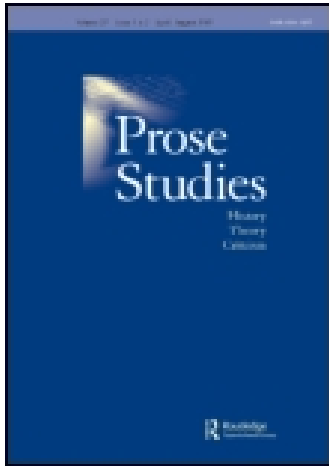


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# Anna Poletti

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND PLAY: “A CONVERSATION WITH MY 12 YEAR OLD SELF”

*This article considers how auto/biography scholarship might read and understand the use of the archive of play by contemporary autobiographers. Drawing on the work of the pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Woods Winnicott, I examine how documents generated from play can be read as instances of self-life-writing, and demonstrate the interpretive approaches that we might use to consider texts which incorporate the archive of play in self-representation. Taking an autobiographical video posted to YouTube that “went viral” in December 2012 as an example, I argue that Winnicott’s distinction between the content and the activity of play offers not only a way of understanding the role of playing in developing and understanding a sense of self but also a way of reading autobiographical texts that re-mediate materials produced through childhood play.*

**Keywords** autobiography; archive; play; Winnicott; YouTube; youth

### Introduction

Given that this issue of *Prose Studies* is concerned with life writing and childhood/youth, I take this as an opportunity to think about the material that might be found in any individual’s archive of their childhood or youth, which may both constitute life writing and life writing project undertaken in adult life. As Claire Lynch’s contribution to this collection has fruitfully explored, one common site for the production of life writing by children and young people is the education system. In this article, I will consider another space where children and young people regularly produce documents relating to themselves: play.

In what follows, I will make some suggestions regarding how auto/biography scholarship might read and understand the use of the archive of play by contemporary autobiographers. Drawing on the work of the pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Woods Winnicott, I will make some preliminary suggestions regarding how documents generated from play might be read as instances of self-life-writing, and the interpretive approaches that we might use to consider texts which incorporate the archive of play in self-representation.

In referring to “the archive of play,” I here describe the materials produced and left behind by the activity of playing. Of course, not all play produces a material trace. That play that does, however, results in material that is – as the case study I discuss

demonstrates – a rich resource for self-representation and life narrative. Materials in the archive of play are diverse and can include: stories, hand-drawn and digitally produced illustrations, letters, videos, photographs, puppets, costumes, collage, and automatic writing. Indeed, the *kinds* of materials in any individual's archive of play is themselves informative and of interest, as I will discuss later. The materials, and the archive itself, may or may not be cherished by the autobiographer. The archive of play may not be valued or recognized as an archive. Many, one suspects, are thrown away during spring cleaning or the purges of objects that regularly occur in societies with high levels of consumption. Where such archives do persist, they may constitute the flotsam of a previous life that is stored in out of the way places and rarely accessed, or stored by members of one's family or childhood friends. The value of the archive of play becomes apparent once an autobiographical project is initiated or, as in the case of Dan Eldon, the Reuters photographer stoned to death in Somalia in 1993 aged 22, a young life is memorialized (Eldon).<sup>1</sup> In some cases, the archive itself demands remediation or engagement in the contemporary moment, as I will explore in the examples of "A Conversation With My 12 Year Old Self" and the auto/biographical film *Tarnation* (Caouette 2003).

In "The Rumpled Bed of Autobiography," Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson consider the role of the archive (broadly conceived) in the production of life writing in contexts where younger autobiographers are using a variety of material and textual remnants from the past. Inspired by Tracey Emin's infamous exhibition of *My Bed*, they ask "how do we describe the difference between selected quotation of one's past moments in such memorabilia as objects and diaries, and the performance of one's past as memory work?" (4) Smith and Watson extend this by raising a question regarding methods of reading in the field: "to what extent are literary, or narratively based, theories of autobiography useful for inquiring into self-reflexive narratives that interweave presentations of self across multiple media. . .?" (13)

