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Cyber Children: Discursive and Subjective Practices in the Palace

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Introduction

This paper will explore tensions regarding the nature of contemporary childhood as they are raised in questions related to children in cyberspace. According to David Buckingham's *After the Death of Childhood: Growing Up in the Age of Electronic Media*, the concept of childhood is only a very recent phenomenon and has been a result of a range of contrasting and conflicting discourses about what children are and should be. He outlines and critiques the sharply polarized images of childhood that are prevalent in current discourses about childhood. On the one hand, children have been perceived to be under increased danger and threat, and requiring protection, yet on the other hand children themselves are beginning to be perceived as a threat to society, when, for example, they take such forms as violent street gangs, child soldiers, or sexually precocious girls in the Asian sex trade. Buckingham reports that, "the sacred garden of childhood has increasingly been violated; and yet children themselves seem ever more reluctant to remain confined within it" (4). Such concepts are informed by various ideological positionings and constructions of the child and are usually drawn from adults'

desires to both protect and control children. The advent of the information age has seen the rise of new moral panics by adults about how best to protect, control, and shape what counts as childhood in these new media. In Buckingham's challenge to what he terms two contrasting essentialist views about childhood, he draws out the commonalities between them, writing, "both implicitly and explicitly, they suggest that the notion of childhood is itself a social, historical construction; and that culture and representation—not least in the form of electronic media—are one of the main arenas in which that construction is developed and sustained" (6). A reflection of these two poles of discursively constructed childhood is clearly evident in the two central discourses in relation to children and technology: *the child in danger* of the perceived threats of the Internet, and *the dangerous child* who is susceptible to violence, anarchy, and chaos, and as one who will use the apparent freedom of the Internet to resist the social norms and expectations of child behavior.

Concerns about the Internet in terms of the child in danger appear to be grouped into three central areas, those being pornography, hate language, and information to aid harmful activities (Weckert and Adeney). Pornographic sites are present on the Internet in a relatively small proportion when compared to the percentage of non-pornographic sites, images, and text files online (Benson and Fodenski, Jarvey). However, instances of children accidentally accessing pornographic material has been reported by these researchers as a major concern which has parents, teachers and caregivers of children deeply concerned. Adult sites accidentally turning up in searches for unrelated sites, or as unsolicited 'junk' mail through programs such as email or ICQ are not uncommon. Of greatest concern are not so much explicit images of consenting heterosexual sexual acts but what he labels as deviant sexual behavior, such as images of violent and extreme sexual acts, pedophilia, and associated images with children and animals. Hate language is a second area of concern as reported by John Weckert and Douglas Adeney and in explicating this they define it as "particular groups, especially white supremacy groups, spreading their messages of hate, free from any control, in a way not normally possible using other media" (51). The third most common area given for concern was that defined as information to aid harmful activities, meaning instructions on how to make bombs, advice to pedophiles on how to abduct and molest children, and explicit instructions and graphics related to committing violence.

Children are the objects of considerable surveillance, monitoring, policing and regulation, both to protect them from perceived dangers and to prevent them from becoming the dangerous child. Adults appear to be most disturbed by the threat of children crossing the boundaries between adulthood and childhood, which, according to Buckingham, represents for adults a challenge to that power, and a far step removed from romantic and Victorian notions of childhood as a site of innocence, purity and truth. Steps by adults to ensure that the public domain of the Internet is 'safe' for children abound. A number of devices and procedures related to Internet use in homes and schools have been used with the intention of protecting children from access to controversial material, including the use of filtering software, the use of tracking devices to see what children have accessed, charters of acceptable use policy, and heavily regulated and monitored time for children's Internet use.

Publishing houses are rapidly publishing books for children and their families with titles related to the '1000 best sites for kids,' and large media corporations such as Disney and Nickelodeon have invested much into their own 'safe and fun for kids' websites which reproduce their respective ideologies about what childhood should mean and what children should find fun. Given that the Internet 'for children' is laden with adult ideological constructs and controls for children, the focus of this paper will be the question: what social and discursive practices do children *actually* engage in within this context and how does this match post-modernist views about the child subject? In defining the postmodern child subject, Buckingham attempts to shift away from the two very polarized views of childhood outlined above. He argues that "...the dominant construction of children as pre-social individuals effectively prevents any consideration of them as social beings, or indeed as citizens" (15). He calls for children to be given the rights and the opportunities, particularly with respect to the Internet, to become active and participatory citizens, explaining that it is time to consider the notion that children have social, cultural, and political rights.

This paper is also written from the perspective that the range of discursive practices in which a child is engaged, construct the child as a particular kind of subject (Henriques et al). What it means to be a child differs with context, and each context serves to construct the child in different ways. Furthermore, each context brings with it a set of rules of operation, and those children that can deconstruct and play within the rules are successful in that particular context. The paper aims to identify those social and discursive practices that are operating in one online—context—the world of the Palace, a graphical chat world that is described in detail below that produces a discursive

'cyber child.' Advocates of digital media argue that the Internet, because of its open and global nature, allows children freedom from adult control, to escape from the usual boundaries and lines between childhood and adulthood, and to define themselves in alternative ways from their offline selves. Jon Katz argues that the ways in which children are creating their own autonomous cultures and communities is one way children are bringing about new forms of cultural expression. However, given the moral panic of adults and the ensuing rush to protect their children through a range of regulatory practices as mentioned above, perhaps the liberating discourses of children learning and creating within the online context are simply another fiction, and unrelated to actual practices.

This paper is an attempt to examine those narratives and fictions that operate as truth in this context with the aim of making them explicit, conscious and understood. Discursive practices operate in the realms of power, knowledge, discipline, and regulation (Foucault 1977). I will examine what this might mean for children. The socially and discursively situated practices occurring online serve to construct a cyber child, or the 'screenager' (Rushkoff). What does it mean then to be a cyber child, and how might this child be uniquely different from the children of the past, or from the children who do not know the privilege of technological access? Since this research is based solely on children in the Palace environment, it only accounts for one of the many variations of online sites in which children participate, and my conclusions about the construction of children as cyber subjects relate strictly to this particular site.

The Virtual Community: Power, Politics, and Identities

Much has been written about aspects of on-line community as far as young adults and adults are concerned (e.g., Smith and Kollock, Holeton, Jones, Turkle). Communities are developing in many forms and for many purposes. People are coming together through email lists, bulletin boards, text and graphical based chat sites to name just a few. Groups range from political discussion and lobbyist groups, gaming groups, self-help groups, and interest and hobby groups. Finding a forum of interest and having the opportunity to express a voice in that forum is highly empowering. As Sherry Turkle explains cautiously, to some people, the Internet "has become a potent symbol and organizational tool for grass roots movements ... it is a symbol and tool of postmodern politics" (243). The potential for flattening hierarchies and offering forums of equality is lauded as the means for offering "expressions from the *vox populi*" (Gurak 259). However,

Christopher Mele argues that few disenfranchised social groups have been able to utilize the resources of the Internet to challenge or subvert societal inequalities. He states that to be successful and actuate real change requires "vast commitments of time, resources, and unflagging dedication, a clear sense of purpose, and a flexible course of action in the face of overwhelming obstacles" (304). Although he claims that the Internet and its related virtual communities and networking of social groups are creating a new kind of civil society based on a technologically disposed form of democratic interaction, he cites a number of obstacles to social change posed by the new types of inequality and divisions being created by these very networks. Such obstacles include: equality of access, equality of technical knowledge, and as Laura Gurak points out, the issues of accuracy of available information and the assumptions that making fast quick responses (so easy to do in a few keystrokes), may in fact lead to hasty decision-making rather than careful and deliberated decisions made through due time and process.

