Games, Learning, and Society

Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age

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14 Culture and Community in a Virtual World for Young Children

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As evidenced by many of the chapters in this volume, robust research is emerging that explores the role of video games and virtual worlds in young people's learning. However, far fewer studies have looked at the role of culture and community in relation to learning not only within these virtual spaces but also in the fan communities that surround them. Moreover, there are even fewer, if any, studies that explore these topics in the context of virtual worlds for very young children. This chapter addresses this gap through a focus on culture and community within and surrounding *Webkinz World* (*WW*), a virtual environment designed for children between the ages of six and thirteen.

While video games such as *World of Warcraft* and virtual worlds such as *Second Life* that target adolescents and adults have been popular for years, online environments aimed at preteen populations (between the ages of six and twelve) are a relatively new phenomenon. Recently, there has been a marked increase in the development of such spaces, with *Webkinz World* (www.webkinz.com), *Club Penguin* (www.clubpenguin.com), *Neopets* (www.neopets.com), and *Barbie Girls* (www.barbiegirls.com) among the most popular. These sites garner a significant number of monthly visitors, with *Webkinz World* attracting approximately twenty-eight million monthly visits in June 2009, *Club Penguin* and *Neopets* boasting approximately ten and ten and a half million, respectively, and *Barbie Girls* attracting nearly eight hundred and fifty thousand (Compete, Inc., 2009). Despite the rampant popularity of such sites, we know very little about children's activities in these spaces at present.

Shared virtual environments (SVEs), such as *Webkinz World* (*WW*), are immersive digital spaces in which players, represented by avatars or digital characters, interact with the virtual world as well as with other players' characters. Unlike massively multiplayer online games (MMOs),

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. Thus players in SVEs often spend a great deal of time engaging in activities that mirror offline day-to-day life, such as furnishing homes, gardening, buying clothes, playing games, developing relationships, and caring for virtual pets.

Studying SVEs that target children is important because younger users are more likely to be influenced by the content than adult users and therefore are more vulnerable to messages, activities, and interactions on these sites. Childhood is a time of intense socialization, in which children learn to navigate their social context and develop tools for successful interactions with others. Because of this intense period of learning, there is a need to better understand how SVEs mediate children's development, as well as how children engage with these sites. Such a focus would provide information about the risks and benefits of SVEs for children as well as which aspects of these spaces may capitalize on children's emerging interests and abilities.

In this chapter we look at the world of *Webkinz* and attempt to understand (1) how print-based and graphic renderings both within and surrounding *WW* contribute to *Webkinz* culture and (2) how the designed activities and systems of meaning within *WW* might enable or hinder the development of community in this SVE. These questions are approached from a developmental perspective that considers the complex interaction between learners and learning contexts, thus maintaining a focus on issues that can affect learning, not just in *WW*, but across technological platforms and other designed learning environments.

It is worth noting that while we began our exploration of *WW* with some expectation of encountering aspects of shared knowledge and culture and a sense of community similar to those reported in teen- and adult-oriented virtual worlds (Boellstorff, 2008; Fields & Kafai, 2009; Steinkuehler, 2006), our findings revealed some significant differences between this particular SVE and other popular online spaces. One of the most striking aspects of our findings may very well be the ways in which Internet safety has "gone wild" (Tynes, 2007) in this space, thereby preventing users from engaging in the sort of content creation and sustained communication that are hallmarks of online community. Instead, the culture and content of *WW* are contrived and controlled by the Ganz Corporation and thus reflect adults' idealized notions about children's behavior, as well as the corporation's interest in this early-childhood

demographic as a marketing niche. Unfortunately, these concerns for safety, coupled with design choices for the site, curtail children's opportunities for learning as well as for the development of community in *WW*. Thus, as we will discuss in our analysis, many users instead turn to external fan websites for the sorts of social connections, collaborative problem solving, and "playful engagement with the reading and writing of multimodal texts" (Marsh, 2008, p. 1), that are valuable aspects of children's learning and participation in online spaces.

