THE ART OF PLAY

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From cats on lounges playing haptic (touch) smartphones to old, disused console devices adorning bedrooms, playful media saturate our everyday lives. While some of the objects radiate the honeymoon aura of new media (aka the romance of a new "app"), many objects are old friends that inhabit our rooms and memories. These playful objects move in and out of the background of our everyday, reminding us play is integral to wellbeing, being creative and resilient.

Contemporary media has been characterised as "playful".[1] However, it is important to connect these objects and media as part of an extended media archaeology whereby new media has always been haunted by the spectres of older media.[2] Take, for example, camera phone apps like Instagram that elicit the aesthetics and genres of analogue photography (i.e. Polaroid) — so much so sociologist Nathan Jurgenson has dubbed camera phone photography as "nostalgia for the present".[3] In the aesthetic nostalgia (aka "analogue") of new media, understanding old and new media in terms of playful media can help to provide productive ways in which to understand objects and their contesting biographies.

This exhibition explores the role of ambient play in relation to game and non-game spaces. By ambient play I'm referring to the texture and feeling of play as it moves in and out of the background soundtrack of everyday life. *The Art of Play* seeks to explore the notion of ambient play as an integral part of our everyday. Beginning with ethnographies of people's households and their media biographies as part of an Australian Research Council discovery grant (*Games of Being Mobile*), this exhibition deploys contemporary photography to reflect upon the domestic vignettes as part of broader debates around play (not just limited to games).[4] *Games of Being Mobile* is a collaboration between various

researchers and participants who have kindly opened their homes to understand how games operate within the mundane setting of the home. From cats playing iPads (yes, there is a whole genre of iPad games for cats) to online *Sudoku* obsessed players, Australian homes are full of a diversity of ambient play activities that cross various boundaries such as generational and non-human divides. In this series of images presented like objects, *The Art of Play* provides glimpses into everyday vignettes to show how these objects resonate meaning and significance that can't be reduced to "just a game" logic. Emphasis has been placed upon the material objects and how they live around the home, drawing from the idea that objects, like people, have biographies.[5]

The Art of Play seeks to connect the genealogies of play by exploring the entanglements between online and offline, and past and present. Riffing off the highly successful *Minecraft* game along with older styles of play (such as the material construction of Lego), *The Art of Play* invites audiences young and old to partake in playful encounters. Audiences can have their playful interventions become part of the Playbour Projects exhibition — all they need to do is play with the material objects in *The Art of Play* and then capture and share these via their camera phone apps. Each week the audience's adventures will be printed and continue to fill the wall until the end of the exhibition. The audience collaborates with Playbour Projects.

Alongside this exhibition will be a series of play and wellbeing workshops with primary and high school children. These workshops are part of the Young And Well CRC 'creative and connected' stream and seek to provide participatory templates developed *by* young people *for* young people.

Larissa Hjorth is an artist, digital ethnographer and Deputy Dean, R&I, School of Media & Communication, RMIT University.

1 Miguel Sicart (2014) *Play Matters*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

2 Lev Manovich (2003) 'The Paradoxes of Digital Photography'. In Liz Wells (Ed.)
   The Photography Reader, London: Routledge, pp. 240-249.

3 Nathan Jurgenson (2011) 'The Faux-Vintage Photo: Full Essay (Parts I, II and III)',
   The Society Pages, http://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2011/05/14/the-faux-
   vintage-photo-full-essay-parts-i-ii-and-iii/ (accessed 2 April 2015).

4 Australian Research Council discovery grant, *Games of Being Mobile*, is a three-year
   ethnographic study into Australian households (2014-2017) with Ingrid Richardson.
   In the project we follow the lives of subjects in 12 households in five capital cities
   over three years to understand mobile gaming as part of broader media and
   socio-cultural practices.

5 Igor Kopytoff (1986) 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process'.
   In Arjun Appadurai (ed), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural
   Perspective*, NY: Cambridge Uni. Press, pp.64-91.

