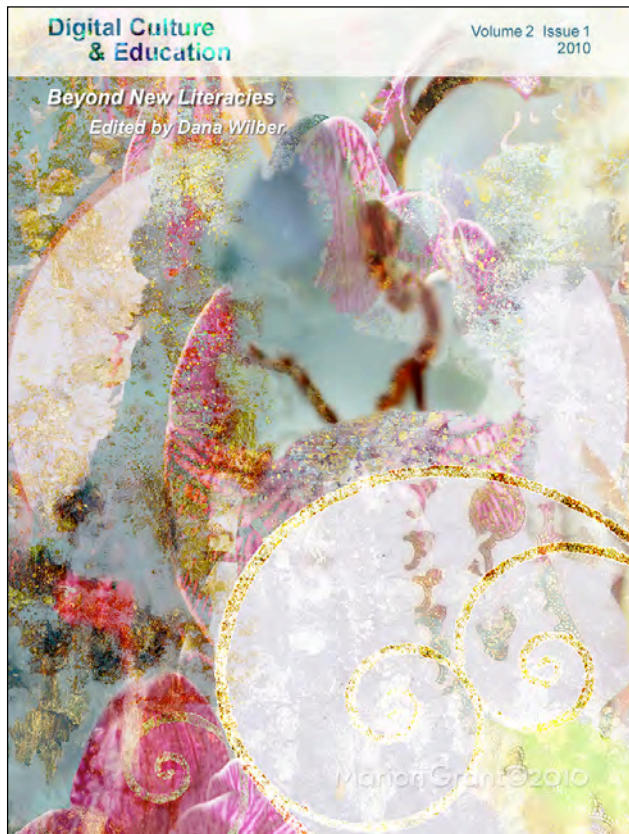


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The language of Webkinz: Early childhood literacy in an online virtual world

Rebecca W. Black

Abstract

In recent years there has been an explosion of virtual worlds intended for early childhood populations; however, because the majority of research on games and such worlds has focused on adults and adolescents, we know very little about these spaces. This article attempts to address this gap by providing a qualitative content analysis of the affordances that Webkinz World an online environment that as of March 2010 had over 3 million unique site visitors per month, offers for children's literacy and language development. Analyses suggest that the site provides unique opportunities for immersion in literacy-rich contexts and academically-oriented practices that may enhance those that are readily available in many children's daily lives. However, looking beyond the discrete linguistic and technical aspects of learning in Webkinz World reveals a designed culture with limitations on learning and a constrained set of literacies and social messages that warrant further critical exploration.

Keywords:

Virtual Worlds, Literacy, Early Childhood

Introduction

The advent of the Internet has offered a wealth of opportunities for youth to socialize, learn, and play in ways that extend beyond the offerings of their immediate home and school contexts. In addition, many online spaces also offer opportunities for engaging in new literacy practices that may differ significantly from traditional print-based notions of literacy. For example, there are collaboratively-authored online encyclopedias for distributing and looking up information, social networking sites for keeping close connections with friends both near and far, video games and virtual worlds for competing and interacting with others via avatars, and fan fiction sites for sharing writing and reading with people with common media interests from across the world. Shared virtual environments (SVEs) offer particularly compelling examples of the new forms of learning, literacy, and social development that youth are engaging with online. SVEs are immersive digital environments in which players, represented by avatars or digital characters, interact with the designed virtual world as well as with other players' characters. Unlike massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) which rely on fixed narratives and graded progression through activities (levels), SVEs allow players the freedom to construct their own play narratives and engage in activities in a less constrained format.

There has been a considerable amount of research aimed at understanding the relationship between video games, such as MMOGs, and contemporary forms of learning and literacy development (Apperley, 2010; Gee, 2003; Shaffer, Squire, Halverson, & J. P. Gee, 2005; Steinkuehler, 2004; Thorne & Black, 2007; Walsh, 2010; Zheng, Young, Brewer, & Wagner, 2009); however, this research has dealt primarily with games targeting adolescents and adults. In recent years, there has been a marked

increase in the number of SVEs targeting children between the ages of six and thirteen. Webkinz World (www.webkinz.com), Club Penguin (www.clubpenguin.com), and Barbie Girls (www.barbiegirls.com) are among the most popular of such sites, with Webkinz attracting approximately 3 million unique monthly visitors in 2010, Club Penguin boasting approximately 2 million, and Barbie Girls with approximately 440,000 (Compete, Inc., 2010). In spite of the popularity of such sites, there is currently a dearth of research looking at young children's literate engagement with video games and SVEs, and even fewer studies have approached virtual worlds as potential sites for new forms of literacy learning and engagement.