In my recent work on the auto/biographical documentary *Tarnation*, I have taken up these issues by examining how filmmaker Jonathan Caouette's use of home movie footage from his childhood challenges the practice of reading solely for narrative in self-representational texts. I argue that play recorded on home video both invites and troubles an indexical reading of the relationship between the content and the context of the play, and the larger narrative into which the archival document is sutured (Poletti "Reading"). Caouette's film can be read as a relational life narrative, as defined by Paul John Eakin and Nancy K. Miller, exploring both his close relationship with his mother and his relationship with popular culture as an archive and resource for self-expression facilitated by the technology of the moving image camera (Poletti "Reading" 58–59). What I did not have the chance to explore in that article, and that I would like to take up here, is how we might think about the relationship between play and the self, and how this could be extended to reading documents produced through play that appear in autobiographical texts. In that article, I suggested that increased access to recording equipment through domestic computing and audio-visual technology will result in more auto/biographical texts making use of such archival material, and Caouette's film is not the only text that asks that we develop a framework for reading the archive of play. The journals of Dan Eldon and the viral hit video "A Conversation With my 12 Year Old Self", among others, demonstrate the rich potential of the archive of play for autobiographical practice, and its appeal to audiences.

In what follows, I outline elements of Winnicott's theory of the self and playing, suggesting a framework it might provide for reading documents from the archive of play in adult-authored self-representational texts. In doing so, I hope to contribute to the larger project of this special issue by indicating some unique characteristics of texts that use child and youth-authored material in auto/biography.

## Relational identity and the self

As a pediatrician and psychoanalyst, Winnicott was uniquely placed to observe and theorize the role of play in identity development. According to Jan Abram, editor of *The Language of Winnicott*, "Running through everything that Winnicott writes is a preoccupation with *the human condition* and *what it means to be a subject*. All his questions, from very early on, are to do with the meaning of life and what it is within that makes life worth living" (emphasis in original 5). Along with Melanie Klein, Winnicott extended and revised the key components of Freudian psychoanalysis in the area of infant psychological development, that crucial early period where the individual moves from the realm of experience and impulse to self-awareness (Abram 103). A distinctive characteristic of Winnicott's theory of the self is his emphasis on the relationality of this process; his focus was on the necessary interaction between the infant's formation of a sense of self and the environment constituted by their primary care relationship with the m/other (Abram 5). Subjectivity, for Winnicott, is constituted relationally. It is through a supportive relationship with an empathetic m/other that the infant is able to achieve a separation between inner and outer worlds, to understand that they are separate from the world, *in* the world, and what expectations they can have *of* the world (Abram 10–12). The self comes into being in infancy through a process of developing an awareness of a Me, separate from a Not-me (Abram 103, 296). "The term 'self,' therefore, describes a subjective sense of being" (Abram 296), a feeling of one's self as real that is achieved in the movement from the state of unintegrated being to self-awareness (Abram 295).

Winnicott's emphasis on the relationality of subjectivity formation shares terrain with dominant paradigms of subjectivity in auto/biography studies. Recent work on patriography, for example, as well as the long trend of feminist criticism in the field has persuasively argued that the self produced through autobiographical practice is more often than not one formed in and through relationships with significant others (or the Other). An explicit engagement with Winnicott provides us with two things. First is a much-needed conceptual tool for considering what, if anything, is distinctive about autobiography produced by young people. The second is to help us understand what these texts communicate and imply about the importance of others in the development and maintenance of a sense of self. Although other strands of psychoanalysis may also provide such tools, the centrality of playing to Winnicott's theory of the relationship between the self and the world appears to me (at the moment at least) to provide an important conceptual tool because it allows us to examine the activity of playing alongside life writing itself – that is used by the individual to experiment with and experience a sense of self.

## The importance of play in developing and experiencing a sense of self

Although the development of the self in Winnicott's theory appears dependent on a binary of Me/Not-me, he was deeply interested in theorizing how this dichotomy was productively and usefully held in tension and explored throughout life. His conceptualization of "transitional phenomena" describes the space between the internal world and the objectively external: "it is the place that both connects and separates inner and outer" (Abram 337). Transitional objects (such as a loved teddy) are one means of safely, and in Winnicott's words creatively, entering that space to experience a feeling of the self. Playing is another. The importance of transitional phenomena to our experience of ourselves is fundamental to the relationality of subjectivity: the space connecting and separating our sense of self from the world, and our ongoing ability to access it, is vital to his understanding of health. Transitional phenomena is a space facilitated through a trusting and holding relationship with the primary care giver, who supports, through play, the child's learning about and encounters with their separateness and connectedness to the world (Winnicott 47–48). For Winnicott, playing is an activity that allows one to enter the third space of transitional phenomena to "process self-experience and, at the same time, communicate" (Abram 248). While children use a variety of activities for playing, in adults, Winnicott suggests, playing "manifests itself, for instance, in the choice of words, the inflection of the voice, and indeed in the sense of humour" (40).<sup>2</sup> Thus, playing is evident in the *aesthetics* of living and communicating in adults, and it is this suggestion that invites us to consider how autobiographical texts that draw on the archive of play are themselves instances of the adult autobiographer *playing*. Let us look at an example.