Sociocultural Theory, Learning, and Culture in Virtual Worlds

This chapter is grounded in a sociocultural perspective of learning that recognizes the relationship between human mental processes and social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Wertsch, 1991). Through this lens, children's interactions with people and objects in their immediate social environments play a crucial role in how they learn and develop higher-order functions. To date, the majority of socioculturally oriented theory and research has focused on the influence of culture in offline spaces. However, for the purposes of this chapter, culture is viewed as a "system of meaning" (Goncu & Katsarou, 2000, p. 223) that is shared by a social group. From this perspective, the signs, artifacts, social norms, and communicative practices shared by a group of children in an online space may be considered a culture, and children's learning and development are in part a process of socialization into these online cultures and systems of meaning (Goncu & Katsarou, 2000).

In this chapter, *mind*, or *cognition*, is viewed "as something that 'extends beyond the skin' in at least two senses: it is often socially distributed and it is connected to the notion of mediation" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 14). Thus we will look at both *WW* and the external fan communities of *WW* in terms of how they both might promote collective thinking and socially distributed learning on the topic of *Webkinz*. Such a lens also helps to draw our attention to the fact that children playing SVEs such as *WW* are participating in a cultural activity with guidance that involves "interactions" (Rogoff, 1995, p. 147) with other users as well as profit-driven corporations, game designers, and content consultants, to name just a few. In modern societies, many of these interactions are mediated through print artifacts and literacy-related activities, as well as through the multimodal representations supported by new media and technologies. Thus this chapter will pay particular attention to the role of linguistic, semiotic, and technical mediation in creating culture in virtual worlds.

Related Research

Research suggests that many popular virtual worlds (Boellstorff, 2008) as well as MMOs (Steinkuehler, 2006) allow for the development of robust communities and foster a sense of connection among players. For example, in his ethnographic exploration of *Second Life*, Boellstorff (2008) described the role of *events* and *groups* in enabling "residents" to conjure a sense of community and social relatedness. *Events*, defined as "conjunction[s] of place, time, and sociality" (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 182) ranged from concerts and religious meetings all the way to round-robin storytelling gatherings. These events gave the virtual *Second Life* landscape a social component by providing a time and location for structured interaction. Conversely, *groups*, which were either "named networks of residents" (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 183) or more informal collectivities, provided a social connection that existed independent of time or location. According to Boellstorff, membership in such groups became a significant form of socialization within the virtual world. Group membership also offered residents the means for publicly exhibiting their affiliations by choosing to display the titles of their group membership above their avatars, much like a guild name appearing above players' names in an MMO.

As another example, Steinkuehler's (2005) ethnographic exploration of the MMO *Lineage* described how players developed "sociocultural norms and...shared practices" (Steinkuehler, 2007, p. 301) through membership in *guilds*. These shared practices included scaffolding newcomers into successful participation, sharing insider knowledge about game play, and collaborative problem solving. Steinkuehler's study also outlined an array of "literacy practices" that constituted social events within the game, including poetry readings and storytelling sessions, debates, and games such as "ritual insult," as well as literate practices beyond the in-game environment, including fan sites and blogs, discussion boards, and annotated fan art and cartoons, to name just a few (Steinkuehler, 2007, p. 301).

A common finding in Boellstorff's and Steinkuehler's studies is how language and other forms of semiotic mediation, such as images, movement, and sound, served as "cultural tool[s] that empowered human action in essential ways" (Wertsch, 1998, p. 39). For instance, printed and spoken language played a crucial role in planning, publicizing, and enacting the group and guild events that were significant "instantiations of sociality" (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 183) in these worlds. Also, members used multiple forms of media to create artifacts (e.g., videos, virtual clothing, designs for guild tabards, printed lore) that contributed to the social and cultural

landscape of these spaces. In addition, through their avatars, members used image, movement, artifacts, and group or guild titles for "identity work" (Goffman, 1959), which allowed them to demonstrate certain elements of their identity in various social situations. Thus the affordances and constraints of the available cultural tools shaped the communicative practices, social meanings, and cultural landscapes that were possible in these worlds.