Some exceptions include research focused on games as training grounds for twenty-first century forms of literacy (Apperley, 2010; Beavis & O'Mara, 2010; Salen, 2007; Walsh, 2010; Zimmerman, 2008). Other studies have focused on informal science learning and discourse practices in Whyville (Fields & Kafai, 2009; Kafai, 2008; Kafai & Giang, 2007). Another notable exception is Marsh's (2008) ongoing study exploring the implications of SVEs such as Club Penguin and Barbie Girls for children's literacy development and learning. Marsh's findings suggest that online spaces allow children to adopt various social roles and experiment with different ways of being in the world (2010), as well as to experiment with new digital literacy practices (2008) through their play. Also, Merchant's (2009) work in this area focuses on the transformative potential of incorporating new digital literacies into the classroom through immersive 3D environments. This research highlights the ways that "innovative digital literacy practices such as those involved in virtual world game play can easily disrupt classroom routines and call into question deeply held assumptions about literacy, about literacy instruction and even the teacher-pupil relationship that lies at the heart of the educational process" (p. 39).

In an attempt to extend knowledge in this area, this article presents a content analysis of the affordances that the SVE Webkinz World offers for children's literacy and language development.

Sociocultural Theory, New Literacies, and Play

Analysis for this article is grounded in a sociocultural approach to literacy which focuses attention on how children's activities, relationships, and immediate social and cultural contexts affect their learning and development. Through this lens, culture can be conceived of as a "system of meaning" (Goncu & Katsarou, 2000, p. 223) that is shared by a social group, thereby opening up a space in which the set of signs, artifacts, social norms, and communicative practices shared by a group of children in an online space may be considered a culture. From this perspective, children's literacy learning and development is part of a process of socialization into these shared cultures and systems of meaning (Goncu & Katsarou, 2000). Moreover, in modern societies, much of this process is mediated through print artifacts and literacy-related activities, as well as through the multimodal representations supported by new media and technologies.

In recent decades, the shift toward computer-mediated communication has given rise to a conception of new literacies that are emerging in tandem with technology-enabled social practices and post-typographic forms of text. According to Lankshear & Knobel (2006), new literacies are not merely chronologically new—as in practices that have emerged recently as a result of computer-mediated communication—but they also are ontologically new in the sense that they entail "technical stuff" and "ethos stuff" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007, p. 7) that differs from the "stuff" of print-based literacies. Examples of new technical stuff might include the kinds of materials (e.g., screens, pixels, code, bytes), practices (e.g. remixing, tagging),

and interactions (e.g., moving a mouse over a web page, following hyperlinks, manipulating an avatar) enabled by new technologies. The new ethos stuff, on the other hand, is a way of describing the sort of norms, values, and sensibilities that are emerging with ubiquitous use of new information and communication technologies. Within this ethos, literacy practices are “‘participatory’, ‘collaborative’, and ‘distributed’ in nature, and can be contrasted with the “‘published’, ‘author-centric’, and ‘individuated’” nature of traditional literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007, p. 9). Moreover, these digital or new literacy practices are also grounded in a new cyberspatial-postindustrial mindset (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007) that views the world as fundamentally changed by the technological revolution. Within the new literacies paradigm/cyberspatial-postindustrial mindset, the world is highly networked, collaborative, and offers up unique possibilities for interacting and exchanging information, as well as new ways of being in the world (e.g., via avatars, online personas, and taking on expert roles in popular cultural spaces, to name just a few) (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). As Wilber (2007) posits, new information and communication technologies and the literacy practices they enable “represent a major cultural and social phenomenon” (np.). This point of view can be contrasted with the physical-industrial mindset of the modern-industrial era that views the current cultural, social, and economic landscape as fundamentally unchanged by new information and communication technologies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006).

While play is often dismissed as a leisure pursuit with little educational value, research suggests that children’s symbolic (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978) and sociodramatic (Roskos & Christie, 2000; Vukelich, Christie, & Enz, 2008) play are mechanisms by which children acquire symbolic systems such as language and experiment with various social roles and ways of being in the world. As increasingly popular play spaces, SVEs have the potential to provide a wealth of opportunities for mediated language play and experimentation with new literacies; however, a sociocultural approach to exploring such spaces emphasizes the importance of looking beyond discrete, decontextualized linguistic features to understand how the social and cultural contexts of these spaces, as well as the tensions between new and traditional literacies may shape, influence, and even curtail children’s learning.

Method

This article uses a case study approach and is based on data stemming from participant observation and a qualitative content analysis of the SVE Webkinz World (www.webkinz.com). This work is part of a larger cross-case analysis of the literacy and developmental features of several SVEs targeting early childhood populations. Data collection, while still in the preliminary stages, has focused on creating a map of the site contents (e.g., rules, Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), tutorials), activities, and spaces, as well as the collection of artifacts (e.g., in-game texts, screenshots). The content analysis was conducted using an open-ended, qualitative protocol that focused on the design features (technical and aesthetic) and the literacy-related artifacts and activities of the site. At this point in the project, participant observation and data collection did not involve any interaction with or recording of children’s activities. The researcher’s observations instead were aimed at gaining a robust sense of navigation, communication, and gameplay in the SVE.