PLAYFUL PRIVACY: LARISSA HJORTH

Larissa Hjorth deftly captures the accouterments of daily habitation in domestic still lifes. Devoid of occupants, her photographs are filled with intimate and everyday objects alongside technological remnants such as a console, remote control, iPad and Nintendo. Hjorth conflates ordinary objects with gaming items as part of an ongoing investigation into play and interiority. Other photographs depict the internal machinations of *Minecraft* games replete with clouds, virtual lego and modular habitats rendered in large, candy-coloured pixels. Saturated with filters and high-key hues, her photographs elicit forgotten memories, longing and obsolete technologies. In doing so, Hjorth evokes the codes, objects and settings for play in quotidian scenarios. Together, these images return us to the interior world of biography as a barometer of recent times.

By using filters and vernacular photography, Hjorth tinges her images with a colourful palette of orange, purple and amber, suggesting a "nostalgia for the present".[1] Here, the clutter of everyday life and its seamless intersection with technology is played out across a photographic suite but it seems that the protagonists might be loitering off screen. The photographs are augmented by a participatory game that unfolds in the gallery and workshops exploring the relationship between play and wellbeing. Hjorth's capacious enterprise reminds us of how our private selves are invested in domestic and technological scenarios. One humorous image depicts a cat stroking an iPad with its paw, trying to swipe a fish swimming across the screen: a comical gesture where the real and fictional merge.

The accumulation of mundane objects arrayed in private spaces renders visible the interrelationship between things, biographies and narratives. Hjorth's series is characterised by the total absence of the human figure suggesting an indirect mode of portraiture

or an ethnographic dissection of circumstances. Different subjects allowed her to photograph aspects of their living spaces as part of a broader research project exploring mobile gaming in everyday life. Presented in the midst of daily activity, it is as if the occupants had left the room momentarily. The narcissistic selfie is replaced by an allusion to occupancy. An old-fashioned table lamp sits in close proximity to a remote control while an iPad and a book protruding from an open drawer with the word "inside" written on it becomes legible, furthering clues about the interiority of Hjorth's images.

Nostalgic for a pre-digital era, Hjorth investigates mobile media as an integrated facet of our everyday lives, poetically revealing the role of gaming in homes as both fun and ordinary. Hjorth's photographic images are organised to express an interior world bathed in saturated colour, like stills from a bygone home movie. As artist and digital ethnographer, Hjorth's enterprise mines the shared cultural interests and concerns of a world littered with devices. She also returns us to the role of playfulness, childhood and fiction as well as Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytical theories about object relations, play and transitional objects: the infant's need for an object at bed-time or at a time of loneliness to provide psychological comfort, taking the place of the mother-child bond. Perhaps Hjorth's intimate images cluttered with mundane objects suggest yearning for a playful privacy that is most certainly offline.

Natalie King is Senior Research Fellow, Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne & Senior Curator, MPavilion, Melbourne.

1   Nathan Jurgenson (2011) 'The Faux-Vintage Photo: Full Essay (Parts I, II and III)', *The Society Pages*, http://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2011/05/14/the-faux-vintage-photo-full-essay-parts-i-ii-and-iii/

TECHNOLOGIES OF THE HAND — GAMING THE TACTILE SCREEN

> *...the hand's tactility is by no means confined to the fingertips but extends over their entire surfaces, front and back. Gnarled and weathered by the exactions of their respective tasks as are the limbs of tree by the elements, the hands of skilled practitioners bear witness to years of repetitive effort. Not only, then, in touch and gesture, can hands tell. In their bumps and creases they can also be told, both as histories of past practice and, in the telling of fortunes as prophecies for the future.*[1]

The hand has long since been important for scholars and researchers, for its ability to "speak" through gestures, its capacity to know through touching, and as the anthropologist Tim Ingold cited above tells us its status as the repository of incremental learning over the course of life. Through our hands we know the world, and we communicate back into the world around us. These are not just the creative hands of the artist or Jazz musician but as the media scholar Shaun Moores calls our attention to the "deft movements of the fingers or digits on keyboards and various touch-sensitive devices".[2] We improvise into imagined future worlds as they unfold at our fingertips, that is, we play with what we think we already know, as we step over the continually moving threshold between now and then, in the world of the imagination.

As technologies of the hand mobile and locative media are contemporary devices where this human capacity to know and move through the world by knowing through touch can be clearly seen.

