter].

This quote shows that when advertisements appear suddenly and the children are unable to make a difference on the screen, one possibility to create a difference is by mentally opposing the strategies. This quote also reflects the interpretive community (Schröder, 1994: 344–345) that seems to exist in relation to advertising in mobile games, as Fredrik knows 'exactly' how his friend experiences these situations. The use of the expletive 'Fuck off', just like the sensation of being 'bombarded with advertisements' (girl, nine years old), reflects the idea of advertising as an unwelcome guest in the game.

The children also performed 'tactics of the mind' when they described advertising as annoying, tiresome, boring and deceptive. Through these descriptions the children opposed and countered one of the main persuasive aims of advertising, namely, to create positive feelings and attitudes (Li and Leckenby, 2012: 205–207). When analysing children's non-

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tactical engagement with advertising the following quote was discussed above, which we will now take another look at:

It's like this: 'From 11 seconds and down' or '20 seconds and down.' Then you have to wait until you are allowed to press the 'X'. Because you must see it, because they want you to have that app, inspire you to have that app. But it's very tiresome because you just sit there. I want to play instead of watching apps that I don't want to have, advertising.

Sitting, watching and waiting can be understood as a form of non-tactical engagement because the aim of the strategy, to catch and maintain users' attention (Li and Leckenby, 2012: 205–207), is not opposed. However, as shown in the quote, these advertising encounters were experienced as tiresome. This description and sensation during the encounter with advertising creates a mental distance which opens up a gap between the individual and the strategy. Hence, children's non-tactical engagement (sitting, waiting and watching) was also commonly intertwined with tactical engagement (critique).

The children also produced 'tactics of the mind' by formulating a more elaborated critique towards in-game advertising during the group interviews. The children, for instance, criticized advertisements that put them in a forced exposure mode, and stated that there should be a close button so that they can choose whether or not to watch advertising. This was discussed by three nine-year-old girls:

Lara: If people don't want to watch it [the ad], there should be something that can take it away. But, the corporations, they want people to buy, but I anyway think that you should be able to take it away. Because otherwise people just get tired and go out from the app. If there is the possibility to take it away, then I think ...

Maja: ... that more people come and play.

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Lara: People will respect it more, otherwise they get tired.

Julia: ... As Lara said, you get more interested if you can take it [the ad] away.

In this conversation, the girls make a moral statement regarding the right to be able to press away advertisements, and thus be able to make a difference on the screen. Critique and concrete suggestions were also formulated with regard to advertising as a source of information. The children were critical of advertisements that did not clearly show if the game was free to download or had to be purchased. One nine-year-old girl said: 'Sometimes it doesn't tell you what it costs. ... It would be better if they wrote the price.' Information about price was considered important by the children as they mainly wanted, or could, download free-to-play games. By expressing the importance of showing the price, and by stating that they should have the possibility to press away advertisements, the children can be said to evoke *a moral economy* (Thompson, 1971) concerning what are fair and unfair marketing practices in the attention economy.¹

The children also produced difference through laughter in the interview situation. There was sometimes laughter among the children when they narrated their struggle with in-game advertising or described how they just sat and waited. When talking about advertisements that appear unexpectedly, one 12-year-old girl said:

Sofie: In *My Talking Angela* [a game app], you need to feed it [the animal] and you tap all the time to give it food, and then it [the advert] appears and then you accidentally touch it.

Interviewer: What do you think about that?

Sofie: Not funny [laughter].

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The quote shows how the girl laughs after saying 'Not funny'. This may seem paradoxical, however, this laughter can be seen as a way to further express how she experiences these situations. Gordon proposes that absurdity denotes the dimensions of our lives that 'are incongruous and do not make sense' (2014: 24) and that people sometimes respond to absurdity with laughter. The children's laughter can, thus, be interpreted as expressing a sense of absurdity in relation to these struggles, and a feeling that things are not really as they should be, or as they want them to be. This laughter reinforces the critical distance to the advertising strategy, and can, hence, be understood as a form of tactical engagement with advertising.

In addition to this, the children also sometimes laughed when they talked about their avoidance tactics. When describing how he presses an advert to get game currency or other virtual objects, one nine-year-old boy said: 'I put away the iPad ... and I do something else. Then I come back when it has finished [laughter]. Because some of these adverts I have seen 3000 or 4000 times, it feels like.' This can be seen as a form of laughter which further accentuates the oppositional character of avoidance tactics, and the boy wants to express the impression that he 'fools the system' when performing avoidance tactics.

Discussion

The aim of this article has been to analyse how children view and engage with advertising in mobile games, and what consequences advertising have for children's game experiences. Mobile games are an important part of children's media usage today and children's game play takes place, to a large extent, in a commercial environment. It was, in light of this, considered relevant to gain insight into what it is like for children to navigate a commercial

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game app ecology. The results of this study show that advertising in mobile games contradicts key experiences that individuals commonly seek from games, such as immersion, enjoyment and achievement (Cairns et al., 2014; Poels et al., 2012.) Instead, children experience sensations of deception, enforcement and resignation as a result of in-game advertising. Children feel they have little control over the commercial game space, and one central dimension of children's engagement with in-game advertising is that it takes the form of an involuntary haptic struggle.