The ability to tinker with and transform one's identity is another major theme drawn upon by scholars and Internet researchers. When online, one's gender, culture, lifestyle, clothing, voices, body size, age, and identity are no longer bound by the confines of an embodied reality. This offers a sense of liberation to many, being a site where the old can feel young, the ugly can be beautiful, the shy can be extrovert, and the loner can be popular. Online interaction strips away all of the usual semiotics of identity, which on the one hand can be limiting, yet on the other hand can be liberating by offering the potential to tinker and play with elements of the self. As Turkle notes, "...the virtual space becomes a laboratory for the construction of identity" (15). Lorri Neilsen further comments about this notion, stating, "the semiotics of communicating in an electronic environment reminds us that we can reinvent ourselves constantly" (130). Yet the shaping of an identity plays a vital role in the online world as far as having some sustained on-line presence within any particular community. For a consistent presence in a community, one needs to create a persona (which may or may not be akin to one's embodied self) to project a sense of self to others. However, as Judith Donath points out, "One can have, some claim, as many electronic personae as one has the time and energy to create" (29). One can become older, younger, wiser, an object, an animal, a thing, or somebody of the opposite sex.

The issue of tinkering with sexuality is of considerable interest to scholars (e.g., Bruckman, Danet, Spender). Danet asserts that, "from early childhood, individuals learn to signal their gender identity in

accord with gender stereotypes. They learn to *perform* "masculinity" or "femininity." Yet, as she claims, the medium of on-line chat is very liberating for many users, both male and female, since the anonymity allows one to tinker with all aspects of one's identity and sexuality. Similarly, Turkle notes:

> You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative. You can be less talkative ... you can just be whoever you want really ... You don't have to worry about the slots other people put you in as much. It's easier to change the way people perceive you, because all they've got is what you show them. They don't look at your body and make assumptions. They don't hear your accent and make assumptions. All they see are your words. (184)

The opportunities for experimenting with gender online have certainly been embraced by adults, although according to Cheris Karamarae the domination of male users in the Internet population results in a more significant number of males entering into this type of 'textual masquerade.' But what about children? Are they as keen as adults to extend their exploration of identity and the multiple forms of its discursive articulation? If children can engage to a high extent in the identity-making process in the potentially liberating spaces of cyber worlds, perhaps then they might further be able to challenge the artificial boundaries of the subject as defined by dominant cultures. As children author multiple forms of their identity online the more fully articulated the resultant cyber child subject could become. Julia Kristeva, following on from Jacques Lacan's work, points out that challenging the naturalized forms of gender is essential for longer-term political success in gender equity issues, precisely by dissolving and deconstructing the gender divide. Are children beginning to use cyberspace to tinker with issues of gender or do they shore up the artificiality of social boundaries between genders? Or, perhaps there may be a point where children do recognize that their own articulations of gender are stereotypical through the very acts of seeing themselves as they participate online, and perhaps at that point they then begin to challenge their own assumptions about gender and identity?

Identity tinkering online opens the possibility and potential for cybercitizens to take risks and to explore all aspects of one's personality. Bravery to take risks is caused by a sense of anonymity by users and contributes to the development of the online self. The safety net of the screen appears to create a lessened sense of inhibition in expressing opinions and feelings for many people, allowing them to take risks and explore ideas they might otherwise have hesitated to do. This sense of new found freedom and seeming lack of consequences also appears to allow people to exercise more aggression, and to be more overtly critical or even cruel to other users. This type of behavior is labeled 'flaming' and occurs most typically within groups that have little or no overt moderation, rules or regulations to suppress such behavior (Reid). A majority of online groups however have established acceptable social norms of behavior for that particular group, and offenders are reprimanded or simply removed from the group by the community.

Children are embracing the cyber cultures that have emerged in cyberspace, so much so that living, composing, co-creating, coding and reading the texts of cyberspace have become a significant form of existence for a new generation. Such children are those who have the privilege of access to the Internet, and thus are limited to children from those particular geographically located socio-economical groups in the world who do have this privilege. Computer culture is no longer reserved for 'geeks,' but it is an ever-increasingly more desirable recreational activity to pursue. As video gaming comes online and invites children to play games against unknown challengers across the world, the child participation in online communities is flourishing at an explosive rate. According to Jay Lemke, the computer-mediated worlds children 'live in' are as real and important to them as their embodied worlds. He claims children develop a sense of full presence within cyberspace, living in them semiotically as they make cultural and personal meaningful sense of their participation. The medium of cyberspace as noted earlier, allows children to participate in ways that allow risk taking and experimentation with their identities that can only be explored online. Cyber communities have become a contemporary global movement. Marc Amerika coined the term 'avant pop' to describe the new youth culture emerging online, describing it as one in which its members seek to deconstruct, to live between worlds, and to be nomadic and ever shifting into new evolutionary formations.

Data from the Palace

A Palace, as introduced earlier, is a graphical chat environment, used to create visually stunning worlds based on various themes. Although Palaces can be accessed via a web browser such as Internet Explorer or Netscape, to enjoy the complete range of features in a Palace a special program can be downloaded (free of charge) from the Internet (available: <http://www.thepalace.com>). This program is

used to connect to the servers that run the graphical worlds of Palaces that are many and varied. Lists of worlds and their server addresses are found both on the web, and within the Palace program in a site menu. Worlds again range from themes related to politics, education, fan clubs, commercial sites, gaming, religion, romance, and sexuality. Each world has a multiplicity of interlinked rooms. Some rooms are backdrops to the action and chat; other rooms are the action themselves, with virtual gaming, virtual theatre, virtual performances, and interviews.

Recently I entered the Palace of South Park, run by Comedy Central. Whilst my avatar (the image I choose to represent myself) was sitting in one room with a number of other people chatting to one side, we were all also viewing an interview with one of the South Park writers in a special event window. The Palace is a sophisticated new visual hangout for kids and adults alike, not to mention the corporate sponsors whose ads animate virtual billboards at the bottom of the screen.

This paper describes the author's ongoing Ph.D. research that has attempted to examine the ways in which children are constructed and how they attempt to construct themselves, in cyberspace. Participants in the research are aged between 8 and 15, and self-selected as a result of reading a request for participation sent out by the author or being shown the announcement by their parents or teachers and agreeing to participate. Children in the research come from Australia, USA, Canada, Switzerland, France, and Germany.