Webkinz

Webkinz (Ganz, 2005-10) are stuffed animals with matching digital counterparts that were released by the Ganz Corporation in April of 2005. Each Webkinz pet comes with

a unique code that allows the owner access to Webkinz World, a SVE in which children participate by adopting the digital version of their stuffed Webkinz toy. After visiting the adoption center, players receive a room for their pet and 2000 KinzCash, a monetary unit that allows them to participate in the Webkinz World economy. At the Webkinz Shop, players can purchase items to furnish their pets' rooms as well as food, toys, and clothes for their highly anthropomorphized pets.

The Webkinz World site offers multiple opportunities for different styles of individual or social gameplay. Players who prefer more individualized activities can focus on furnishing their pets' rooms, cultivating an outdoor garden, getting a job at the Employment Center, sending their pets on a trip through the Travel Agency, signing their pet up for classes at the Kinzville Academy, entering their pets in various competitions (e.g., cooking, beauty pageant) at the Webkinz Stadium, or playing games in the Arcade. For more social forms of engagement with Webkinz World, players have the option of pitting their skills against other players in the Tournament Arena games, inviting another Webkinz over to their virtual room to visit with their pet, or visiting the Webkinz Clubhouse where players can communicate with other Webkinz World members.

The Webkinz World space is aesthetically rich, with bright colors, engaging scenery, and a variety of text- and video-based materials to support players' activities. According to researchers as well as practitioners, productive contexts for early literacy learning are immersive spaces, rich with environmental and functional print, that provide learners with many opportunities for receptive and expressive engagement with language (Vukelich et al., 2008). By these standards, play in Webkinz World has the potential to foster early readers' print- as well as digitally-based literacy development in many ways. Moreover, the online, multimodal format of the site also has the potential to provide children with access to a variety of new literacy practices. Nonetheless, touted by the creators as a "safe, educational, and fun online community" (Ganz, 2009a, p. Take a Tour), Webkinz World also has various design features aimed at ensuring the safety of young children on the site, as well as marketing other Ganz Corporation products. Thus, as the following analysis will demonstrate, while Webkinz World does offer significant and valuable opportunities for literacy learning, the constraints of the site design, coupled with Internet security safeguards and the profit-driven nature of the space somewhat mitigate the site's effectiveness as an environment for fostering language development and experimentation with new literacies. Moreover, because Webkinz World is commercially oriented, the shared social meanings, values, and life lessons promoted through the site warrant critical exploration as a part of children's daily learning and development.

Analysis

User Interface and Site Navigation

The Webkinz World site includes many design features that make activities accessible even to novice technology users and early readers. The main user interface, known as the dock, uses a mixture of text and icons to help players keep track of their in-game inventory, monitor their pet's condition and navigate the world.



Figure 1: Dock

To illustrate, the left hand side of the dock shows information about the pet’s levels of happiness (represented by a smiley face), health (represented by a heart), and hunger (represented by a fork). The Actions tab is represented by a bouncing ball as well as text, and the My Stuff tab by colored building blocks and text. This combination of icons and text is often used in Webkinz World, which can help pre-readers to navigate some aspects of the game more easily, and also allow early readers to develop print awareness and begin making the connections between the concepts represented by the icons and the words for these concepts. Another important aspect of navigation is the Things to Do tab, which is located on the dock and provides access to all of the various Webkinz World spaces and activities.



Figure 2: Things to Do Tab

As illustrated in Figure 1.2, the Things to Do tab also uses a combination of text and representative icons to help players with limited literacy skills navigate the world. While

multimodal representations, such as text combined with image or audio, are commonplace in curricular materials for early readers, the synthesis of text, color, image, space, and font afforded by the virtual environment exemplifies some of the “technical stuff” of new literacies that children are both learning and learning from as they navigate SVEs.

Upon joining the Webkinz World site, players are taken to the Adoption Center where they are greeted by a Mother Goose-like character (who is actually a penguin) named Ms. Birdy who leads them through the adoption process and a tutorial for how to navigate the space. From the very start, the site emphasizes literacy artifacts (e.g., signs, forms to fill out, labels, and bulletin boards) and encourages players to read site-related materials.



Figure 3: Adoption form

During the adoption process, players receive instructions both aurally and textually through corresponding text bubbles that appear above Ms. Birdy's head. Then, after entering information about their pet, they receive a printable adoption certificate and are encouraged to read their pet's personalized biography.

It is worth noting that most areas of the Webkinz World site have tutorials conducted by a character such as Ms. Birdy. These tutorials provide explicit instructions for how to use the site, and include a great deal of linguistic scaffolding for early readers.