In studying young children's immersion in shared virtual environments, it is reasonable to expect some aspects of shared culture and sense of community, largely mediated through semiotics and other tool use, to be salient for these sites. Therefore, it is with this focus that the case study and content analysis of the *WW* and the fan communities surrounding the SVE were directed.

Methods

This chapter 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, FAQs, and tutorials), activities, and spaces, as well as the collection of artifacts (e.g., in-game texts and screenshots). The content analysis was conducted using an open-ended, qualitative protocol that focused on the design features (i.e., 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 researchers' observations instead were aimed at gaining a robust sense of navigation, communication, and game play in the SVE.

Webkinz World

Webkinz

Webkinz are stuffed animals with corresponding digital counterparts that were released by the Ganz company in April 2005. Each stuffed Webkinz pet comes with an exclusive code that allows the owner access to *WW*, 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 2,000 *kinzcash*, a monetary unit that allows them

to participate in the *WW* economy. At the W Shop, players can purchase items to furnish their pets' rooms as well as food, toys, and clothes. These highly anthropomorphized pets – their outfits and actions – are children's primary form of self-representation and thus mediate many of their experiences as they navigate *WW*.

In theory, the *WW* site offers opportunities for different styles of individual or social game play. For example, 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 competitions (e.g., cooking and beauty pageants) at the Webkinz Stadium, or playing games in the Arcade. For more social forms of engagement within *WW*, 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 or Park, where players can communicate with other *WW* members. However, discussion in this chapter will highlight the many limitations placed on communication and self-expression in *WW* and how this hinders social forms of game play and thwarts the development of an in-game community.

Kindness, Caring, and Consumption: Culture in Webkinz World

Players in *WW* navigate the site primarily through the avatars of their virtual pets; consequently, many site activities center on caring for and even indulging these pets. For example, the main user interface, known as the *dock*, uses a mixture of text and icons to help players monitor their pet's happiness (represented by a smiley face), health (represented by a heart), and hunger (represented by a fork). The dock also contains players' in-game inventories, used for storing clothes, foodstuff, games, and toys for pets, as well as the menu for navigating the various spaces and activities of *WW*. Activities such as feeding, bathing, and exercising pets are mandatory in the sense that if a pet does not receive an adequate level of care, it will become sick and require a visit to Dr. Quack (a duck physician) and perhaps some medicine to become well again.

Unfortunately, food in *WW* does not grow freely on trees. Thus children must find ways to feed and care for their pets. Options for earning kinzcash to pay for food include taking jobs at the Employment Center, answering academic and trivia questions at Quizzy's Question Corner, playing games in the Arcade, or special (e.g., Wheel of Yum) and regularly

occurring (e.g., Wishing Well 2) activities. Of these activities, those which involve academic knowledge are more lucrative, such that Quizzy's Question Corner pays more than Arcade games, and games within the Arcade that involve math or spelling pay more than those involving typical game play. Another option is for children to purchase a garden and seeds, which allows them to grow enough food to feed their pets and sell any surplus in the W Shop. This option, however, comes with an additional level of responsibility because players must cultivate crops on a regular basis. This includes watering, weeding, and harvesting to keep the crops from dying.

The design choices around food shape the social norms and expectations for players' behavior in *WW*. The mandatory nature of pet care and the ongoing cultivation of crops contribute potentially to a culture of caring that may help to teach children responsibility. These activities also encourage children to take on the identity of a dependable and loving pet owner. However, there is a level of consumerism that is engendered in which money to spend on your pet is necessary to make the pet happy and healthy.