The research was conducted on a Palace constructed by the author, where children would log on and talk to each other. The number of children on the Palace at any one time would vary, from 5 to 35, although at party times up to 60 children may have been present. The Palace was generally only open to the child participants, their parents, and/or teachers. On occasion, special 'open days' were run by Electric Communities—the developers of the Palace software, and our Palace participated in two of these with careful supervision by teachers, parents, and myself. Logs of conversations and screenshots of children as they participated in the world were kept. The chat transcripts and screenshots were used as the tools of analysis. The research used a *textual* discourse analysis technique drawn from Norman Fairclough, and a *visual* discourse analysis technique drawn from Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen. This paper analyzes one episode of text 'chat' and one instance of the visual text captured by a screenshot. In analyzing each instance using these techniques it aims to draw out a small range of the social and discursive practices in which children are engaged in this online environment. Here, I use a differentiation between what James Gee terms *discourse* with a lower case 'd,' and *Discourse* with an upper case 'D.' By discursive practices I refer to the range of texts, both written and visual, in which children are engaged. Social practices relate to the type of behaviors I identified the children engaging in. An examination of both of these practices will indicate the types of Discourses, that is, the ways in which the children are enacting certain symbol systems and ways of knowing, within the Palace cyber environment.

The children who agreed to participate in this research project (all of whom had parental permission) were invited to a Palace that I coded and constructed. Children were invited through responding to formal advertisements I posted asking for participants on educational and children's mailing lists, as well as through parents or children themselves hearing about the project through word of mouth or from my website information. The Palace I created I named "Kids, Enfants, Kinder," to express my hopes that it would attract an international selection of children, which it eventually did. The Palace is constructed using a programming language called *iptscrae*, and graphics of personal selection. I taught myself the programming language through the Palace website instruction manual, and received assistance from owners of other Palaces and members of the Palace *iptscrae* mailing list. Two computer graphic artists assisted in designing the central graphics for the rooms in the Palace, though a number of children custom made their own room backgrounds.

I collected data using four methods: First, transcripts of interactions, second, a series of individual interviews with each child, third, taking screenshots of the Palace window and finally, video recording the screen action as it occurred in real time. All participants and their parents have given their written consent for any of the data—written and visual texts created within this research project—to be published and used as seen fit by the researcher. Participants all use 'screen names' and anonymity is assured.

As a focus for this paper I have selected a sample screenshot and a sample transcript that I believe are aptly representative of the data collected. The screenshot shows a small group of children (more likely the case than having large groups), and the images the children used as avatars here are the most typical. The transcript touches on several of the key themes that I have identified from the bulk of transcripts, and highlights some of the significant points about discursive practices that I wish to focus upon here. In addition, I will discuss some of the comments children have made in their interviews about their

Palace experiences. To discuss the data analytically, I will use a combination of various discourse analysis techniques, namely those suggested by Fairclough, and Kress and van Leeuwen.

Fairclough offers a framework for analyzing texts that draws together three central areas: analysis of text and words; analysis of text production and interpretation; and a social analysis of discourse events. I have selected his framework as he examines how the analysis of discourse and text can be linked to political and ideological change, and he also draws heavily on the theoretical perspectives of Michel Foucault. Given my objective of examining the type of child subject that is constructed in cyberspace, Fairclough's framework offers a useful means of understanding this objective. Kress and van Leeuwen draw upon Halliday's system of functional grammar, a means for analyzing the grammar of texts, and apply his system to the reading of visual images. They have developed a mirror system to analyze the grammar of visual texts, which is of particular significance to this research given the nature of the online graphical world of the Palace under investigation. I will overlay this with the use of an analytic tool by Basil Bernstein who offers a way of gaining insight into the construction of identity. Bernstein distinguishes three fundamental ways of identity construction that will be outlined later in the paper, and I would like to examine what the children are doing with both their visual and typographical texts using his framework. Having a range of lenses through which to analyze this unique data allows a rich understanding to unfold.

Below I have included both the screenshot and the transcript selected for discussion, since the screenshots are just one microsecond in time and it is important to see them in the context of the communication that is occurring within them. The transcript here is reflective and typical of the hours of logged texts that I have collected throughout the research. The screenshot used occurred at a special moment in time during preparations for an 'End of Millennium' party. The end of the millennium party was a special event organized by the Electric Community Palace owners to celebrate the dawn of the year 2000. A number of Palaces were invited to participate, including ours. After discussion and consent given by the children and as many parents as possible we gathered together to plan the party. The nature of the party was such that the members of each Palace community would take turns visiting the other Palaces. Special party rooms were designed, special avatars were made, and special music that was selected by the children and myself. The moment captured in the screenshot is during the preparatory discussions about what we could do for this party.

Each person logs on to the Palace space and meets in a room, which has a graphical background. When you first log on, you are just a 'ball,' but as you develop your 'avatar library' and fill up your 'prop bag' you adopt the avatar which best suits your mood for the time and place, and other people see you as that representation. The picture on the screen represents the 'face' you show the world. Speech occurs in bubbles of text like a cartoon, but also appears in a separate log window if you're having trouble keeping track of who is saying what. The transcript is taken directly from the log window I had open, and was produced by my opting to record and save the log as a data file.

Transcript

=Anya=:	can anybody tell me how to do a screenshot on a PC
SoccerKid:	i can any
=Anya=:	thanks SK
*deedee:	Poor CJ ... he's had a rough day
=Anya=:	how?
SoccerKid:	hit alt then print screen
babygurl™:	sesame street rocks.. hehehe =)
Di_1:	who said that?
Christy:	COOKIE MONSTER!!!!!!!!!!!!
=Anya=:	ok, then where does it end up?
*deedee:	Hey I love Sesame Street ... actually Grovers my fav
trisha:	hi christy
babygurl ™:	i think im gonna leave the group of friends i'm with though ... they're older than me and they're always making fun of me
Di_1:	the: *** blah, blah, blah
HurricaneBob:	sorry dancing queen I fogive u
Di_1:	thingy
*deedee:	Di_1 what is that sign?
Christy:	Hey Trisha! That's the downside of older friends!
SoccerKid:	it ends up in your clip board, you can past it into any image editing program, such as paint shop pro
Di_1:	nothing
trisha:	?

babygurl ™:	my best friend is ALWAYS putting me down but i think it's because she's over weight and i'm.. well.. not.
Christy:	just said Hey
Di_1:	who said the zombie or whatever it was
trisha:	ohh
trisha:	hey
=Anya=:	ooohhhh wonderful, thank you SoccerKid
SoccerKid:	your welcome
SoccerKid:	you're i mean
=Anya=:	*smile*
HurricaneBob:	)train
Christy:	that stinks. my boy is older then me and calls me stupid sometimes so I know what you mean
DancingQueen:	what did you do soccerkid?
SoccerKid:	helped her with somethin
.·:HuLa BaYbAh:·.:	babygurl...u have neato avz...where do u get them??
DancingQueen:	like...
DancingQueen:	sorry im nosey
SoccerKid:	told her how to take a screen shot
trisha:	christy can i get that purple thing you are wearing?
DancingQueen:	oh
babygurl ™:	like we were at the movies and these guys kept staring at us and i was like... "that one can't be older than 11" and my friend lauren goes "well he's PERFECT for YOU then!"
*deedee:	ah
Christy:	ya
*deedee:	ouch
trisha:	ok
Christy:	i would have been really mad!
Di_1:	^brb
babygurl ™:	i was but i didnt say anything i just laughed

The Visual World of the Palace

Figure 1. Screenshot taken from a moment in 'Palace' time with a small sample group of children. Credit: Angela Thomas, 1999. Available: <palace://kids.digital-x.net:9998>.