### "A Conversation With My 12 Year Old Self": the archive of play and the 'True Self'

On July 5, 2012, actor and regular YouTube contributor Jeremiah McDonald uploaded a video titled "A Conversation With My 12 Year Old Self: 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition". The video incorporates video footage he made when he was 12 years old. In the YouTube video, the 32-year-old McDonald finds a VHS cassette tape made by his 12-year-old self. On the tape, the 12-year-old Jeremiah asks his older self a number of questions, which the adult answers. The interaction results in the adult Jeremiah rediscovering his love of drawing, a narrative arc which I will address in more detail shortly. The video received nearly 4 million hits in 4 days (*Today*), and at the time of writing, it has been watched over 9 million times in 7 months since its release. McDonald's video "went viral" and was reposted on sites such as *The Huffington Post* and the *LA Times*. McDonald gave interviews to the *Today* show and *NBC News* who reported on the viral success of the video.

Part of the video's success, McDonald acknowledges in interviews, lies in the aesthetic and discursive strategies he uses to situate the video within autobiographical discourse and establish the tape as an authentic item taken from his archive of play. The video opens with intertitles that read "20 years ago I left a tape for myself." The 12-

year-old child, framed by a television set, appears saying to camera “I think I’d like to talk to myself in the future. . . yes that’s something that I’ll do.” A montage of images of McDonald follows, which establishes the continuity of self between the 12-year old and the 32-year old. In an earlier reworking of the archival video, McDonald had not provided this context. In an interview, he discusses how this decision impacted on people’s responses: “So I did do an early version of the same video, and I learned some things from that first attempt. When people would watch it, they’d say, ‘Oh, who’s that kid playing you?’ I would say, ‘Well, that’s me.’ They’d be confused. Looking at the [original] video on its own merits, it just wasn’t that good” (Strecker). The opening 24 seconds of the YouTube video is essential to the success of the second version because it more clearly establishes the video, as possessing an autobiographical narrative (“20 years ago I left myself a video”) and authenticates the tape itself as an archival document by showing the 32-year-old Jeremiah placing the tape in the VHS player. “Even though it’s a surreal concept, that you pop in a VHS and you’re having a conversation with the image, but (sic) I had to create a context that made sense. In the old version, my 12-year-old self just pops up on my laptop and we’re talking, and we don’t know why. Yes, I had to create a narrative,” McDonald explains (Strecker). The use of the first person in the intertitles and the montage of self-portraits position the “12-year-old self” referred to in the title of the YouTube video as belonging to the filmmaker, thus inviting the viewer to take up the autobiographical pact (Lejeune).

However, it is also important to note that this second version of the video explicitly situates the existence and the materiality of the archive by *showing* a VHS tape (who knows if it is *the* tape) upon which is handwritten “do not watch until future.”<sup>3</sup> Although the earlier version of the video remediated the document of play onto the laptop screen, reactions from McDonald’s viewers suggested that this digitization worked against the document being read as coming from the archive. Reference to and representation of the materiality of the archive – in this case, a pile of VHS tapes from which *this* tape is selected – confirms the importance of materiality as an authenticating strategy in autobiographical practices beyond the book, both online such as in *Post Secret* and in zine culture.<sup>4</sup> Such strategies are never complete, however, and McDonald continues to defend the authenticity of the video of his child-self in the comments section of the video on YouTube, evidencing what Leigh Gilmore has argued is autobiography’s unique ability to produce juridical readings concerned with evidence (Gilmore).