Figure 4: Ms. Birdy's tutorial

For instance, as the animated character introduces aspects of the user interface, it will often point, tilt its head, and/or direct its eyes toward the object or portion of the screen being discussed (See Figure 1.4). This design feature creates shared visual attention, which research has shown to be effective for learners' vocabulary and concept retention (Walker, 2004 cited in Vukelich, et al., 2008). The tutorials also implicitly emphasize game-specific vocabulary (e.g., KinzCash, dock) as well as general vocabulary terms (e.g., check out, purchase). This emphasis helps players to develop what Gee (1999) calls "technical language" that is specific to Webkinz World and helps players to more easily and advantageously navigate the space.

Interestingly, based on preliminary analyses, the tutorials in different parts of the world have varying levels of reader accessibility both across and within the same videos. For example, Ms. Birdy's introductory tutorial introduces text at about 200 words per minute (wpm), or just below the average adult reading speed of 230-250 wpm (Brumfit & Carter, 1986), with a Flesch-Kincaid reading grade level of 3.3. As a contrasting example, the Kinzville Academy (where players can sign their pets up to master certain skills) tutorial for the basic level agility training course introduces instructions at about 90 to 100 wpm, or a fluent 2nd-3rd grade reading level (with one brief exception during which the video introduces instruction at a rate of nearly 700 wpm) and is written at about a 4th grade Flesch-Kincaid level. While these tutorials have notably different wpm rates, design decisions may actually make Ms. Birdy's tutorial more accessible for early readers even though it introduces information and text at twice the rate of the agility tutorial. Specifically, the design features discussed below may support comprehension, although the speed at which printed material is introduced may impede actual "reading" of the text.

A primary factor in increasing accessibility is the coupling of chat bubbles above Ms. Birdy's head with oral instructions that correlate exactly with the text. Much like storybooks paired with compact discs, the coupling of aural and visual information can increase comprehension for early readers and English learners and help them make

connections between spoken and printed words. Several of the more essential tutorials and non-player characters (NPCs) in Webkinz World use this coupling of voice and text, while more peripheral activities, such as classes at the Kinzville Academy, only introduce information through text. As mentioned previously, Ms. Birdy's tutorial also leverages the affordances of the digital medium by using a range of other multimodal cues to increase comprehension. These include NPCs' eye and body movement as well as introducing images, color, and movement to highlight certain objects and illustrate points being made in the tutorial. In contrast, the agility tutorial (much like other more peripheral tutorials in Webkinz World that are explaining optional rather than central game activities) makes some use of movement and color to illustrate information; however, it is primarily text-based. Moreover, unlike the relatively stable chat bubbles above Ms. Birdy's head, the agility tutorial introduces text in boxes that randomly appear on the computer screen, much like text in a comic book, leaving slower readers with less time to decode because they first have to locate the new text. Thus, these tutorials vary notably in terms of how effectively they draw on the multimodal affordances of the online space; nonetheless, while early reader accessibility for these tutorials seems somewhat erratic, the design of the site as a whole indicates clear efforts to make materials accessible to players at a range of reading levels.

Receptive and Expressive Language Development

Literacy Artifacts

As Marsh points out, literacy is “deeply embedded” (2009) in children's virtual worlds, and participation in these sites has the potential to scaffold children's literate abilities in numerous ways (See Marsh, 2009, p. 201 for a brief survey of such literacy skills). Webkinz World is no exception in this regard. For example, there is an array of environmental print, or print that “serves real-life functions” (Vukelich, et al., 2008, p. 122). This includes signs to help players recognize the different areas of Webkinz World, name tags to identify in-game characters, labels to distinguish various objects, a newspaper, posters, pet travel brochures, and advertisements, to name a few. There is also an array of what could be called functional print, defined for the purposes of this article as print that is connected to performing in-game activities. This includes the Webkinz Guide, help menus, instructions for playing games and entering contests, job postings that list skill requirements for pets, pet resumes, daily and hourly activity schedules, game-related messages from Ganz, as well as labels and mouse-overs that help players determine how to complete a specific task. Thus, literacy-rich artifacts are salient components of Webkinz World that help players develop their receptive language skills, scaffold players' access to in-game activities, and socialize players into the shared practices and meanings of the site.

While there are ample opportunities for early readers and writers to be immersed in contextualized print, there are far fewer opportunities for players to engage deeply with literacy materials and develop expressive language skills. As an example, the Webkinz World newspaper the Kinzville Times is almost exclusively a forum for the Ganz Corporation's advertisements. The May 14, 2010 version of the paper is replete with ads for new pets, items, and accessories to purchase, as well as for in-game activities and the new Webkinz Jr. site. This also includes advertisements for a deluxe membership, which, for a fee, provides players with access to special areas of Webkinz World, exclusive items, and even a special hat for your pet “to let everyone know that you're deluxe” (Ganz, 2009b). Albeit primarily focused on image-heavy advertising, the in-game newspaper does offer several types of text that might inspire children to read.