Textual Analysis

I have found that it is important to contextualize these 'events' to a certain degree before going into more in-depth analyses. The transcript consists of a number of conversations that are occurring simultaneously. Each conversation I have termed a thread, and each thread is interwoven into the overall fabric of the transcript. It opens in the middle of various threads of conversations when I, as =Anya=, logon, and ask a question, which is the beginning of the transcript. I have selected this piece because it is so typical of the conversational content of all the transcripts I have in terms of the themes of discussion the children are engaged in and the type of behaviors exemplified. I ask for instructions related to my computer. Having just changed from a Mac to a PC, I didn't know how to make a screenshot, so I asked, who else, but the experts—the kids! SoccerKid replies to explain how to do so.

One of the most exciting things I have observed children doing online is teaching each other and learning new things together with considerable enthusiasm and motivation. The mere act of participation requires a high level of computer competency, and the incentive to learn is indeed high. Teaching and learning from each other and with each other is something that kids just 'do,' and sometimes there is no 'expert,' just two kids trying to figure out how something works together so that they can 'get the game running,' like children might do in other forms of unsolicited play. I believe this confronts many of our educational constructions of the learner as an apprentice to an 'expert' (Vygotsky) and is an avenue I believe should be investigated further. In much research about child development, attention has been focused on the mental processes of the child such as perception, recognition, memory, and attention. Lev Vygotsky argues that children's development of thought is due to mediated processes of attention, in which a novice child learns from an expert other. Yet, Geoff Williams questions this and claims that the text itself is agentive in a child's reading and learning, and is not neutral in the process of development. He asserts that the textual roles in mediating children's reading development are crucial to our understanding of the child as a learner. Since online interaction requires very specific contextual, textual and social practices, the agentive power of the online environment as a mediator in children's learning is yet to be understood.

In the transcript, there is also a thread about friendships and life—kids talking about the ups and downs of their lives. Lots of kids find it easier to talk to strangers about their feelings, and use places like this as a type of 'confessional' or place of 'therapy.' All children have talked to me in interviews also about the importance of making friends. Solidarity and togetherness, making a gang, and even looking similar is important to them. Many reported a lack of fear in making new friends, compared to how scary it can be in real life. They can be assertive online, they can experiment with the way they represent themselves to others, and can find out what 'works.' It is easy to trash identities if they don't work. As various children have commented throughout my interviews with them: "I like it cuz others like it … fit in ya know;" "fashion is everything heh;" "I try to adapt to the place I am in; I like wearing stuff that surrounds me;" "I made three friends here in one night without even knowing—all you need to do is not be rude to them."

Another thread is about rules and regulations and order in the community. Some of the kids have been given 'wizard' privileges, which means they are responsible for maintaining the Palace rules,

and they have the power to 'kill' or 'ban' any person who is unseemly or unsavory. Just prior to my arrival somebody had come on wearing an 'unacceptable' avatar (a bathing costume I believe) and started 'spoofing'—making rude comments appear next to other people. When children are given wizard powers they usually take it very seriously indeed and insist on enforcing with rigidity the disciplinary rules and practices of the community. I have seen eleven year old children 'kill' fifty year old adults for an almost rude swearword. This exercising of power by children renders the Palace environment, a site of division, normalization and conformity, requiring participants to become "the obedient subject, the individual subjected to habits, rules, orders" (Foucault 1977, 227). Those children in power enjoy exercising their authority as they play out roles of responsibility and importance which they may not have access to offline.

One of the most common topics of conversation is this discussion about avatars. Everybody wants to look cool and have great avatars. The cool avatars resemble teen runway models, modeling sports clothing lines, and in fact many of the clothes have distinctive sporting logos on them. Both trisha and .·:HuLa BaYbAh:·. ask after avatars. .·:HuLa BaYbAh:·. is complimenting somebody (no better way to get ahead and maybe even be granted wizardship status than to compliment everybody) and trisha is asking if she can have somebody else's. Online the invisibility of the body makes it possible to manipulate parts of the image of 'self,' of constructing an image that is an adaptation of self. Sometimes a purified self, sometimes an idealized self, sometimes the murky self, or even the secret self of desire. It is easier to be 'prettier,' 'in control,' 'liked,' and perhaps is a reflection of their fantasy. As one child commented when I asked them about the selection of their favorite avatar, "Maybe it represents the person I dream about being?"

In understanding the transcript further I employ Fairclough's framework for textual analysis below. Fairclough suggests three dimensions of discourse practice that are useful when analyzing texts. These dimensions include text production, text distribution, and text consumption. These will be used briefly in turn as a more critical examination of the children's transcript will be discussed.

In terms of text production, the transcript may be considered a sample of 'Internet chat,' and yet it is unlike any conventional conversation genre because it instantaneously captures both small group and large group conversations within the single text. The tenor varies because power relationships existing between and among the range of people participating within the room's chat are diverse. These

power relationships range from the expert-novice technology user; the monitors and regulators (wizards) of the chat related to the regular users; the seeker of acceptance into the group; the users with the most visible presence due to their higher levels of talk; and the requestors of information and the givers of information. Some examples of these are expounded below.

Anya sets up a seeker of knowledge from an expert relationship with SoccerKid. Christy and babygurl™ set up an equal intimate relationship of two young girls discussing friendships and boys. *deedee and Di_1 are setting up a regulatory relationship regarding appropriate behavior, though this is confused because *deedee does not realize that the offensive behavior is merely being reported to her by Di_1 and this understanding is being negotiated. .∴:HuLa BaYbAh:∴. is setting up a seeker of goods (the avatar) relationship with babygurl. This small sample is exemplary of the Internet chat genre or discourse type (as it occurs in public rooms) as a type which simultaneously includes instances of equality, authority, power and regulation, goods-seeking, goods-giving, knowledge-seeking from an expert, and expert sharing of knowledge. These relationships are manifested through the threads of text that are experienced by all in the room. Additionally, at any one time one participant may be holding simultaneous conversations in which they may be both the intimate friend, the rule-enforcer and the novice asking an expert for advice. All people in the room will witness the range of roles and power relationships adopted by a single person through the multiple layers of conversation occurring.

