

Chapter 12

The New Backyard: Social and Moral Development in Virtual Worlds

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the significant role that virtual worlds, particularly massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), such as Club Penguin and World of Warcraft, play in the social and moral development of children and adolescents. A central argument of the chapter is that MMOGs and other virtual worlds provide a new backyard within which children and adolescents engage in active social interaction and play out moral dilemmas. It discusses three important areas of development in the context of interactions in MMOGs. First, it explores the process of perspective-taking, which is an important factor in empathy and pro-social behavior. Second, it explores the impact that MMOGs might have on stereotyping behavior and the phenomenon of stereotype threat, a harmful outcome of stereotyping behavior. Finally, it considers the role of moral dilemmas in development and how MMOGs provide unique environments for social and moral problem solving.

INTRODUCTION

Children are coming of age in a rapidly changing world. No longer are children limited to equilibrating the many factors of their social and physical environments—a challenging task in

and of itself—they must now come to understand and integrate the features of their technological environments (Freier & Kahn, 2009). For children who come of age with the new generation of technology already a part of their lives, they likely do not see this task as anything unusual. The technology is simply another part of their reality. But the experiences that children and adolescents

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have in multiplayer virtual worlds contrast to the experiences that they have in real life and to the experiences that prior generations of children and adolescents had before the development of these technologies. The virtual world provides limited physical feedback, abstracted social context, provide a surrogate extension of self, and require technical versatility to access. These clear and substantive differences may have implications for social and moral development.

In this chapter, we discuss the significant role that virtual worlds, particularly massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) such as *Club Penguin* and *World of Warcraft*, are starting to play in the social and moral development of children and adolescents. The popularity of MMOGs is rapidly increasing, and there appears to be no slow down in this progress. In 2006, for example, the revenues accrued through MMOGs exceeded \$1 billion (Harding-Rolls, 2007). By 2013, analysts expect MMOG subscriptions to top \$2 billion in consumer spending (Carless, 2009). Beyond the consumer experience, MMOGs and virtual worlds, such as *Second Life*, a virtual world developed by Linden Lab, are being used in numerous educational contexts, supplementing a variety of core curricula. With these online experiences becoming widely accessible and increasingly mainstream, what were once niche communities of adult players are now being joined by children at earlier and earlier ages. Therefore, it is critical to assess the developmental implications for children.

In this chapter, our discussion will be informed both by direct experience of game play and anecdotal observation of children's game play. We also call upon existing interdisciplinary theoretical and empirical literature to buttress our discussion from areas of research including child development, game and virtual world studies, and human-computer interaction (HCI). We provide references to empirical evidence to support our claims whenever possible—and when not possible, we will make explicit that the statement is a

hypothesis motivated by theory and/or experience as opposed to rigorous empirical observation.

One of our central arguments in this paper is that MMOGs and other virtual worlds provide a new “safe” environment (assuming the informed awareness of a parent or guardian) within which children and adolescents can engage in active social interaction and play out rich moral dilemmas. These virtual worlds may already be replacing real life environments in which children are perceived to be at a greater danger of physical harm and as a result have fewer unmanaged experiences (e.g., neighborhood backyards, parks or shopping malls). So, while the real world appears to offer increasingly less opportunity for experimentation and mistakes from which to learn, virtual worlds might offer an increasingly realistic array of analogous experiences with fewer perceived boundaries. It is the new backyard.

There are, of course, costs and benefits to such a replacement. This chapter attempts to identify and describe a few of the significant implications that MMOGs have for children's and adolescent's social and moral development. We discuss three topics that are central to social and moral development: perspective-taking, stereotyping, and engagement in moral dilemmas. Other developmental and technological topics will be discussed as appropriate to contextualize these three foci.

However, before discussing the developmental implications of coming of age interacting with MMOGs, let us consider a specific event that occurred on a *World of Warcraft* server. This event provides a concrete example, even if it is not a prototypical one, of the sorts of social and moral challenges that children and adolescents may face when interacting socially in these virtual spaces.

THE FUNERAL RAID

On March 4, 2006, roughly 40 people gathered together in tribute to a friend that had recently passed away. As the congregants mourned their

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