Above and beyond any necessary pet care activities, players also have the option of pampering their pets by buying them fancy clothing, toys, and furniture. Unlike many video games in which there is some functional value in purchasing most in-game items (i.e., specialized armor that adds attack or protection bonuses, food or drink items that heal), there is little practical value to the majority of items that can be purchased in *WW*. However, the designed culture of *WW* promotes this sort of consumption in several ways. For example, the site actively encourages children to associate the purchase of such "material" goods with caring for a Webkinz pet. This is done through various texts in *WW*, such as pets' automated utterances thanking the player for "being so good to me" and saying, "I'm so glad you bought this for me" after purchases are made. Shopping and buying also result in increased happiness and health scores for the pet on the dock interface. Furthermore, W Shop advertisements such as, "A totally rad black hat will make your Webkinz pet feel like one cool dude!" and "For a sophisticated look, you need these chic shades!" also encourage users toward materialism. Other examples include advertisements from the Travel Agency encouraging players to "Send all your pets on a great getaway! Your pets will go on a short trip to the spa and will come back happier, healthier, and less hungry! Wait here while your pet gets pampered!" Even the Ganz-created *Music Starz* uses animated music videos to promote consumptive values by depicting Webkinz pets that are yearning to take a vacation at the Travel Agency, showing off their fancy outfits, and expressing appreciation for all their favorite furniture.

On the one hand, this culture of purchasing validates common concerns about consumption-oriented values and the use of immersive advertising (Grimes & Shade, 2005) in virtual worlds for young children because children are encouraged to take on the identity of consumers. On the other hand, through this type of play, children also have the opportunity to learn about responsibility and saving and spending money because they must balance their desire to purchase in-game luxury items with the need to care for their pets adequately. Thus, despite design choices that encourage consumptive forms of participation, children have the opportunity to shape their own experience of play within the confines of ensuring the health and happiness of their Webkinz.

In considering the presence, development, and rationale for the cultural norms within *WW*, it is clear that concerns about children's safety while using the Internet (Grimes & Shade, 2005) are paramount. As such, site content is designed to minimize risk and consequently reduces users' abilities to interact with one another and contribute meaningfully to the structure and activities on the site. For example, in *WW*, the shared social meanings of the game space are communicated through a variety of media. However, unlike virtual worlds such as *Second Life*, in which members are largely responsible for creating these media, the graphic and print environment of *WW* is designed and maintained exclusively by Ganz. This allows Ganz to create a purported "safe, educational, and fun online community" (Ganz, 2009a, p. "Take a Tour") and makes the corporation rather than site members the main purveyors of shared social meanings within this space.

In many cases, the messages of site texts are explicit. For example, immersive in-game advertising urges young players to "adopt" (aka purchase) more pets, to visit parts of the site that require the purchase of Webkinz products to enter, and to become deluxe members for a forty-nine-dollar annual fee. The social meanings conveyed through some of the other site texts, however, are less explicit. For instance, the majority of female nonplayer characters (NPCs) in *WW* wear cardigans, blazers, scarves, and pearls. Pets go for vacations to tropical islands and spend days at the spa. With the purchase of an outside yard, users can see large green spaces between the backs of neighboring houses. Thus the prevailing aesthetic in *WW* is suburban, with manicured lawns, tree houses, and white picket fences that children can paint in order to earn money.

Collectively, these texts create a culture that is undeniably aligned with white, upper-middle-class values. Moreover, many aspects of the game underscore the consumerist focus of *WW* because 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 (i.e., the aforementioned deluxe membership). This can be contrasted with many other video games and virtual worlds in which 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). Furthermore, access to *WW* is maintained only by purchasing a new Webkinz annually. If no new pet is adopted within twelve months, the user's account is terminated. By tying game access and many game activities to money rather than merit, Ganz essentially is creating a culture of consumption in which children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are excluded from full participation.

Comparing events in *WW* with those in other SVEs such as *Second Life* illustrates the designed nature of social meanings and culture in these worlds and how cultural tools are accessed and used. For example, the events from Boellstorff's (2008) study were facilitated by the affordances of the *Second Life* software as a cultural tool. According to Wertsch (1998), "When trying to develop new cultural tools, the focus naturally tends to be on how they will overcome some perceived problem or restriction inherent in existing forms of mediated action" (Wertsch, 1998, p. 39). As a cultural tool, the *Second Life* software addresses the problem of making meaningful social connections across geographic borders by allowing for embodied, authentic interactions between residents. According to Boellstorff's study, the affordances of the software allowed residents to plan (via IM), attend (via their avatars), and freely communicate (via chat) at gatherings of their choice, making such events significant "instantiations of sociality" (2008, p. 183) and purveyors of shared social norms and meanings in this online community.