Conventions of turn taking certainly exist, but perhaps not as neatly or clearly as an offline group conversation. Here we see, for example, confusions about who spoke (Christy mistakenly responds to trisha rather than babygurl about friends), interruptions by people coming and leaving the room, an interruption by DancingQueen which seems to indicate her desire to join into one of the conversations, and people like *deedee holding several conversations simultaneously, resulting in only partial conversations actually ending up in the transcript, as the other people she was talking with do not respond or take their 'turn' until later in time.

Because of the range of tenor in the relationships taken up within the transcript, the type of vocabulary used varies accordingly. This transcript includes: the computer technical discourse such as "hit alt then print screen," typical computer-talk abbreviations such a "u" to mean you, other online chat conventions such as capitals for emphasis, the use of three or more dots such as "…" to represent the

speaker's intention to produce a pause, a single question mark on a line "?" to simply save the writer's time in typing in the whole question, also indicative of their assumption that the right person will both recognize the question mark as belonging to their conversation and interpreting the question without having it articulated. Particular computer codes are also used unique to the Palace, such as the use of "a)" in hurricane bob's use of ")" train to produce a sound, and the use of Di_1's "^" in "^brb" to produce a square text sign next to her avatar to signal her temporary absence at the keyboard to those in the room. The nature of cyber chatting is such that children are learning to converse with new semiotic systems, some of which directly relate to computer programming cues, others are signs of their own invention, both of which combine to create a new form of text which requires correct interpretation for inclusivity into the cyber world for these children.

In terms of text distribution, the way the text is distributed is quite unique since this text is both conversation and writing. Conventional conversations usually exist in the moment, and they are only distributed further by retellings or rememberings of the conversation. As a hybrid between conversation and writing, this text usefully illustrates Jacques Derrida's critique of 'presence' in western metaphysics. The western philosophical tradition since Plato has prioritized speech as somewhat more 'authentic' or 'present' to the originator of the ideas expressed. As Derrida has pointed out, this privileging of speech as the primary term in the dyad speech-writing rests on the assumption that speech is less mediated than writing. What he points out is that the crucial first step is the translation of an idea into language, and therefore speech and writing are on an equal footing. In both speech and writing, language stands between the idea and its form of expression, deferring our access to the idea, or signified. The conversational nature of chat-room exchanges rests on the near real-time exchange between participants, and so takes the form more like that of speech than of writing.

Whilst this transcript is an example of speech written down, as explained earlier, it is actually represented in the written form in two ways—one in the form of various shaped and various colored speech bubbles which appear cartoon-like from the user's avatars' mouths, and the second in the form of a running log in a separate window which users may or may not opt to use. A further option is available at the user level to log the conversation (resulting in a text such as the above transcript) in order to keep permanent written records of a conversation. These might be used to record developing friendships or for in-

terest. The owner of a Palace can keep server logs of the conversations and comings and goings of users, which could include times appearing next to each line of text, as well as user log-in details such as the ISP address. This might be used to restrict for moderation and regulation purposes. In these ways then, the text, because of its written nature can be reproduced for varying purposes, including that of analysis by Internet researchers in papers such as this one.

In terms of text consumption, Fairclough relates the way discourse reflects social practice, ideology and power within the concept of discourse to hegemonic struggle. Examining the ideologies present in texts, Fairclough suggests, allows an understanding of the significations that serve to sustain or restructure power relations. In the focus transcript, a 'correct' manner of chatting (e.g. being polite) is regulated heavily. It may be acceptable to talk freely about boyfriends and graphic programs, but repeatedly making uninvited train noises is unacceptable. Showing enthusiasm by using careful placement of capitals and numerous exclamation marks is acceptable, but using all capitals (the Internet equivalent of shouting) is not. Using abbreviations and anagrams are expected and accepted conventions, but children's self-correction of spelling errors also indicates that even young people are aware that they are presenting themselves 'in text,' and some want that text, and as an extension of that, the perception others have of them, to be of a high literate standard. The amount of effort children make and what they make that effort about is an indication of the amount and type of investment they place on their experience in this situation. This ranges from ensuring correct spelling or designing colorful hand-customized avatars.

In this particular transcript, an examination of the different topics addressed by the girls and boys reveals that the girls seem more interested in talking about issues related to friends, boys, health, diet, and the clothes and appearance of their avatars. This appears to be common to a number of other transcript data, but further analysis is required in this ongoing project before any generalization might be made with certainty about gendered Palace practices.

The girls also seem to do the majority of the public talking (we do not see the other boys who were present and mentioned in the transcript participating publicly, such as CJ and cookie monster). Of the two boys talking, one is talking computer technicalities, the other is making train noises. *deedee has a lot to say by virtue of her 'wizardship' status, other girls appear to be competing for attention and inclusion within the public chat. A sense of belonging to the community is highly sought after, and the sense of presence in that com-

munity by participating in the open chat is an important vehicle for this sense to develop. Speaking and behaving appropriately in public spaces leads to this feeling of inclusivity and belonging.

Although the rules and conventions of participation are clearly important, the hegemonic struggle appears to be just as much about how to participate within the community rules, as it is about who has the most to say, who is talked to the most, and who is deemed to be most 'cool' in the environment. The more physical presence through talk combined with the most interesting collection of avatars, the more likely this acceptance and domination of the chat room will be accomplished.

Visual Analysis

The avatars provide a rich starting point for analysis. In terms of a visual text, these are the visual texts that are used as the signs of representation of each person's identity. The avatars children are using are linked inextricably to popular culture and fashion, the trends being: sports (sk8r avatars), music (Korn), and computer games (tomb raiders, pokemon). It is also interesting to note that *Adidas* sponsors Korn, so the combination of sporting and musical logos-signs are very important with regards to pop culture and the choice of avatars. In the screenshot all of the avatars have a certain look to them, the 'cool' sporty and-or musical look. Although in this screenshot the names are not visible, in normal Palace participation names can be switched on or off, with the default being on. The choice of names by children is sometimes linked to 'gangs' or groups of friends, using symbols of leadership e.g. Angela{{{Leader of Sparrows}}} (here this represents Angela belonging to and being the leader of the gang {{{ Sparrows}}}); or linked to Korn UsInG CaPiTaLs in a playful disturbance and disruption of traditional typeface (as you can see with .·:HuLa BaYbAh:·.). It's also common to use symbols rather than, or combined with, typeface such as babygurl ™. Also, deliberate incorrect spelling for names e.g. Klown for clown is common.