By situating the archive of play from which it emerges, “A Conversation With My 12 Year Old Self” is a celebration *of* playing. The 12-year-old Jeremiah is clearly enjoying the extension of his interest in time travel stories and love of Doctor Who, context given by McDonald in an interview (*Today*). The VHS video is both a document of a particular play – the content of the playing provides the narrative hook for the YouTube video – and a record of the activity *of* playing, where the 12-year old enters the transitional space between inner and outer worlds to creatively explore his relationship with his own future. The possibility *of* Jeremiah’s future life is neither a purely internal phenomenon, his future is not “made up” by him, nor is a tangible feature of the external world, although it will exist there when it arrives. The video is a viral success because the VHS the 12-year-old Jeremiah produced has a uniquely prescient symmetry between form (playing) and content (the play). The content of the play (imagining a future self) and the activity of playing (entering the third space that

connects and separates the individual from the world) both involve the excitement and precariousness which, for Winnicott, are defining features of playing:

Play is immensely exciting. It is exciting not primarily because the instincts are involved, be it understood! The thing about playing is always the precariousness of the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects. (Winnicott 47)

In one sense then, the 12-year old's video is a testament to him receiving good-enough mothering,<sup>5</sup> that allows him to extend into the third space without fear of annihilation of his subjectivity, and that supports the formation of illusion of omnipotence. As an autobiographical document, McDonald's YouTube video could be read as a celebration of that environment – a testament to the parenting he received. Although his parent/s feature nowhere in the video, a reading informed by Winnicott could read "A Conversation With My 12 Year Old Self" as a celebration of the environment produced and maintained for the child Jeremiah by his primary care giver/s. An element of the success of the video comes from how it relies upon, but does not narrate, good-enough parenting that supports and is the context for the playing we see in the archival material. Our pleasure in watching the video is in imagining the supportive environment in which the play takes place, and which, according to Winnicott, is fundamental to the development of a sense of self.<sup>6</sup>

Viewers also enjoy and find meaning in the video, email it to their friends, and post it on social networking pages, because by drawing on the archive of play, McDonald creates a text that represents the magical and precarious joy of playing which, Winnicott suggests, is universal (41). "A Conversation. . ." involves archived play and records the adult Jeremiah playing with his own archive. Some of the charm of the video is in the playful interaction between the 12-year old and the 32-year old, they play together, and McDonald – as editor – organizes this playing into a narrative with a satisfying arc in two distinct acts. The first act is defined by a light-hearted banter between the two Jeremiahs; 12-year old asks the 32-year old questions ("Are all your questions going to be about pets?" the adult Jeremiah drolly asks when the 12-year old asks whether family pets are still living). This act follows a fairly predictable character dynamic: the maturity of the 32-year old and the immaturity of the 12-year old are established and juxtaposed, and this is crystalized when the 12-year old burps and the 32-year old mutters "charming." This dynamic shifts in the second act, when the adult begins to interview the child. "What were you doing before you made this video?" the adult Jeremiah asks. "Ah," says the child, and holds up a large hand-drawn picture of a rabbit that fills the screen. "There you go," the child says from behind the picture. At this point, the tone changes and shifts to a moment of revelation that is held to the end of the video. The 32-year old looks long and hard at the picture. "Is that Roy?" he asks. "Yes. Do you still draw Roy?" the 12-year old responds from behind the picture. "No. I don't draw much anymore," the adult says. Here begins the conclusion of the video, the 32-year old is reconnected with his love of drawing and narrates his childhood desire to be an animator, revealing that as a child (the child we see on the screen) he would draw a whole cast of characters regularly. The child Jeremiah shifts from being a distant, unfamiliar, and immature self to a representative of what Winnicott would call

the True Self, the subjectivity that feels real, that is the kernel of the sense of self, and is experiences as the source of spontaneous gesture (Abram 306).

This moment of revelation, where the child-self creates the opportunity for the adult-self to reconnect with his True Self, fits neatly with dominant discourses that inform and structure representations of childhood in contemporary print autobiography, particularly nostalgia (Douglas). This is undoubtedly one reason for the immense popularity of McDonald's YouTube video. This is also one of McDonald's stated intentions for making the video, which was partly designed to work as viral marketing for his business of producing illustrations to order. This strategy worked, and resulted in McDonald being inundated with orders for his drawings (Lazar). In this case, the archive of play provides documentation for the re-presentation of a True Self through autobiographical discourse that authenticates (while narrating) an identity that is, in part, a vehicle for making an artistic practice financially viable, perhaps profitable. (And we should acknowledge here that McDonald is by no means the first to use autobiography in this way.) Since the enormous success of "A Conversation With My 12 Year Old Self," McDonald has continued to draw upon his archive of play for both ideas for future artwork, and to authenticate his identity as an artist. For example, see two recent video updates posted to his Tumblr, "Some projects I'll be working on in 2013" and "I wanted to be animator, but then I got lazy and went into filmmaking" where a line spoken by the adult Jeremiah in the revelatory act of "A Conversation . . ." is used to re-frame the short film *A Lot of Loss*, made in 2009.