Conversely, as a cultural tool, the *WW* software addresses the problem of how to provide safe, online spaces for children; therefore, all "social" activities and spaces in *WW* are either fabricated by or carefully mediated through constraints of the game software. For example, the Webkinz Stadium, where players compete against each other in beauty pageants and cooking contests, is both attended and judged by an audience of NPCs, and real players are not permitted any authentic interaction. Also, the only "group" available in *WW* is the deluxe membership, which gives players a special gold chat channel, special gifts each month, and an exclusive gold hat "to let everyone know that you're deluxe" (Ganz, 2009b). Unlike the events and groups from *Second Life* that reflect residents' affinities and serve as part of their identity work on the site, the events and groups on *WW* are all fabricated and reflect the corporation's and designers' assumptions about children's culture and their interests.

Communication in Webkinz World

Just as language and the printed word provided the centers around which nonvirtual communities and nations could be imagined (Anderson, 1983), technologies of communication also have been central to the development and maintenance of online communities and their shared cultural practices (see, for example, Baym, 1995; Jones, 1995). As Boellstorff (2008) puts it, "[I]f what makes virtual worlds 'worlds' is that they are places, what makes them sites of culture – and thus amenable to ethnographic investigation – is that people interact in them" (p. 180). Unfortunately, as will be discussed in this section, concerns about Internet safety have seriously curtailed the extent to which people are able to interact and thus contribute to the shared social meanings of *WW*.

KinzChat is an in-game messaging tool that serves as a primary means of communication within *WW*. KinzChat content is strictly controlled through formulaic messaging and thus does not require parental permission. The system allows players to choose from a set of topically organized, preconstructed sentences and phrases. For example, children can choose from the categories "Ask," "Say," and "Rap." The "Ask" category includes subcategories such as "About You," "About *Webkinz World*," "About Stuff to Do." These subcategories then include questions such as, "How was your day?" "How many Webkinz pets do you have?" and "Are you having fun?" Unfortunately, the system is glitchy (e.g., frequent disconnects), cumbersome to use (e.g., slow, necessitates searching through a list of phrases, requires previous coordination because players must be on the same channel in order to chat), is poorly planned (e.g., not all questions have appropriate answers within the menu of response options), and is developmentally inappropriate for young children (e.g., based on adult-created taxonomies rather than interlocutors' expressive wishes and do not consider that most young children lack class inclusion abilities, which are needed to identify in which higher-order category a question or response is located). Thus KinzChat is ineffective as a tool for mediating authentic interaction and utterly useless for facilitating the sorts of shared social practices – participating in events, scaffolding new players' participation, sharing insider knowledge about game activities, and engaging in literate "play" – described in Boellstorff's and Steinkuehler's studies. This structure is unfortunate because sociocultural theory posits that learning is less "the socially facilitated acquisition of knowledge and skill and more…a matter of participation in a social process of knowledge construction" (Salomon & Perkins, 1998, p. 4). Thus children's inability to construct language or

freely generate written responses hinders their ability to request or offer help and to participate in socially scaffolded learning activities.

KinzPost is an in-game messaging system in which users can send letters or packages to other users for a price. As with KinzChat, KinzPost relies on lists of preselected categories from which users can select, such as "Birthday," "Friendship," and "Have a great day!" Within these eleven categories are four to ten statements for children to select. This feature, like KinzChat, relies on children having sophisticated class inclusion abilities to determine which higher-order category will contain the statement wanted for the message and prohibits any communication that is not specified in these categories. For instance, while there is a "Thank You" category, there are no other response options in which a child receiving a letter could reply appropriately – other than to state, "Thanks for the letter!" However, KinzPost does provide a way for users to send gifts to other users and somewhat personalize their packaging and stationary for an additional fee (e.g., selecting wrapping paper, adding a heart or other shape to the letter). Thus, like KinzChat, the postal service does not provide an effective mechanism for authentic interaction between users or methods for shaping the norms and culture of the site. While the postal features of the site do not support emergent literacy and communication, as free typing would, they do provide opportunities for reading printed text and may offer a mechanism for users to feel more connected to others by giving and receiving messages and gifts.