Customization of avatars, that is, adding in one's own graphics, colors, animations, ghostings (fading the colors of the avatar to appear ghost-like), drawings and/or logos to personalize the avatars, is a common practice. In fact it is almost essential if you want to be 'cool.' Children are teaching each other the complex technical specifications of computer graphics and editing so that they can achieve this. Sometimes groups of children will get together and design their own 'friends' type prop that they all wear over their normal avatar. They may make a group or 'clan' and invite their friends to join in, and

wear some token prop or sign to indicate membership. The sense of belonging, friendship and fun this gives them makes tackling those graphic programs well worth the effort. These girls that 'can,' that have mastered the technicalities, are the ones that are 'cool' and they flaunt it. The mastery of technical skills by these girls represents an explicit instance of what Foucault would term the connection between knowledge and power. Having the technical know-how gives these girls power within the virtual community. Power to look 'cool,' power to teach others, and power to participate fully using all of the resources available to them in the Palace environment builds status. Flaunting, displaying and exercising their skills makes their power visible and their status as a member of the cyber community validity.

In terms of gender, it is interesting to note that despite the literature related to gender swapping for young adults (e.g. Bruckman, Danet, Spender), the children I have studied and discussed here, in fact, made every effort to *exaggerate* their gender. The choice of avatars reflects the children's visions of themselves as 'cool' young girls and boys. The girl's faces are pronounced and beautiful, with long eyelashes, flowing locks and pert lips. The boys have punk hairdos, posture in a slouch, hands in pockets, 'cool' hats. Similarly in language use, girls in my interviews have tended to use more emotive language and expressions (e.g. "that avatar is neato!"), whereas boys tend to play the 'techno-expert' game and choose to discuss the graphics, the programs, the hardware, and their own skills. Instead of breaking any gender stereotypes as aforementioned scholars claim is possible, the children reinforce with a vengeance their sense of femininity and masculinity. For children, their sexuality and appearance as *male* or *female* is crucial to their sense of identity and projection of self to others. This links back to the earlier discussion and questions raised about children's authoring of multiple forms of identity online. The children at this age seem on the surface to be replicating the artificiality of social boundaries between genders. I see this as reflective of their needs as children and young adolescents to fashion themselves as the male or female they fantasize themselves as becoming, as their youthful dreams of who they might be. The avatars are all beautiful and popular looking, resembling popular heroes that young children might aspire to be. Although a superficial glance might give the impression that the children are merely reinforcing stereotyped notions of gender construction, they are, in fact, tinkering with their own fantasies of femininity and masculinity, and it is through this process, I would speculate, that they will also begin to deconstruct for themselves what it is to be male and female in the playful and risk-free space of this cyber context.

Another common social practice in the Palace is that of avatar parading, swapping, and changing. The kids do it for several reasons, such as: to show the results of 'shopping' or 'creating' using graphics programs to construct their avatar; to express their changing emotional 'faces' or 'states' and their desired various bodily positions—such as finding and using avatars for sitting, avatars for lying, and avatars for jumping; to participate in the 'group' atmosphere of the Palace by being 'active' during their encounters (it is very common to swap and change avatars with a high degree of frequency in any single exchange). Additionally, children will use other customized props to accompany their avatars to show an activity, action, or state of accompaniment such as food, drink, pets, and signs. It is also common for example to have coke or coffee and the like next to each person's avatars to symbolize a group activity. Bringing customized props and sharing them with the other people in the room, such as providing a drink of coke for everybody appears a sure means of winning friends. Peter Kollock talks extensively about many online communities being "gift-giving communities" and explains that gift economies induce benefits by improving the "technology of social relations," that is, by increasing the range and diversity of social networks (220). I would argue the children's making of and swapping avatars is a form of gift giving. It too is done in a spirit of giving and receiving and with the motivation of gaining more friends, fitting in, and feeling a sense of belonging. Gift giving, then, is another practice that discursively constitutes the cyber child subject in this context.

In the screenshot shown, our Palace was preparing for an 'end of millennium' party. The children had spent much time discussing with me prior to the party about how to make our guests feel welcome and in the party mood. Here some of the children had gathered to show me what they had managed to prepare. Christy (the popcorn girl) had spent quite some time finding and modifying her avatar as well as making prop bags of popcorn to give out to all the guests. Soccerkid and Yonono (the two boys) had found music (*Real* midi files that users could hear), silly animals (the monkeys they adorned the Palace room with), and a funny sign about not feeding the wizards to make people laugh when they entered.

To analyze this visual image in detail I will look at the avatars and the environmental space using Kress and Van Leeuwen's framework of visual analysis. I will examine how the screenshot realizes various ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings. In defining these categories it is important to view them in light of their relationship to Hallidayan functional grammar systemics as previously alluded to.

Michael Halliday explains that when we use language we are always simultaneously making three different kinds of meanings: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Ideational structures construct the nature of events, the objects and participants involved, and the circumstances in which they occur. Interpersonal meanings construct the nature of the relationships among the speakers and listeners or readers and writers. Textual meanings are concerned with the distribution of the information value or relative emphasis among elements of the text. Kress and van Leeuwen use these three meaning making systems and apply them to describing a grammar of visual design. By applying their analytical tool to the screenshot a deeper understanding of the visual meanings created by the children and/or for the children will result, and this will in turn lead to another way of understanding how the cyber child subject is constructed. Kress and van Leeuwen refer to images in general, and do not specifically concentrate any of their visual grammar to cyber spaces, so this analysis will be based upon my own interpretation of how their framework might be applied to this visual context. Each of the three metafunctions will be discussed in turn below.

The Ideational Metafunction

Kress and van Leeuwen's first dimension is the ideational, and explores the meanings that are created in the image. Here the image is a narrative with the participants 'living' in the story. Though in this image none of the participants are acting directly on another, they are all engaging in interaction, and their continual movements about the screen which cannot be captured by a single screenshot makes it ultimately more of a transactional process.

The participants involved are each of the children present. They are all gathered in a particular location, in order to discuss the party preparation, which explains the context or circumstances during the time of the screenshot of the image. They are also there in a relationship of accompaniment in some instances. Christy is accompanied by her popcorn machine and Yonono is accompanied by his music ghetto blaster machine. These props as mentioned before are important both for the party and for representing the symbolic control and mastery of the Palace environment.

The Interpersonal Metafunction

Kress and van Leeuwen identify five dimensions of interpersonal meanings in describing the grammar of visual images: mood, subjec-

tivity, objectivity, social distance, and modality. This is a highly complex set of dimensions given the nature of the online environment, so below is an initial interpretation of how they might be applied to the cyber context and what this might mean as far as understanding the child as a cyber subject is concerned.

In terms of mood, we see in the screenshot that the females have all chosen avatars that can be classified as 'demand,' with their gaze directed outwards. The obscured gaze of the two males realizes the mood as an offer. The nature of the screen however blurs this demand-offer realization, when you consider that the person represented inside the screen is also looking at their selves from the outside. An almost narcissistic element creeps into the 'demand' mood, when you represent yourself as gazing out towards yourself. The gender difference is interesting to note, and begs the question: why? This leads to the next interpersonal dimension of the image, which is undoubtedly subjective. Viewers are included both from within and outside of the screen. The frontal angles are inclusive from 'you as a viewer' perspective, yet the oblique angles are inclusive from the 'you inside the screen as a participant' perspective. The duality of the self (viewer and participant) in this space lends a particularly complex reading of these images.