Screens, hands and paws are at the centre of Larissa Hjorth's images. Her visual practice invites us to contemplate how the knowing hand or paw has become part of the way that we and other species navigate our worlds through smartphone and tablet touch screens.

She introduces us to an environment where human and nonhuman come together in ways that are not expressed in words but that are known at the multisensory interface between the digital and the material, and between touch, vision and sometimes sound.

It is through our hands, coupled with the visual and audio cues of games that we experience mobile and locative media. Our hands become attuned to the feel of the material device and navigate its digital platforms. They become repositories for knowing digital worlds as the muscle-memories of our fingers learn the habitual movements required to move through in-screen worlds, relationships and feelings. The hand-eye coordination needed for working with tactile screens brings to the fore the relationship between touch and vision that has long since been at the centre of discussions in film theory. As the film scholar Laura Marks proposes through the concept of "haptic *visuality*" we can think that "the eyes themselves function like organs of touch".[3] And the anthropological filmmaker and theorist David MacDougall remarks "although seeing and touching are not the same, they originate in the same body and their objects overlap", they "share an experiential field".[4]

In the contemporary, sensory environments made possible through digital media, mobile and locative technologies are becoming key sites for ways of knowing and creating through the hand. Our hands become our routes into these worlds, and within them we accumulate digital and sensory ways of being and knowing. We might not even have words for these experiences, precisely because they are embedded in the haptic visuality of our relationships with touch screens. They are part of the non-verbal ways in which we live and play.

Sarah Pink is Professor of Design at the Design Research Institute and School of Media & Communication, RMIT University.

1   Tim Ingold (2013) *Making*, London: Routledge, p. 117.

2   Shaun Moores (2014) 'Digital orientations: "Ways of the hand" and practical knowing in media uses and other manual activities' *Mobile Media & Communication*, Vol. 2(2) 196–208, p. 205.

3   Marks (2000) *The Skin of the Film*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, p. 2.

4   David MacDougall (1998) *Transcultural Cinema*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 51.

THE GAMES WE PLAY

*Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately
defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have
not waited for man to teach them their playing.*[1]

The impulse to play is innate; a baby begins to play in the womb.
Play teaches the young, it extends the life of the old and somewhere
in between it provides joy, relieves stress and improves cognitive
function. My grandparents, who are both 90, play croquet every
week and they are outrageously competitive.

Play is a biological, psychological and social necessity. It is enjoyed
by individuals and unites communities; and it is used to entertain
as well as rehabilitate. Even in the most horrific circumstances we
play — to pass the time; share; or suspend disbelief.

In the film *Life is Beautiful* (1997), Guido convinces his young son,
Giosué, that their internment in a Nazi concentration camp is a
game — with simple rules to win or lose points. They must play day
and night, he explains, to be the first to score 1,000 points and win a
tank with a big gun to take home. Guido continues this complicated
fiction until his death bringing some hope and joy to their hideous
existence through play. The sacrifice he makes is a display of
unconditional love — he plays, with and for his son, to shield him
from harsh reality.[2]

Engaging in play is widely recognised to have numerous, lasting
benefits for cognitive, emotional, social and physical health. It can
improve co-ordination and fitness, stimulate creativity and foster
imagination. Studies have determined that children produced more
colourful and complex art after being allowed to play, compared
to children who first followed a structured exercise[3] and children
with access to a variety of toys reach higher levels of intellectual
achievement, regardless of sex, race, or social class.[4] Do the games
we play and the objects we play with determine our destiny?

Through his documentary series, *Seven Up!* Michael Apted sought to
test the hypothesis that one's socio-economic background informs
their life journey and future careers. Similarly, could we be classified
according to the toys, games and associated play of our generation
and gender?

For children living in an increasingly fast-paced society, time
spent playing is being diminished, despite the established benefits.[5]
Outdoor space and playgrounds are being significantly reduced and
children engage in less free, outdoor play.[6] In the current culture
of litigation, in which all risk from playgrounds is eliminated,
playscapes are becoming homogenised.[7] Helicopter parenting and
the aura of crime have become all-pervasive.