KinzChatPlus (KCP) is another in-game messaging system that requires parental approval and can be used only in certain areas of *WW*, such as the Clubhouse and the Park. KCP is what is known as a dictionary messaging system, meaning that children can type their own messages as long as the words are not "on the list of excluded words and phrases" (Ganz, 2009c). Excluded words include profanity, proper names, numbers (to prevent children from disclosing personal information), and misspellings. Unfortunately, the exclusion of misspelled words and certain words and phrases (e.g., *baby*, *on you*) makes it difficult for young writers to use invented, phonetic spelling and their emerging literacy skills to communicate in this space. In addition, as Grimes (2008) has argued, there has been little to no discussion in the research literature of how decisions are made about what words and phrases to include and exclude from these messaging system dictionaries. An in-depth discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this chapter; however, it is worth noting that the content of messaging systems underscores how the social and cultural contexts in which SVEs are designed and the carefully mediated nature of communication in such spaces can have a significant impact on the cultural meanings and

forms of expression available to children in their play. Nonetheless, KCP is much less restrictive than KinzChat and KinzPost and thus allows children greater freedom for interacting and contributing to the shared social meanings of the game space.

Searching for Community in *Webkinz World*

Through our content analysis, it is clear that cultural values, norms, and practices exist in this virtual world. As studies have consistently found, it is culture that provides a dynamic and contextual (Dean, 2001) "way of thinking and interacting" (Nanda, 1991, p. 67) that individuals can use to navigate their social worlds and solve different sorts of challenges (Reich & Reich, 2006). On *WW*, these cultural norms for in-game play define the goals of the site, the values of activities and interactions, and the ways in which children should engage with the site. In exploring these aspects of culture, it is clear that value is placed on materialism (in-game advertising and need for offline and in-game purchases to continue and upgrade access to the site, ensure Webkinz's health, and use the bulk of the *WW* features) and middle-class values (for normative dress, home structure, employment, and budgeting). However, some aspects of the SVE support nurturing, giving, and interacting (albeit in limited capacity) with others. Users are encouraged to care for their Webkinz's health, happiness, and hunger; interact positively with others users (because only kind and upbeat statements are possible in KinzChat and KinzPost), and visit *WW* features that other users frequent (e.g., Kinzville Clubhouse, and Park).

While these cultural and communicative elements are clearly present on *WW*, there is little evidence of the establishment of a sense of community on this site. Such a finding reminds us that while culture and communication are foundational to the existence and functioning of a community, they alone are not sufficient for establishing social connections or ensuring that members have a sense of investment and belonging in a space. As Foster (1996) pointed out, "[Alt]hough communication serves as the basis of community, it must not be equated with it. One can communicate with another individual without considering that person to be a member of one's own community" (p. 24). The same can be said for culture. Although community members may share cultural values, norms, and behaviors, culture is not the same as community (Jones, 1997). Perhaps a key difference between culture and community is that while it is possible, through the sorts of design choices discussed in the preceding section, to impose culture in an SVE such as *WW*, it is nearly impossible to impose community. This is due in

part to the fact that community members have collective needs and wants for the group (Heller, 1989) and provide vital input in the functioning of the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Unfortunately, the design of *WW* does not allow for these aspects of member participation to manifest in any significant way. Nonetheless, while meaningful communication and a sense of community may be lacking on *WW*, as we will discuss in the following section, it can be found in the fan websites that surround the site.

Community Beyond Webkinz World

According to Rheingold (2001), "*Virtual communities* are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (p. 276). Unfortunately, aside from dressing their pets, furnishing their pets' rooms, and using restrictive chat systems, players have few options for affecting the world of Webkinz or contributing to public spaces and discussions in any significant way. As a result, external fan websites are the only option for forming the sort of "webs of personal relationships" that make up the sorts of online communities to which Rheingold is referring.