Bodily placement is used to emphasize or de-emphasize relationships with others. To sit next to or on another, to be a chair or cloud for somebody else to sit on or float in, to lurk in the corner, are all signifiers of social distance. The fluid placement of self in the image will tell a multiplicity of storylines throughout any one session. Avatars are full body, and the 'shot' is a public one. It is possible to have close up headshots as avatars, and to create a more intimate distance, and this is done by some people (mainly adults) but is not reflected here. The intimacy is created by positioning and, of course, what could be more intimate than turning yourself into a chair and having another person sit on you!

In many ways, then, bodily communication and body 'language' online can echo the offline world. Children seem to be fluid in the way in which they position themselves in a room—sometimes positioning themselves in 'standard' ways of sitting and standing at a place on the room background that would replicate offline positions, yet at other times (such as the floating girl in the screenshot), playfully disrupting and resisting the offline physical constraints of the body by positioning it anywhere they desire.

Modality is realized through the use of elements such as color, texture, light and shade. In this Palace backgrounds and avatars tend

to fall into what Kress and van Leeuwen term a sensory coding orientation, where bright vibrant colors dominate. The pleasure principle is the dominant theme of the Palace, and the colors are rich and in high modality to realize this.

The Textual Metafunction

The avatars each represent points of salience in the image. The background offers various places for activity (the chair, the platform, the rooftops, and the sky) but here the participants have chosen their own particular spot for placement at this particular moment in time. The girl in mid-air is likely to be either just joining the room and not yet decided upon her preferred spot, defying the rules of gravity and deliberately positioning herself in that spot, or preparing to add wings to her avatar so that she can legitimately be an angel or bird to hover in that spot. As alluded to above, this is a playful disruption of traditional boundaries of the ability of the physical body and reveals some children's pleasure in resisting such boundaries, and yet other children's desires to hold on to those same boundaries and see themselves as conforming to the physical world. However, this might reflect their sense of aesthetics as much as a desire to conform.

Identity Shaping

Identity is shaped through a complex combination of elements online just as it is offline. In the Palace, the crucial elements identified by the kids as giving them a sense of identity include: their selection and use of avatars, their sense of being a part of a group, the importance of talking (to have a positive presence, one needs to talk), not only talking, but talking fast, talking the Palace slang, keeping up, keeping track, and multitasking, for example the interactive game sites <www.zone.com>, <www.battle.net>, and using the Palace as a talking site while playing in another site. Also crucial was the importance for children to have mastery over the technical aspects of the Palace software, graphics software and computers in general, and being able to teach each other how to navigate through programs.

The examples I have cited reflect children showing or developing skills across a range of discursive identity making sites. Many of these have been identified as sites of identity construction offline also. The selection of avatars for example could be construed as analogous to children's selection of clothing and style. Fred Davis claims that clothing makes a clear reference to whom we are and to whom we wish to be taken as. The avatars children select clearly indicate their fantasies

they wish to be like.

Children also engage in group behavior, as well as learning how to 'talk the talk,' that is, they enter a linguistic community with a relatively closed lexical register that requires of them highly specific technical language and technical command (Halliday). Children are engaged in multitasking, demonstrating mastery across a range of contemporary technologies, possibly an outcome of growing up wired. In teaching each other, they exercise a form of power related to their knowledge, thus reinforcing their self-esteem and strengthening their own identity in these formations.

Bernstein distinguishes three fundamental ways of identity construction, and I would like to examine what the children are doing with both their visual and typographical texts using his framework. This framework is based on an understanding of how our fast capitalist society has altered traditional resources for the construction of identity, and he looks to the new resources available. Fast capitalism, namely the current greatly accelerated speed of turnover time, necessitates the production and distribution of ephemeral items such as images (rather than say white goods) by means of which people can construct identities that are equally as ephemeral. In his framework, he identifies three categories of identity construction: de-centered, retrospective and prospective. Defining these, Bernstein explains:

> De-centered identities are constructed from local resources. Retrospective identities are constructed from grand narratives, cultural or religious, which serve as models. Prospective identities are constructed from narrative resources which create a re-centering of the identity, that is, giving the identity a new collective base. (76)

De-centered identities can be constructed from either instrumental or therapeutic dimensions. The instrumental dimension relates to a 'projection' onto a market signifier, it has no boundaries, and the present is no guide to either the past or the future. The children's avatars could well fit into this—their avatars wear market signifiers, their names relate to market signifiers, and their avatars change at whim according to what's 'in.' The therapeutic dimension is the opposite of the projected instrumental dimension, and refers to an introjected individuality. This is where the self is independent of consumer signifiers and instead becomes a 'personal project' or an 'open narrative' which is internally constructed. While I would argue that the adults I have met online exhibit this dimension, the evidence I have suggests that children are more likely to be projecting onto market signifiers.

Retrospective identities are constructed from the resources of the past, and are formed by grand narratives that provide exemplars and criteria for 'belonging.' These include fundamentalist narratives of religion, where rules and codes of behavior are sacred, and elitist narratives of high culture, which privilege certain types of education, initiation, and hierarchy to 'belong.' I have found no evidence of either type of retrospective identities reflected in the children online.

Prospective identities are future oriented and are grounded in the identity of the future, a future based on a society which is grounded in both fast capitalism and rapid technological change. They renounce traditional forms of identity as categorized in his retrospective forms of identity, but are different to the de-centered forms because they aim to create a new collective base, based on new belief systems. Examples of what Bernstein views as a prospective identity include groups that are brought together to activate political change such as feminist lobby groups. Bernstein suggests these groups are likely to be symbolic rather than economically based, and that it is better to look to the social purposes of the groups and the solidarity they represent to understand the way in which their identity is constituted. As Jerry Everard points out, there are two kinds of economy—the economy of commerce and the economy of signs. The first is about exchange between communities, the second is about establishing who belongs within a given community. Whilst the commerce-economy is important, in terms of the state it needs to be treated as only one of the facets of any group identity. States go to war over symbols and identity, but rarely do so over commerce. Identity is about life or death both for the individual as well as for the state, whereas commerce is about relationships and commodity value. Thus the importance of the symbolic order should not be underestimated. Examples of renouncing traditional forms of identity might include geographical neighborhoods—young people today are more likely to have a web of friendships based on common interest yet are not geographically bounded than those in more traditional social relations.