For example, The W Tales are serial stories featuring Webkinz pets that are written at about a 5th grade Flesch-Kincaid readability level. The May 14, 2010, update is about a group of Webkinz pets who befriend a famous teenage cat. It features a great deal of dialogue and emphasizes the theme that friendship is more important than fortune and fame. The Kinzville Times also includes a Fun Stuff section that features various craft projects involving the stuffed Webkinz pets, as well as an advice column titled Plumpy's Place. Plumpy the advice hippo's column offers an opportunity for children to work on their expressive language skills, as they are able to send emails with game-related questions to Plumpy. This activity may inspire children to work on their spelling, grammar, and composition skills, both to make their emails more comprehensible, and to increase the likelihood that their questions will be selected for publication and answered in the column.

The various Webkinz World play spaces also offer up different literacy materials and opportunities for scaffolding language acquisition and play. As one example, the Kinzville Academy is a school where players can enroll their pets in different classes. Literacy artifacts integral to navigating this space include the learning guide (which provides introductory information about why pets should take classes), report card (which provide feedback on a pet's progress), sign up sheet (where players select and keep track of classes), as well as video tutorials that precede each class. This space would be difficult for a pre- or early-reader to access fully, as the materials are written at around a 9th grade Flesch-Kincaid reading level. However, because players complete a series of repetitive tasks at increasing difficulty levels, it is possible that an early reader could participate after receiving some initial scaffolding in the activities and interface from a parent or older sibling. This would require that the young reader either memorize the location of various buttons or memorize sight words such as "sign up" and "try out," to name just a few.

The Employment Agency is another designed space that requires players to engage with various play-related literacy materials. Such materials include a resume (where players can keep track of jobs completed by their pet) as well as the job board (which lists available positions and their requisite skills). Nearly all Webkinz World jobs, such as grocery clerk, flooring assistant, KinzPost sorter, baby-sitter, gem miner, and Ms. Birdy's assistant, have requisite skills that involve completing various in-game activities. For example, the gem mining position requires that players have previously located at least 20 gems (only one of which can be collected per real world day) by mining in the Curio Shop mines. It is worth noting that the jobs often require players to have completed at least one series of 50 academic questions in Quizzy's Question Corner, thus providing impetus for children to engage with the academic materials on the site. Much of the text in this area, especially the instructions and job requirements, would be difficult for an early reader to navigate; however, because many of the words are highly contextualized within Webkinz World (e.g., "You need to have completed 50 Kid's World questions at Quizzy's to do this job."), it is possible that players could use contextual clues to decipher the materials while at the same time broadening their repertoire of sight words.

The digital Webkinz World environment affords opportunities for children to visit virtual spaces, participate in activities, and be exposed to language that they might not otherwise encounter in their offline lives. That said, in spite of the digital, literacy-rich environment, the majority of textual artifacts in Webkinz World seem to be grounded in conventional print-based formats, rather than taking full advantage of the interactive possibilities afforded by the online technology. For example, the newspaper does not include any opportunities for readers to contribute via comments, the site labels and instructions have very little in the way of interactive text (e.g., mouseovers

that provide further explication or explanations in audio or visual modes), and, as will be discussed in a subsequent section, many of the games, such as Quizzy's Question Corner, use an automated Initiation-Response-Evaluation format that provides very little scaffolding for learners.

Communication and Self-Expression for Players

While Webkinz World does provide channels for expressive forms of meaning making and communication between players using their avatars, images, and movement, concerns about online safety curtail many opportunities for literacy development, authentic communication, and experimentation with new literacies that online channels might otherwise provide. KinzChat, the in-game messaging tool that does not require parental permission, is the primary means by which players communicate in Webkinz World. KinzChat works through formulaic messaging which allows players to choose from a set of topically-organized, pre-constructed sentences and phrases. Because most of the phrases are simple and contextually-situated within Webkinz World, this form of messaging can make it easier for early readers and writers to discern word meanings and construct and interpret messages without the help of a parent or older sibling. In addition, the act of choosing and combining phrases can help children develop an understanding of English grammar and syntax.



Figure 5: KinzChat

Figure 1.5 illustrates an interesting component of how KinzChat makes effective use of the multimodal medium to scaffold communication and understanding. Specifically, in this chat segment, the player chooses “About the Room” as a topical category, then selects “Woah, I like your.” Because of this choice, labels for all of the items in the room are automatically added to the third chat window choices. Then, when the player selects one of these choices and hits “send,” not only does this statement appear in a chat bubble for the other player to read, but a circle of stars (not visible in this

screenshot) appears around the object in question—in this case the Lemon-Lime-Time Clock. This feature helps early readers and writers locate words that they are searching for, learn new vocabulary, and make their meanings clear.