The concepts of *tactics* (De Certeau, 1984) and *non-tactics* have been used to analyse children's engagement with advertising in mobile games. The analysis shows that both boys and girls, and children in both age groups, engage tactically as well as non-tactically with in-game advertising; the children sometimes oppose the intentions of strategies and at times they act in line with the aims of strategies. The results suggest that the experience of advertising as tiresome and bothering to a large extent is related to these different forms of engagement. Why children sometimes resist watching advertisements and sometimes give in to the pressures put on them may be a result of the particular context. For instance, if a child recently has performed an avoidance tactic it may be easier to just sit still and non-tactically endure the moment when another advert appears, and at that moment oppose the strategy through 'tactics of the mind' (critique) instead. De Certeau (1984) proposes that 'users make (bricolent) innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules' (pp. xiii–xiv). In line with this, children can be said to try to make the best out of the situation in order to reach their goals, that is, to be able to play.

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This further prompts the question of how to understand children's possibilities for agency in relation to the commercial structure of mobile games. The relationship between structure and agency is one of the most central themes in social sciences, and has also been discussed thoroughly in the new sociology of childhood (James and James, 2012: 3–4). While the view of children as social actors is central in childhood studies there exist different understandings of children's possibilities for agency and the role of structural constraints. Some approaches stress the force of social structure, while others center on children's possibilities to form and to make a difference in their own lives within family and society (James et al., 1998: 208–216; Qvortrup, 2005: 12–13; Wyness, 2006). The concept of agency has various dimensions (Valentine, 2011), however, one central aspect of agency is to be able to influence the surrounding environment or the course of events. Giddens (1984) argues that an agent is one that is 'able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs' (Giddens, 1984: 14). When it comes to children's possibilities for agency in the game space one can argue that children perform their agency when they are able to influence the course of events in the games. When advertisements hinder children's performances while playing children's agency is constrained within the game space, something which leads to frustration (Johnson, 2015). Children have few possibilities to make real changes in the commercial structure – 'the state of affairs' (Giddens, 1984: 14) - as they cannot decide on the appearance of advertisements in the games. Children are able to press away advertisements when they have functional close buttons and can in this way influence the environment, however, the presence or lack of close buttons is not for children to decide upon. Hence, it can be argued that children's agency is limited with regard to the textual structure, and that children only have the possibilities for agency that are given them by the producers.

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In contrast to this, children have more possibilities for agency outside the commercial game space. They can decide on whether to play the game or not, and whether to watch the advertisements or leave the screen, depending on circumstances. Hence, tactics as well as non-tactics can be understood as expressions of agency. Through these various practices children try to reach their goal, namely, to engage in positive game experiences. The difference between tactics and non-tactics is mainly based on their relationship with the strategies. Tactical practices can be seen as more independent with respect to consumer culture, as these practices oppose the aims of the advertising strategies, while non-tactical practices can be understood as more conform to contemporary consumer society. On the other hand, one can also problematize the view of non-tactics as expressions of agency in the same way as tactics. When children described their non-tactics they commonly expressed how they felt forced to sit there and watch, using modal verbs such as 'must' and 'have to'. Hence, children did not feel that they, in this context, were able to influence the surrounding environment, or even decide on their own actions in relation to advertising. To conclude, the present study suggests that in this particular domain of children's everyday lives children are able to exert their agency in different ways, however, within structural constraints that clearly limit children's possibilities for agency.

This article gives new insights into children's engagement with advertising in digital games. Previous research has shown how nine- and 11-year-old children primarily view advertising as interfering with their gaming activities and that children try to avoid advertising in various ways (Martínez et al., 2013: 112–113; Marti-Pellón and Saunders-Uchoa-Craveiro, 2015; see also Saunders-Uchoa-Craveiro and Araújo Cysne Rios, 2013), something which is found also in the present study. However, previous studies do not reveal how children *struggle* with advertisements, and previous research has not found that children stop playing, or delete

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games, as a result of advertising, as highlighted in the present study. Children do not only find advertising in mobile games intrusive but they also have difficulties avoiding advertisements and engage with them involuntarily. Negative experiences are not only restricted to irritation, but to enforcement, deception and resignation. Hence, the commercial environment in mobile games appear to be more demanding than in other digital games. Children's experiences of mobile advertising seem to be linked to the touchscreen device to some extent, such as when children accidentally press advertisements and unintentionally touch outside the close buttons. Future research should look further into advertising strategies used within mobile games, and should also investigate the specificities of the touchscreen device in relation to negative experiences of in-game advertising. Future research could also further investigate children's ideas about fair and unfair marketing practices, and children's views on what constitutes a 'moral economy' (Thompson, 1971) on the internet.

Evans (2015: 1) argues that game research needs to interrogate 'the intersection between commercial motivations and game design'. Based on the results of this article, one can question certain aspects of in-game advertising, particularly advertisements that appear suddenly and unpredictably in the games, and advertisements with dysfunctional close buttons, as they can lead to a sense of deception and resignation among children. However, advertising is not only an obstacle for children's game play, as advertising-based revenue models makes it possible for children to easily access, explore and play many different games in the first place. In this study, children mentioned how they actively used advertising as a source of information on new games to play, and they emphasized how they did not want, or were unable, to pay for game apps. A future challenge for the game industry is how to integrate in-game advertising in such a way that it does not directly contradict the positive experiences that players seek from games.

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Notes

¹ The concept of 'moral economy' was developed by the historian E. P. Thompson in his study of 18th-century food riots (1971). Thompson argues that individuals participating in food riots defended traditional rights and popular views 'as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking, etc' (1971: 79). The idea of fair prices for bread was one central aspect of this moral economy (Thompson, 1991: 228).

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