Whilst online communities lived in by children might not amount to the activation of political change, the children themselves are certainly enriched in a number of ways. The way they form friendship groups and wear their group insignia as a badge reflects a commitment to the new friendship, gaming, or interest group that they have joined. This badge is symbolic of the solidarity of the group formation, and their desire to belong to and support that group. The way children work together to teach each other and maintain the mechanics of the community is reflected by such examples as the online discur-

sive disciplining of individuals who might disrupt the group, the commitment to working together to hold online parties, the desires to present themselves well to others in terms of the way they 'look,' and the ways in which they work to welcome new members or visitors to the group by such simple acts as offering each new person a bag of popcorn or a cup of coffee to 'hold.' Such actions, the commitment of time, and the commitment to creating and producing their world are certainly indicators of the willingness of the members to acknowledge and face challenges together to maintain their group identity.

I would like to argue that the networking and community building by children online is reflective of a prospective, collective identity formation. Online children have the opportunity to exist in a place and space removed from their offline reality, so they are able to reconsider the external influences that shape their identities and find other ways in which they can extend their identities. Online they can become part of groups which are not necessarily accessible to them offline, so their ways of being and living in the world are expanded in new ways. This relates to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of "de-territorialization" in which to 'Be' in the world entails stepping out of your comfort zone—extending the boundaries of your identity and only then coming up against the Other by which one gains self-definition. Children have opportunities online to experience those other ways of being, which they can either resist or accept, in part or whole, into their overall sense of identity construction.

Conclusion

For the children in this study, participation in the Palace environment is one of social interaction and fun for children and one in which friendships and groups were forged through the Internet medium. This fun is not boundless, but discursively practiced through disciplinary and regulatory moments. Fun is also closely tied in to children's mastery over the technological world, and the sense of power this knowledge empowers them with, power which they might not otherwise have access to in their offline worlds.

The transcript and screenshot used a basis for the discussion in this paper lead to the conclusion that participation is screened through regulatory measures, and that power is a struggle for presence, acceptance and positions of assertiveness and dominance in the new medium. This results from a combination of technical expertise, willingness to share knowledge and expertise, playing by the rules, and high levels of communication. The way a child is a subject offline is bound by the discursive practices of the dominant culture in which

childhood and adulthood are disparate entities. Herethe reader may recall Buckingham's assertions that childhood and adulthood no longer exist as separate entities, but have become blurred. I would argue that one of the catalysts for the blurring of such boundaries is because of technology and the empowerment children are developing through their formation of online communities such as the Palace under examination in this research. The child as a subject online has that very opportunity to resist the discursive practices that bind them into a closed category of 'child.' Foucault (1971) discusses "eventualisation," that is, that at certain moments, due to certain confluences of discourses or conditioning elements which he terms "enunciative modalities," changes can occur more easily. Children online in the Palace have discovered moments that serve to position them with alternative ways of being and alternative possibilities of identity. As a cyber subject they are finding those ways to blur and move beyond any closed notions of childhood that may discursively bind them into only one way of being in their offline world.

However, whilst achievement of power within the community is concerned might seem to blur any traditional boundaries of gender participation in the technological domain, the girls and boys in this sample seem to not take advantage of these possibilities and veer towards more traditional views of gendered behavior. Everard notes, "the Internet is a cultural artifact. As such it encodes within its structures, its technology and the language surrounding it, a world-view or philosophical outlook" (160). Everard expands on this, stating:

> While the 'space' within which such communities occurs is 'virtual' the communities that operate within them are nonetheless real. The 'space' is the space within which telephone conversations take place—the notional space between one telephone receiver and another, separated by wires and all the other technological mediations that make such conversations transparent to the participants. (124)

The logical consequence of this is that people take their offline personalities, prejudices and modalities of thought with them online. This also goes some way toward explaining why virtual 'cross-dressing' presents such a challenge and test of discursive skill for participants. The extent to which girls and boys replicate or resist traditional notions of gender when in the virtual environment is certainly an area worth further investigation.

My thesis then, is that children are beginning to construct prospective identities as they network, form friendships, and join online communities. The use of instrumentalist market signifiers in their

individual avatar making is an important part of joining into the online worlds, but it is more a subset of the broader identity construction, within the social and discursive practices of online life. The avatars children select operate as tokens of subjectivity within the notional space of cyberspace, and they are instrumentalist in terms of being preset choices from the Palace.

Children are in some ways constructing new forms of identity when online, moving away from some of the traditional resources from which identity was once shaped such as family and religion. In this age, there exist a greater plurality of religions and belief systems, and family groupings. Now, more than ever before, much more complicated, complex possibilities of the family experience, the religious experience, the neighborhood experience, and the racial experience exist in society. Cyberspace offers a further and new way of existing within the world, or being a subject in the world, and of adding to the already complex ways in which identities are shaped. For the child, new collective, empowering forms of identity exist online for those who have the access and desire to explore new technologies and to find new and playful ways of expressing their identities. Cyberspace also presents the child with previously unavailable access to people from other countries, other world-views, in ways that were all but inconceivable offline without enormous access to material resources for transport and other support—and for a child this would entail being taken by one's family on trips rather than being able to explore freely in a less-controlled environment. This is notwithstanding that families and belief systems can take a variety of forms—the breadth of access available to an online child is orders of magnitude greater than that available to an offline child.

The discourses in which they participate online construct them in ways that are on the one hand liberating and exciting, yet on the other are a product of commercial standardization and heavy regulation. Derrida's comment is pertinent here:

> ...we could ... take up all the coupled oppositions on which philosophy is constructed, and from which our language lives, not in order to see oppositions vanish, but to see the emergence of a necessity such that one of the two terms appears as the *differance* of the other. (1976, xxix)

Children in the sample discussed are clearly technological literate and able to participate in the world of the Palace, yet are only able to do so subject to certain acceptable modes of behavior. As Foucault (1971) suggests in the "Author Function Concept," people are both posi-

tioned within discourse, yet are faced constantly with the choice between resistance and complicity. So in this instance children can author themselves in new ways online, but only within certain new confines relative to the discursive positioning in which they find themselves online. Additionally, only those children who are able to participate within all of the varied discourses online are those who will gain mastery or positions of dominance and power of any particular online domain.

The challenge for the child of the new age is to make wise and informed choices about their participation in cyber culture, and such choices would necessarily be different for each individual. What children can achieve in these sites requires incredibly high levels of literacy and competence that begs acknowledgement and understanding. The genre of Internet chat is complex and intricate, and requires of participants new ways of seeing and living, and an ability to work simultaneously within multiple registers and tenor relationships. The challenge for parents, teachers, policymakers, librarians, software developers and so forth is that they all need to respond to this new type of child, the cyber child, and do so quickly in order to ensure that children get the best support in developing these new literacies.

The challenge for society is to accept new notions of childhood in the age of the electronic media. Children no longer are enclosed in the rigid boundaries that Buckingham termed "pre-social." They are no longer excluded from sites of power and knowledge that were once reserved for adults. Children are social, active and participatory members of society who, in sites such as the online world of the Palace, can exercise cultural, social and political power, within discursive practices partially of their own making. The experience of being a cyber child adds new layers and dimensions to their identity formation, and is a significant social development that resists traditional conceptualizations of the child.

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