However, the archival video also provides McDonald the opportunity to allow the child Jeremiah to resist this positioning. Although the adult is in reverie about his True Self and his lost relationship with drawing, the 12-year-old Jeremiah asks: "Don't you realize you're kind of . . .messing up time?"<sup>7</sup> I would like to linger on this question to consider both the potential meanings within "A Conversation . . ." and what it might tell us about childhood playing as autobiographical practice more generally.

This statement, when made by the 12-year old at the time of filming, expresses his enjoyment of the precariousness Winnicott suggests characterizes playing: the precariousness of the interplay of personal psychic reality – imagining his future life – and the experience of control of actual objects – in this case the recording equipment which allows the 12-year old to leave an object (a tape, but also a text) in the objective world, in what I am calling the archive of play, for his future self to find. The second person address in the statement "you're kind of messing up time" exists in the precariousness and pleasure of the third space of playing; the "you" is both the "I" making the recording, inspired by Doctor Who and time-travel stories, and the imagined future "I" who will be the recipient of the video. In saying "you are kind of messing up time," the child speaks both to himself and to his future self, warning both selves about the ramifications of interfering with the future, a common theme in popular culture narratives of time travel, and enjoying the precariousness of that potential interference. In imagining he *might* interfere with time, the child momentarily experiences the omnipotence that is a characteristic phase of the development of the self (Abram 305–306). The bold imagining of his video changing time itself is precisely the kind of fantasy of power that bolsters a strong sense of self in childhood development.

We could also read against the grain a little here, and see this warning from the 12-year old as cautioning against an idealization of the child-self as a representative of the True Self. Winnicott, in suggesting how psychoanalysts might engage playing in



their therapeutic practice, sounds a similar warning regarding the analyst's temptation to interpret the content of play: "the significant moment is that at which *the child surprises him or herself*. It is not the moment of my clever interpretation that is significant" (Winnicott 51, emphasis in original). Thus, the 12-year-old Jeremiah reminds his adult-self that the video he has made is a result of the process of communicating about the self that serves a developmental purpose for the 12-year old which cannot be co-opted by the narrative imperative invented by the 32-year old in *his* play. The VHS tape is a trace of the playing by the 12-year old, and the content, Winnicott suggests, is of secondary importance to the activity itself. As a means of concluding, I will briefly point to how remediation, and particularly the suturing of the archive of play into a larger narrative of identity, is, somewhat paradoxically, what makes this importance tangible for audiences.

On December 6, 2012, Jeremiah McDonald posted "A Conversation With My 12 Year Old Self: The Prequel" to YouTube. This video uses another document from McDonald's archive of play, a video he purports to have found *after* the making and release of the twentieth Anniversary Edition. In the "About" section accompanying the YouTube post, McDonald says:

Months after posting A Conversation With My 12 Year Old Self, I stumbled on another tape that contained the second half of the footage I shot in 1992, which I thought was lost. These are some highlights.

Using footage I shot when I was 10, I attempted to do what I later did more successfully with the other video. It's clear the 10-year-old footage wasn't intended for this purpose, which is undoubtedly what inspired me to make a tape for my future self. I hope you enjoy it for what it is. Cheers.