There are, however, several aspects of KinzChat that mitigate the system's potential for promoting literacy development and communication. Clearly, the most obvious problem with this system is that it leaves little room for children to practice putting their thoughts into words and expressing themselves freely. In fact, the Webkinz World FAQ for parents clearly states that “There is no way for users to type what they want, exchange any personal information, ask or say anything inappropriate. We control everything the users are able to say” (Ganz, 2009c, para. 1). Another hindrance is the cumbersome nature of the system itself. It takes a considerable amount of time to scroll through the different topical categories and to select choices that most closely approximate what one is trying to say, thereby creating a stilted and somewhat unoriginal communicative context. Moreover, as will be discussed in Black and Reich (in preparation), choosing the appropriate topical category may be developmentally untenable for younger players (or even some adults, for that matter), and the designers of these types of preconstructed messaging systems miss many opportunities for structuring chat in ways that would scaffold linguistic development and awareness.

KinzChatPlus, which requires parental approval, is another in-game messaging system that players can use in certain areas of Webkinz World, such as the Clubhouse. According to the FAQs, “using KinzChatPlus, children may type using their own words and phrases as long as they are not on the excluded list of words and phrases developed for this form of chat. We try to exclude inappropriate words and phrases, including proper names and numbers to avoid the disclosure of personal information” (Ganz, 2009c).

This less restrictive system, also known as dictionary messaging, allows children much greater freedom for conveying their own thoughts and making meaningful social connections with other players, as long as their word choices are in the approved game “dictionary” and do not fall into the excluded words and phrases category. It also provides opportunities for children to work on their expressive language skills. However, in contrast to what Ganz claims in the preceding quote, because the system prohibits misspellings as a means of preventing players from circumventing the rules about profanity and excluded words and phrases, it seriously curtails opportunities for early writers to use invented spelling, simple misspellings, and “their own words and phrases” to convey meaning.

Grimes' (2008) discussion of the Barbie Girls (Mattel, Inc., 2010) in-game messaging system draws attention to understudied yet noteworthy questions about preconstructed and dictionary messaging systems. Specifically, she points out that such systems are designed to promote safety within the site; however, the term “safety” remains vague and undefined. She goes on to argue that “what's missing is any nuanced discussion of how the pre-approved words and sentences become approved in the first place: How are they selected, who selects them, and on what basis? Perhaps most importantly, what's being excluded in the process?” (Grimes, 2008). While an in depth discussion of these topics is beyond the scope of this article, such questions are particularly relevant to understanding how the social and cultural contexts in which SVEs are designed can significantly impact the shared meanings and experiences that children are able to develop through their play. Moreover, the decisions about what to include and exclude in these messaging systems may be in direct conflict with players' developmentally appropriate topics of interest and/or linguistic capabilities, and may also favor certain cultural perspectives. Also, from a new literacies perspective, this restrictive approach to communication prevents young players from participating in the

kinds of knowledge-sharing, collaborative problem-solving, and highly networked interactions that characterize many online spaces. Thus, this topic warrants further attention and research.

Academic Materials

In addition to the many informal opportunities for learning and literacy development, several Webkinz World games and activities offer an explicit focus on promoting academic learning. According to the Webkinz World website:

- Booger Gets an A promotes addition skills
- Lunch Letters helps children to learn how to type and spell
- Quizzy's Word Challenge aids in spelling
- Operation Gumball encourages children to think logically (Ganz, 2009d, para. 4)

The site promotes participation in these activities by making them lucrative for earning KinzCash, more so than the Arcade games, and by making a certain level of educational gameplay mandatory for certain jobs at the Employment Agency. The most academically oriented activity on the site appears to be Quizzy's Question Corner (QQC), a game show activity hosted by Quizzy the Bear. QQC is known as one of the fastest ways for players to make KinzCash, and thus is a popular activity within Webkinz World. QQC features academic questions for all age groups across categories such as The Arts, Social Studies, Health, Math, Language, Science, as well as a general knowledge category with subcategories such as Kid's World, Pop Culture, Animals, Sports, Fun Facts, Green Thumb, and The Environment.

Considering the online game show format, it is not surprising that Quizzy's multiple choice questions tend to follow the Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) pattern, as the challenges associated with natural language processing (converting human language into structures that are decipherable for the computer) would make it difficult for the Webkinz World designers to implement any sort of genuine dialogue or more complex responses to children's answers. However, rather than simply leaving players with an evaluative "correct" or "incorrect" response, Quizzy's questions go a step further and provide final feedback aimed at extending the player's knowledge. As an example, with the question "For what do you use a fork?" after giving the correct response of eating, Quizzy's concludes with the information "Some people eat with chopsticks!" These closing bits of information either help extend the player's knowledge of the question topic (i.e., characteristics of a fork), or their general awareness about the U.S. or other cultures. That said, the distinctly Westernized perspective of the site's materials may also be alienating for many players.