For example, *Webkinz* Insider, with approximately eighty-three thousand members, is a popular destination for *WW* fans. While geographically distant, these fans use imagination, creativity, and multiple modes of text to extend their participation and form what Anderson (1983) calls an *imagined community* around *WW*. Much like the *Lineage* guild members in Steinkuehler's (2007) study, the members of *Webkinz* Insider develop a sense of community through offering help for newcomers to *WW*, sharing insider knowledge about the SVE through a forum and Twitter updates, and collaboratively solving problems. To illustrate, the following post appeared on the *Webkinz* Insider home page not long after members began experiencing trouble with a specific part of *WW*:

> If you are experiencing Magical Forest problems on your account, please visit the Glitch Report section of our forum. Our members are getting together and comparing notes to see if they can figure out what triggers these glitches. Hopefully we can collect information that will be useful to the Ganz programmers as they hunt for solutions to these problems.

This post and the responses it generated are a clear demonstration of the distributed nature of knowledge in the *Webkinz* Insider community. By

collecting examples of instances of these problems, members are helping each other to avoid triggering these glitches in their game play and attempting to provide Ganz with feedback on how to fix these issues. Such posts, as well as forum threads and articles posted on the *Webkinz* Insider Wiki, cover topics ranging from how to earn more kinzcash and how to make certain desirable clothing items all the way to how to navigate specific parts of the game; moreover, they provide clear examples of the culture of collaborative problem solving and social nature of learning in this space. Members take pride in sharing their knowledge about *WW*, and the *Webkinz* Insider site provides the cultural tools needed for easily and effectively communicating such information.

As another example, the site Everything *Webkinz*, with approximately twenty-one thousand members, is another popular destination for *WW* fans. Created by three mothers, the site's goal – "to provide a fun and safe place for Webkinz lovers of all ages to play and learn and talk about their Webkinz!" – is similar to that of *WW*; however, as a not-for-profit and less restrictive space, Everything *Webkinz* offers far more opportunities for creating a sense of community around *WW*. The site hosts virtual events, such as room decorating contests, raffles, holiday parties, and scavenger hunts, that foster interaction among members. Similar to Boellstorff's (2008) study, these events are a significant source of socialization within this space, yielding artifacts (e.g., screenshots, artwork, contest entries) and shared memories that help members to "conjure an image of their communion" and social connection (Anderson, 1983, p. 5) In addition, the site administrators solicit member input on what these events should be and how they should be structured, thus allowing members to shape the social and cultural landscape of the site.

Conclusion: Sociocultural Theories of Learning and *WW*

Sociocultural theory is predicated on the belief that cultural components are foundational for learning and that learning is supported by social connections and interactions with others. As such, social partners (e.g., siblings, parents, and community members) are active participants in the learning process, and learning is facilitated in the space between people (interpsychological), where culture resides, prior to being internalized (intrapsychological) (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus the social precedes the psychological (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). In studying the cultural and community aspects of *WW* and how they might facilitate learning, it is clear that the absence of community, especially in terms of limited communication and

user input, impedes the capacity of the SVE to support children's developing intellectual and emotional abilities.

In the absence of direct interaction and feedback, users are constrained in their internalization capacities. While scaffolded learning is possible at some level through the semiotic mediation of *WW* [the SVE is rich with printed (and some spoken) language, sounds, and images], the social aspects of learning are limited because users have few meaningful interactions with others and receive little feedback from site activities (other than gratitude for purchases made for one's Webkinz). Thus the "potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance [or site feedback] or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86) is lacking. This lack of dialectic processes (Bidell, 1999) minimizes the learning capacity of this SVE.

