

Chapter 4

Multi-Modal Investigations of Relationship Play in Virtual Worlds

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ABSTRACT

Millions of youth have joined virtual worlds to hang out with each other. However, capturing their interactions is no easy feat given the complexity of virtual worlds, their 24/7 availability, and distributed access from different places. In this paper, we illustrate what different methods can reveal about the dating and flirting practices of tweens in Whyville.net, a virtual world with over 1.5 million registered players in 2005 between the ages 8-16 years old. We compare findings from analyses of tweens' newspaper writings, chat records, and logfile data. Our analysis demonstrates the mixed attitudes toward flirting on Whyville and the pervasiveness of flirting as a whole, as well as the breadth and selectivity of tweens' adoption of flirting practices. We discuss how our multi-modal investigation reveals individual variation and development across practices and suggests that player expertise might contribute to the striking contrast between formal writing about dating and the frequency of it on the site. Finally, we discuss the limitations of our methodological approaches and suggest that our findings are limited to a particular space and time in the existence of Whyville and the tweens who populate it.

INTRODUCTION

To date, most studies of virtual social spaces have focused on college youth and adults while largely ignoring younger players. Yet teens have rapidly adopted social networking sites like MySpace and Friendster as their own for continuing friendships and developing casual relationships (Buckingham & Willett, 2006; Mazarella, 2005). Further, many online spaces have opened up for even younger players than in the previous decade. Toontown, Club Penguin, Neopets—to name but a few—are aimed at younger players, called tweens, and millions of them have joined these places to hang out with each other. Researcher Danah Boyd (2008) suggests that one attraction of these sites is that they “provid[e] teens with a space to work out identity and status, make sense of cultural cues, and negotiate public life” (p. 120). As tweens move from childhood into adolescence they try out various ways to begin relationships that they anticipate engaging in. While such relationship-play is an important steppingstone in tweens’ social development (Thorne, 1993) it often takes place outside adult-supervised spaces and might explain the increasing prominence of virtual worlds. Studying such social interactions in virtual worlds is difficult given the complexity of virtual environments, their 24/7 availability, and distributed access from different places. The study of tween flirting and dating in virtual worlds so far has received little attention and will be the focus of this paper.

In this paper, we want to illustrate what different methods can reveal about a particular set of social practices, namely dating and flirting, of tweens in Whyville.net, a virtual world with over 1.5 million registered players in 2005 between the ages 8-16 years old. In Whyville, citizens play casual science games in order to earn a virtual salary (in ‘clams’), which they can then spend on buying and designing parts for their avatars (virtual characters), projectiles to throw at other users, and other goods. The general consensus

among Whyvillians (the citizens of the virtual community of Whyville) is that earning a good salary and thus procuring a large number of clams to spend on face parts or other goods is essential for the primary desire of Whyvillians, developing relationships (Kafai & Giang, 2007). From our previous research on Whyville, we know that tweens spend most of their time in virtual worlds socializing with one another and engaged in identity play with their avatars as a vehicle for these explorations (Feldon & Kafai, 2008; Fields & Kafai, in press). Beyond these central activities, players develop niches depending on their interests and levels of expertise. Often girls and boys play in same-sex groupings, but sometimes come together, as evidenced in the diffusion of teleporting and projectile throwing practices through the after school gaming club (Fields & Kafai, 2009; Fields & Kafai, 2008; Kafai, 2008). Our studies of these practices were very focused, looking closely at how club members learned from each other how to teleport and how to throw projectiles. To do this we searched logfiles selectively and drew on observations from the club to put together a larger picture of the diffusion of these practices (Kafai & Fields, in press).

Capturing flirting and dating proved to be difficult because the practices were more complicated, not being limited to particular commands but being much more dependent on context. Additionally, field observations in the after-school gaming club provided limited evidence that boys flirted in Whyville yet we had hints from the logfiles that the girls flirted without advertising it in the club (Kafai, 2008; Fields & Kafai, 2008). These initial observations suggested discrepancies between online and offline activity in regard to flirting. In the following sections, we describe our efforts to engage other methods that captured what tweens did and how they talked about flirting and dating, starting with a content analysis of the newspaper writings about flirting and dating in *The Whyville Times*, the weekly online newspaper, followed by a word frequency search of chat records. Only by

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