Flashback to the 1970s when we rode bikes everywhere and no
one wore a helmet. We strapped on roller skates — there were no
knee-pads. Playgrounds were made of metal and wood, the backs
of our legs burned as we slid down a slide, and our bums collected
splinters when we seesawed. Our backyard enclosed a pool with
no fence and a trampoline with huge springs — without protective
barriers. My dad set off firecrackers in the backyard; we gambled
with our grandparents; and our parents bought us lollies called
'Fags' shaped like cigarettes so we could pretend to smoke.

However, my parents did not direct our play through gendered
toys. My older sister and I played with marbles, cars, Lego and
Meccano. We had Barbie dolls too of course — and Ken — but that
was in the days before anyone noticed that Barbie's feet were too
small to support her body. Toys dictate what is appropriate for girls
and for boys, and these messages potentially have implications on
career choices.[8] I loved trains — so mum made a train cake from the

Woman's Weekly Children's Birthday Cake book. We had an amazing Fisher Price garage with a lift, petrol pump, bell and ramp — it was a favourite. But I think any career prospects in the automotive industry were quashed the day we filled the petrol tank of my parents' car with water from the hose.

Everyone has favourite toys from their past. Have these toys played a more important role in forming who we are and how we view the world than we realise? Or are children pre-disposed to particular play preferences?

Despite generational distance and difference, and the ubiquity of new media and contemporary screen culture, many of the toys kids play with today are the same as those used by the generation before — and their parents and grandparents too. Some intergenerational examples are: marbles, yoyos, alphabet blocks, hula-hoops, skates, dolls, cars, bikes, checkers, bingo, billiards, ball games, stuffed toys, hopscotch, cards, croquet, 'Rock-paper-scissors' and 'Ring Around the Rosie'.

In 1949 a company in Denmark called 'Lego' began to manufacture an early version of their familiar colourful, interlocking bricks and in 1974 the Rubik's cube was invented — by the 1980s it was omnipresent. Designed by Hungarian sculptor and professor of architecture Ernö Rubik — with its bold colours and sophisticated structure, is this gorgeous object not an artist's multiple in an edition of infinity? Great games and toys never get tedious, or old fashioned. The design, colour, brand and popularity of some of these timeless toys have been transferred to current gaming culture.

When my sister got *Donkey Kong* in the 1980s we fought over it for hours, and obsessively tried to beat each other's score. The ultimate victory was to be able to 'clock' the device, so the score would surpass the largest number it could display, and then start again

from zero — at double the pace. Video games were ubiquitous and addictive — and not just for kids.

I still play *Donkey Kong* in the car on long trips, and I know it will not be long before I have to start sharing it again, this time with my daughter.

Karra Rees is Managing Curator at Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne.