Furthermore, a core component of sociocultural theory is that learning is an actively supported endeavor and that this scaffolding enables learners to grow from their actual level of ability to their potential level (Vygotsky, 1978). Sadly, this awareness of children's zone of proximal development is missing on *WW* because feedback after errors is missing and responses are often discouraging in their tone. For instance, the Jelly Bean Challenge, a special activity in which users are presented with a partially filled jar of jellybeans and asked to guess how many jellybeans are inside, does not support improvement after errors. Instead, feedback for incorrect guesses include statements such as, "Wow, you were way off!" without any information as to whether the guess was too high or too low. While users get four chances, the user can get the same response four times with no mention of whether any guesses were closer than others. Thus users have no way to improve from one guess or challenge to the next. Interestingly, the fan communities surrounding *WW* do provide feedback that supports learning by listing the maximum capacity of the jar and translating the meaning of responses (e.g., "Wow, you were way off!" means that a guess was off by a thousand or more jellybeans, whereas "Oooo, that was close" means that the guess was off by two hundred or fewer jellybeans). These sites also provide chat and/or bulletin board features in which users can post comments and answer others' questions. Thus users can be the scaffolded learner or the more competent peer – roles that are both supportive of learning.

From a sociocultural standpoint, the design features of *WW* and the concern for users' safety limit the capacity of the site to support learning because meaningful interactions are minimal. Users cannot communicate freely, share ideas, or contribute to the design, activities, or structure of the site. This is unfortunate because learning theories highlight that learning

is "a matter of participation in a social process of knowledge construction" (Salomon & Perkins, 1998, p. 4). Thus *WW* is a SVE in which users can be exposed to and possibly internalize cultural norms and values (e.g., materialism, caring) but in no way contribute to them. It is worth noting, however, that in a recent *Webkinz Newz* article, Ganz announced its intention to improve the community aspects of *WW*. At the moment, efforts in this direction include (1) "enhanc[ing] the community aspects of *Webkinz Newz*" (Ganz, 2010, n.p.) through the addition of something called Feedback Fridays in which Ganz solicits feedback about site content from members, (2) "improv[ing] the biggest social area in *WW*, the Kinzville Park, with some great new features to get more people meeting and chatting with one another" (Ganz, 2010), and (3) implementing communal contests that "require players to work together toward a common goal [e.g., 'collectively score 1.7 billion points in Cash Cow 2 (an arcade game)'" (Ganz, 2010, n.p.). It is not yet clear if these efforts actually will help members to develop closer social ties and a sense of investment in the site, but they are indicators that Ganz is aware of shortcomings in this area and is attempting to redesign the space to give members more ownership and influence in *WW*.

While at present *WW* appears limited in its capacity to provide scaffolded learning opportunities and offer members a sense of community within the game site, it remains a compelling space for young children that can offer opportunities for learning along with other fronts. For example, the site affords young children the opportunity to develop a range of technological competencies, such as using a mouse, operating a computer, typing, reading icons, using an avatar to navigate virtual space, and searching for online information. *WW* also engages children in literacy-related practices, such as reading environmental and functional print and deciphering messages via text, audio, and image (Black, 2010). The site also encourages children to play academically oriented games and provides a space for experimenting with online social roles by dressing Webkinz and decorating rooms. In addition, children's engagement with sites such as *WW* inspires the development of ancillary fan sites such as those discussed in this chapter that do provide mechanisms for children's input, scaffolded learning, and a sense of connection with others. Moreover, the site can be used as a motivating factor in classroom activities, such as literacy centers in which children write stories, plays, or poems about their Webkinz pets or research projects that involve exploring the habitat and particularities of the various animals found in *WW*, to name just a few. Also, the virtual world, used in conjunction with face-to-face interactions, could

be a resource for scaffolded learning in which feedback and suggestions for improvement are provided by social partners such as siblings, parents, teachers, and peers.

Collectively, the findings and discussion from this chapter suggest that SVEs for young children are significant sites of culture that warrant further exploration. In addition, analyses emphasize the risks to learning and the creation of community when communication and social interactions are limited. This content analysis of *WW* and the fan sites surrounding it underscore the benefits of facilitating a sense of belonging and investment when designing learning spaces. While virtual worlds may create cultural norms, values, and practices, the absence of communication and users' ability to influence the site limits the establishment of online community as well as learning potentials. From a sociocultural perspective, learning is a highly social and mediated process (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, combining the engaging graphics and play of shared virtual worlds with opportunities for authentic communication, literacy development, and scaffolded learning (as those in the fan sites surrounding *WW*) can provide exciting opportunities for children's learning and development.

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