Answering questions in any of the QQC categories can play a role in fostering children's receptive language, pragmatic, and lexical skills; however, the "Language" category has a clear focus on promoting children's knowledge and development in the areas of literacy and Language Arts. As an example, QQC questions for the 5-6 age group can be broken down into several distinct early literacy-related features such as: Alphabet Knowledge, Phonological and Phonemic Awareness (Letter-sound-isolation, Rhyming, Onset/Rime, Compound Words), Lexical Knowledge, Literature, and Idioms. For each age group, questions for every category are divided into 6 series of 50, for a total of 300 questions in each category, and there are discernable thematic patterns across each series of questions. For instance, many of the Age 5-6, Language Arts, Series 1 questions are related to fruits, vegetables, utensils (writing and eating), and fairy tales.

This thematic repetition, as well as the repetition across content area knowledge (e.g., multiple examples of compound words, multiple questions about the same author), allows children to either draw upon or build up their knowledge base in these areas and parallels the thematic organization used in many textbooks and classroom materials. As players progress through the series and age levels, the difficulty level of the questions and the sophistication of the themes increase. For instance, questions from the most advanced age level, 13 and up, features questions that focus players' attention on etymology, word roots, prefixes and suffixes, poetry, literature, as well as facts about female authors and famous playwrights. The QQC questions are clearly based in academic curriculum and provide age-appropriate opportunities for children to enhance their content area knowledge as well as their literacy skills in a low-stakes, informal, and fun learning environment. In addition, the heavy focus on vocabulary, idioms, and the U.S. cultural knowledge frequently presented in the additional feedback can be particularly helpful for English language learners' (ELLs) development of linguistic and cultural knowledge. In spite of the potential benefits of these materials, it also is worth noting that these activities are presented in a format that, rather than taking advantage of the affordances of the online medium, instead resemble traditional flashcard and multiple choice activities and could just as easily be completed on paper.

Discussion: Shared Social Meanings, New Literacies, and Learning in Webkinz World

From the preceding analysis, it is clear that Webkinz World offers children unique opportunities for immersion in literacy-rich contexts and academically-oriented practices that may enhance those that are readily available in their daily lives. In addition, as the number of site visits can attest to, children find these SVEs extremely compelling and are willing to spend hours playing and learning in such spaces. Webkinz World games and activities provide both direct instruction of word spellings and meanings, as well as numerous possibilities for incidental learning through contextualized language and communicative events. In addition to developing literacy skills, as Marsh (2009) points out, SVEs also help children "develop skills across the visual, gestural and aural modes" (p. 15). Thus, players are learning some new literacy proficiencies that are increasingly relevant to academic, work, and leisure pursuits in the 21st century, such as navigating virtual environments, manipulating avatars, interpreting icons, communicating via online messaging systems, and maintaining online relationships, to name just a few. It is also important to acknowledge the importance of what Steinkuehler (2007) calls the "constellation of literacy practices" that surround many if not all popular video games and virtual worlds in ancillary fan sites. Some examples of these practices include help sites (where players share information about how to find items and accomplish in-game tasks), fan fiction and fan art (narratives and images based on in-game adventures and characters), as well as forums and general discussion groups for avid players/fans. While not a focus of this article, research (Black, 2008; Black & Reich, in press; Steinkuehler, 2007) has shown that these out-of-game activities provide unique opportunities for youth to display and develop expertise and express their perspectives through complex, literacy-rich practices.

It is important to note that real world social and cultural contexts have a significant impact on the kinds of texts and opportunities for learning that are available in these virtual spaces. Looking beyond the discrete linguistic and technical aspects of learning in Webkinz World reveals a designed culture with a set of shared meanings that warrant further exploration. Common concerns about children's use of SVEs include

the consumption-oriented values promoted through site activities, and the use of immersive advertising (Grimes & Shade, 2005), both of which are readily apparent in Webkinz World. According to the FAQs, play in Webkinz World helps to teach children about saving and spending money, behaving responsibly, and caring for a pet, and in many ways, the site does encourage a form of dramatic play in which players take on the identities of responsible pet owners. This in turn requires that they learn to navigate the literacy materials and activities associated with this identity if they are to have healthy and happy pets. However, the focus on earning and spending in-game currency, common in many popular SVEs, encourages children to equate the purchase of “material” goods with caring for the Webkinz. This is reinforced through site texts, such as pets’ automated utterances thanking the player for “being so good to me,” and Webkinz Shop advertisements such as “A totally rad black hat will make your Webkinz pet feel like one cool dude!” Thus, children need to learn to read critically for the “functions and meanings” of such texts in order to balance the desire for cute and trendy virtual goods with the need to maintain enough KinzCash to feed and care for their pet. It is also worth noting that the site’s rampant in-game self-advertising makes up a large proportion of the environmental print and virtual space that could otherwise be occupied by literacy rich texts that are relevant to young players’ interests, thus providing further impetus to read and further opportunities for learning and development.