1 Johan Huizinga (1955). *Homo Iudens; A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press, p 1.
2 Roberto Benigni dir. (1997). *Life is Beautiful (La vita è bella)*. Distribution: Mirimax Films.
3 P. A. Howard-Jones et al. (2002). 'The effect of play on the creativity of young children during subsequent activity.' *Early Child Development and Care*, pp. 172, 323-328.
4 *The Genius of Play* www.thegeniusofplay.org/ (accessed 12 April 2015).
5 Jeffrey Goldstein (2012). *Play in Children's development, health and well-being*. Brussels: Toy Industries of Europe, p. 6.
6 Joe L Frost (2010). *A History of Children's Play and Play Environments: Toward a Contemporary Child-saving Movement*, New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 269-270.
7 Roy Kozlovsky (2010). 'Book reviews: Frost, Joe L, *A History of Children's Play and Play Environments: Toward a Contemporary Child-saving Movement*', *American Journal of Play* Volume 2, Number 4, Spring, p. 479.
8 Vanessa Barford (2014). 'Do children's toys influence their career choices?' *BBC News Magazine* 27 January: http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-25857895 (accessed 14 April 2015).
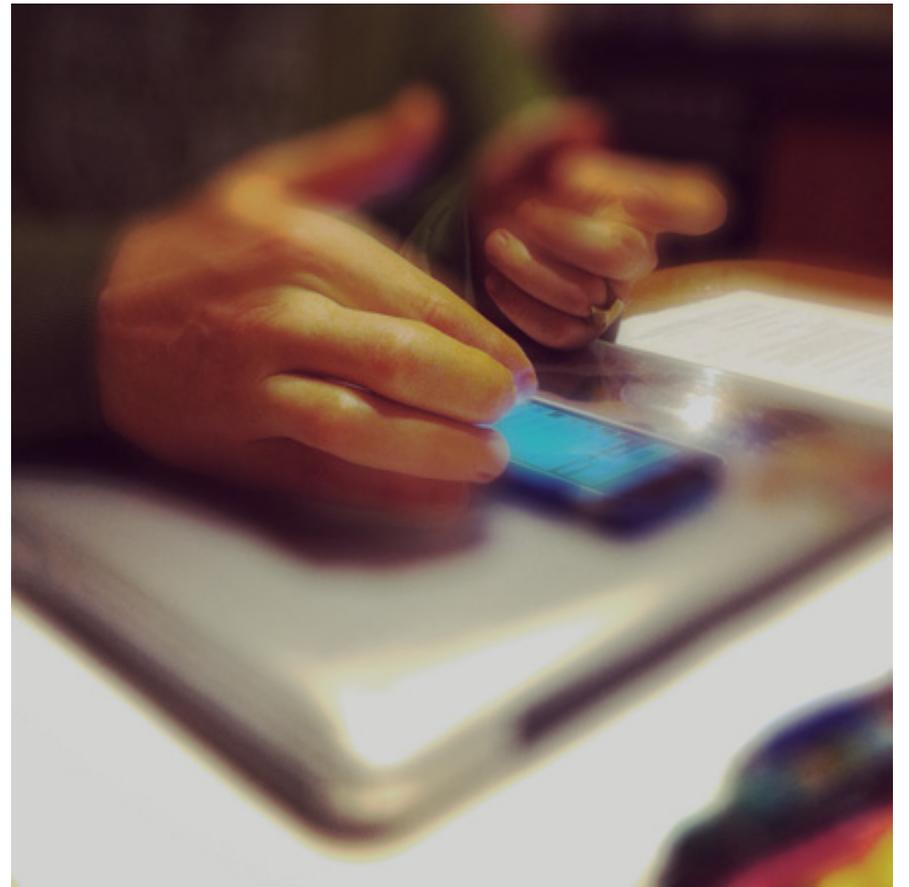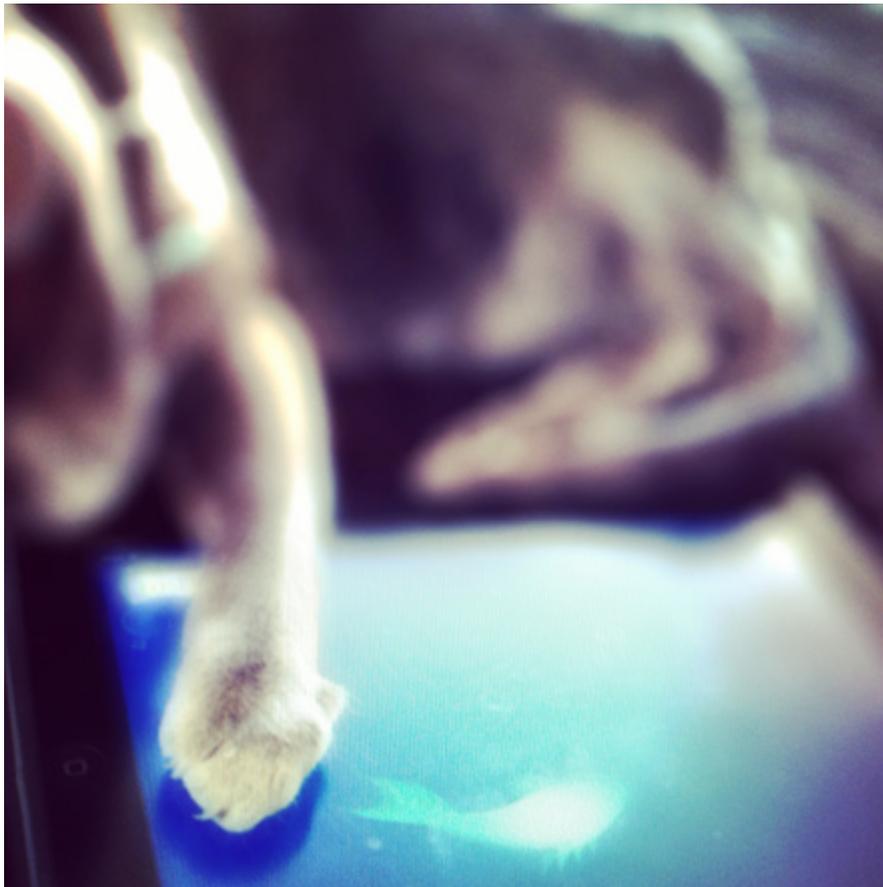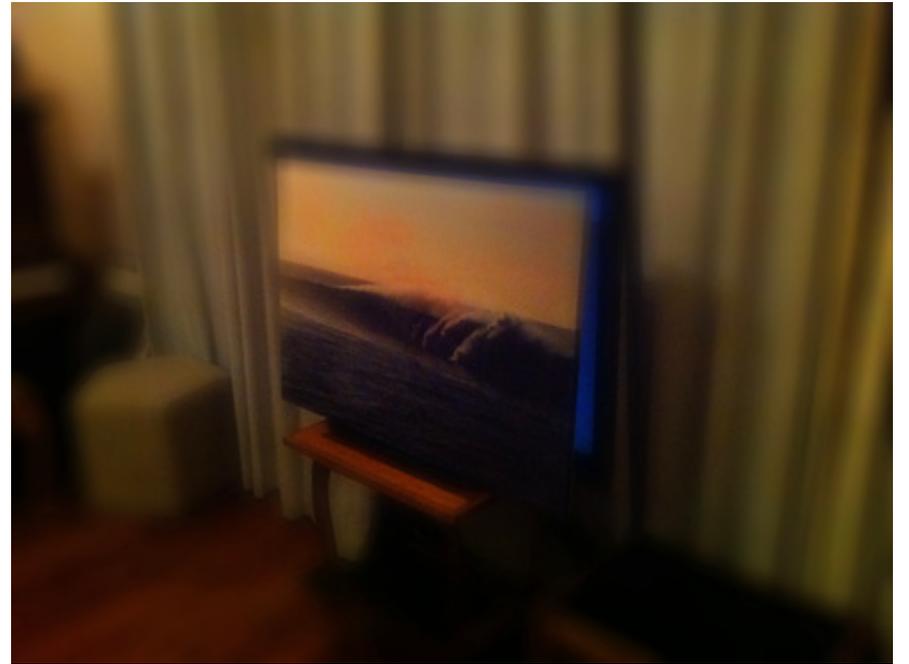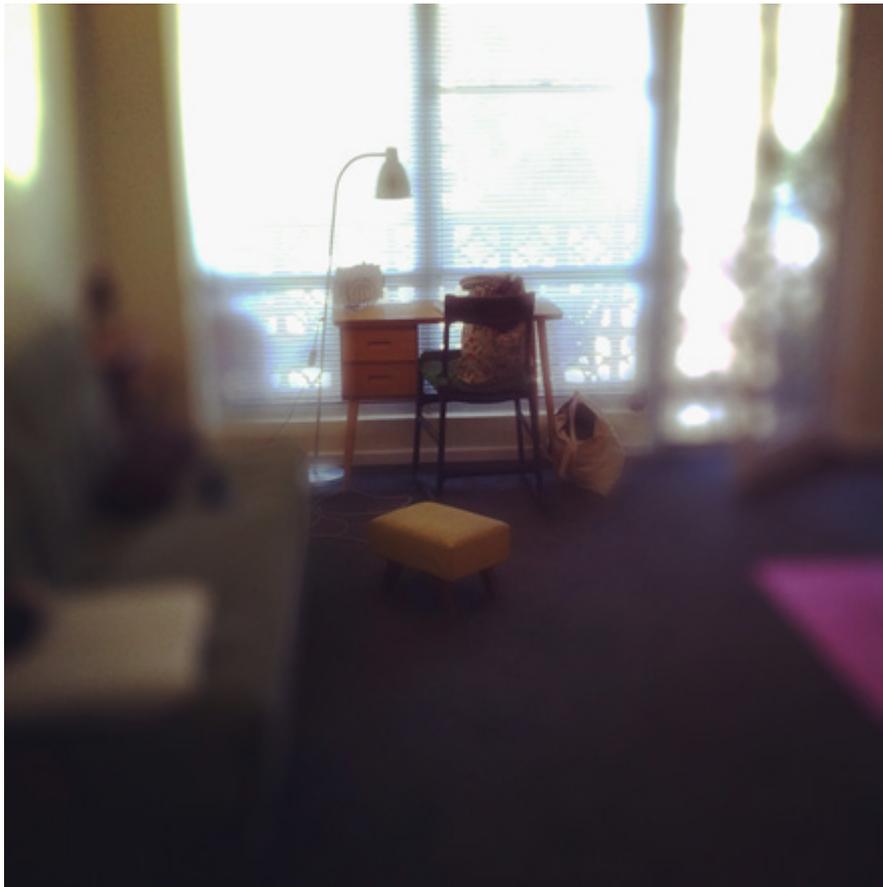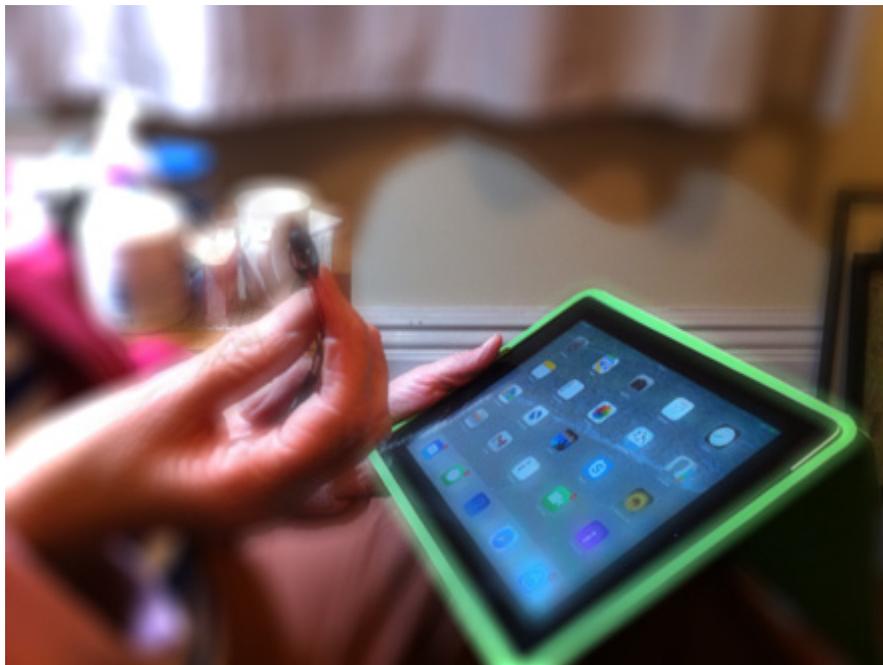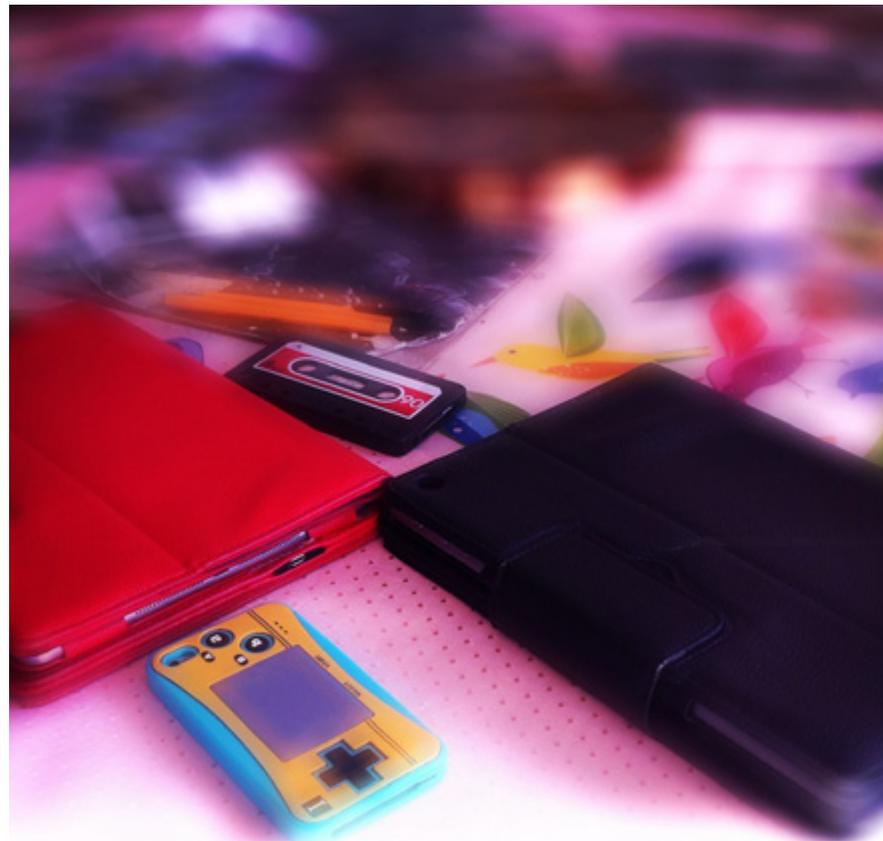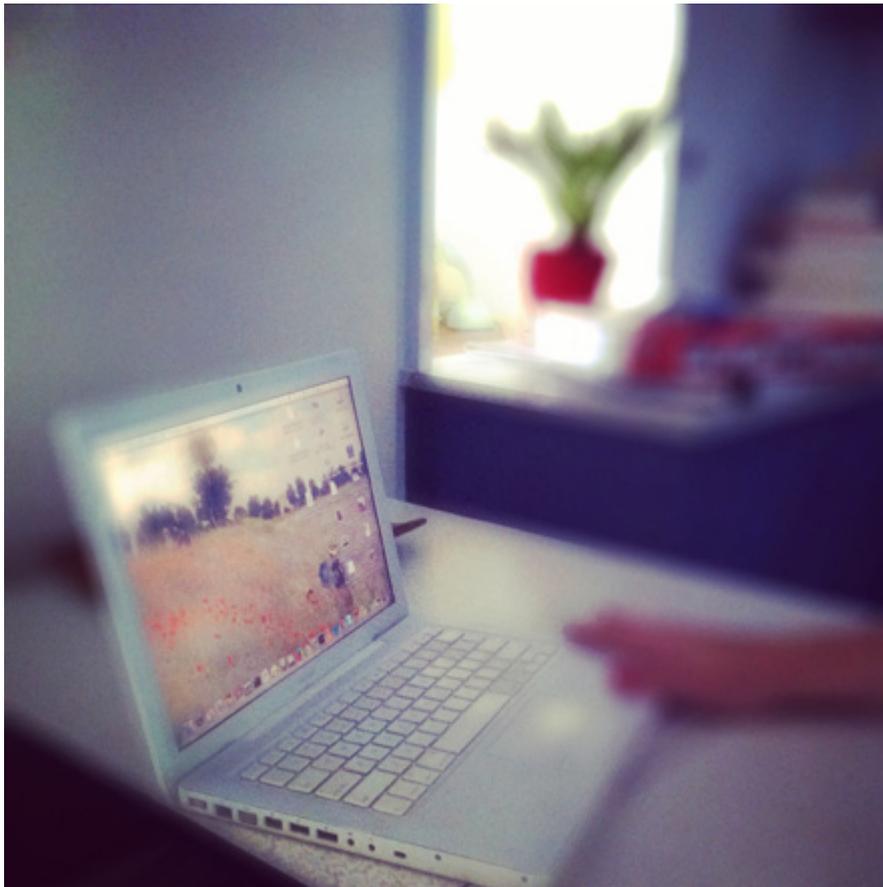
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