The prequel video consists solely of a video made by the 12-year-old Jeremiah. In this archival document, the 12-year-old Jeremiah is standing in front of a television. "Hello," he says, "and welcome to a very special edition of the Jeremiah show. See today I will be talking to my former self." The 12-year-old Jeremiah then enters into a dialogue with a video made by his 10-year-old self, which screens on the television behind him. The 12-year-old host finds his 10-year-old self a little unsophisticated and frustrating. He treats the 10-year old *as* a child. "Now I will speak to myself in the present," the host says, and plays a video of himself. The two 12-year olds engage in banter: "You're better than my other self," the 12-year-old host tells his 12-year-old interview subject, "I mean, we're much better now right?" The 12-year old on the screen agrees, "Oh yeah." In the archival video posted as a prequel, elements of the twentieth Anniversary video are repeated in a different context of play. The prequel post acts to further authenticate the archival footage in the more popular twentieth Anniversary video, and to demonstrate that McDonald has been playing with the moving image of himself from a very young age. This video, and the other videos of play uploaded by McDonald under his "weepingprophet" alias on YouTube, present an archive of play not dissimilar in the form to that presented by Caouette in *Tarnation* – the use of domestic audio visual equipment to present and experiment with subjectivity. However, the raw archival footage – even when edited into "highlights" of 2 min 44 s in length – does not appear to be as interesting to audiences, if the hits are

any gauge of traction (just over 48,000 for the prequel, compared with over 9 million for the twentieth Anniversary edition). I would suggest that this is because without the framing footage seen in the Anniversary edition, the text does not, at the level of form, explicitly establish the dynamic between the inner and outer that is connected by the transitional phenomena of playing. We see the trace of playing, but we focus on the content of the play rather than play itself because a lack of framing leaves the viewer without an explicit frame for interpreting the content *or* the activity. This very strategy is used, I have argued, to profound effect by Caouette in *Tarnation*, which has the room and flexibility of the feature length documentary form to create more complex relationships between archival material and the autobiographical practice taking place in the present. In both *Tarnation* and “A Conversation With My 12 Year Old Self: 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition,” we see that that archive of play functions autobiographically when it itself is the subject of playing by the autobiographer, when they themselves are drawn into the precarious and enjoyable third space by the material, and in doing so, connect with a feeling of the self as *real*.

The source of this feeling, for the adult autobiographer using childhood material, is of course partly historical. The archive of play, like all archives, places its subject in time. What I have attempted to demonstrate here is that this placement can be read as occurring at the level of form (the act of playing) rather than content (the material produced in play). Autobiographical texts such as these engage audiences because we see in the activity of playing the trust established in the primary care relationship that enables it, a relationship we all experienced but in infinitely variable degrees, *and* a confirmation of the importance of playing for our sense of who we are throughout our lives. Moreover, autobiographical texts that draw on the archive of play are themselves the result *of* playing, the autobiographer entering into a relationship with the archival material that allows them to encounter (temporarily) their past selves in a space that is precarious, exciting, and satisfying and which ultimately reinforces a feeling of the self as *real*.

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## Notes

1. Eldon’s adolescent journals – notebooks in which he developed sophisticated collages involving original photographic prints, ephemera, and writing – were edited by his mother and published in a hardback full cover in 1997 under the title *The Journey Is The Destination* (see Eldon).
2. Winnicott viewed psychoanalysis itself as drawing on playing between the analysand and the analyst (50–51).

3. This differs from Caouette's approach, where he leaves *what* is being looked at when archival documents are shown open to interpretation, whether or not the child Jonathan is playing "himself" or someone else is an ambiguity that is central to Caouette's to the element of *Tarnation's* narrative that deals with his experience of dissociative disorder. Although both Caouette and McDonald present narratives of their identity as artists, McDonald's is far more direct in the connection it draws between playing and the True Self.
4. See Poletti, "Intimate Economies" for a discussion of materiality as authenticating strategy in *Post Secret*; and Poletti, *Intimate Ephemera* for an analysis of materiality in autobiographical practice in zine culture.
5. Winnicott uses the term "good-enough" mother to distinguish between the real woman and the figure of the mother in his developmental theory, but also to stress that "good" mothering will be in response to the development of a specific infant, rather "good" being an objectively defined quality (Abram 221).
6. For the adult McDonald, the success of the video is evidence of the success of YouTube as a space of experimentation and play: "When I was a kid, I was just playing. I don't know how far in advance I was thinking, and of course, I didn't think anyone would see it anyway. It was purely for my own enjoyment. I think maybe by the time I was 20 years old, I said, 'This is something really cool.' Even then, I didn't know how I was going to use it because, certainly, there was no YouTube at the time. When YouTube started, I knew that this would be something that was perfect for that. I did an early version. I consider YouTube as a playground, it's a place to experiment" (Strecker).
7. "Sorry," the adult responds, distractedly, "I was just thinking out loud".

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