In addition, many aspects of the game, such as the aforementioned deluxe membership, underscore the consumerist focus of Webkinz World, as the only way for players to receive access to many rare game items and exclusive parts of the virtual world is through real life financial expenditures. However, in many other video games and SVEs, players attain such items and access through merit (e.g., gaming skill and time spent trying) or pure luck (i.e., rare items drop at random intervals). By tying many game activities and spaces to money rather than merit, Ganz essentially is creating an unequal playing field in which children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are excluded from full participation.

Another common concern about SVEs that manifests in the literacy affordances of Webkinz World is that of Internet safety. Specifically, the site design favors safety over opportunities for authentic interaction and meaningful social connection, which admittedly at present may be the most viable alternative for SVEs aimed at younger populations. Nonetheless, the restrictions on the site’s messaging systems seriously hinder young players’ ability to use in-game communication as a scaffold for their expressive literacy development. Moreover, the systems themselves seem to be designed without children’s developmental trajectories for literacy in mind. In addition, the choices about what words and topics are excluded and included in these types of dictionary messaging systems are shaped by adults working in a corporate context who likely have interests and values that differ from those of many young players. Although a detailed discussion of this topic is not viable for this paper due to space constraints, further research in this area is needed to examine the linguistic aspects of these messaging systems, to understand better the impact that they have on players’ communicative practices, as well as to provide insight into how such systems and worlds might be designed in ways that better facilitate communication and full participation for early childhood populations, inclusive of diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

While the virtual format of Webkinz World does provide children with some opportunities to experiment with identity play and new digital literacies, it is mainly in the aforementioned ancillary fan sites that children are able to engage in the sort of highly networked, collaborative learning and interaction associated with the “ethos

stuff” of new literacies (Black & Reich, in press). In Webkinz World itself, however, many activities appear to be grounded in a physical-industrial mindset. Within this mindset, technology is employed in ways that reproduce conventional forms of literacy in a digital format, rather than in ways that leverage the technical components in concert with the ethos of new digital literacies. A clear example of this is how Ganz and the Webkinz World designers approach Internet safety by “imposing blocks and filters in ways that parallel physical world behavior: road blocks, fences, restraints, and so on” rather than “adopting educative responses” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 34-35) to address issues of safety (see www.Habbo.com for a virtual world that takes educative approaches to Internet safety). Other examples include the static, read-only nature of textual artifacts, such as the newspaper, and the limited opportunities for players to interact or contribute to the construction of the game space.

Collectively, these examples illustrate the sort of tensions between the physical-industrial and cyberspatial-postindustrial mindsets (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007) that often arise in the design of contemporary learning environments. While Webkinz World, by virtue of its “technical stuff,” is in theory well-positioned as a site where children can develop new literacy skills, its design remains grounded in what Lankshear and Knobel call “bookspace” (2007, p. 13). In bookspace, the focus is on content that is ratified, standardized, and created by “experts”; in the case of Webkinz World, all content is created and strictly controlled by the Ganz Corporation. This content is then delivered in formats that position children as novices who are evaluated on the basis of mastering knowledge or skills. This can be contrasted with new literacy spaces in which participants are free to contribute content and demonstrate their expertise on topics of their choosing (Wilber, 2007). In such spaces, knowledge is distributed and accessed as needed, and textual materials are less “policed” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007, p. 14) and instead are open for sharing, reinterpretation, and remixing. However, as we can see from learning spaces such as SVEs, schools, and after school programs that cater to young populations, there are significant challenges to balancing the sort of freedom and creativity that are hallmarks of new digital literacies against traditional notions of how to best teach and keep children safe in bounded, physical environments.

With neighborhood (Jenkins, 1998) and school-based play spaces on the decline, technology-mediated environments increasingly make up a significant portion of the everyday contexts in which young children learn, socialize, and play. Case in point, as of July 2009 the Webkinz World site alone has over 28 million visits per month (Compete, Inc., 2009), and the majority of these visits were likely made by children. Considering the sheer numbers of children who are in some way impacted by the literacies and social meanings perpetuated via these popular spaces, it seems vitally important that parents, teachers, and education researchers alike have at least a basic (if not in depth) understanding of what players are doing in this popular SVE and in other virtual environments like it. Moreover, literacy researchers and educators should begin to consider how the various literacy materials and skills that children are engaging with in these online spaces may interact with or impact their attitudes toward and performance with school-based practices. Additionally, as increasingly influential purveyors of children’s culture, designers of SVEs should become aware of how educational research can be brought to bear to improve the educational, and perhaps social, efficacy of their worlds.

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