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Book Reviews

Connected Play: Tweens in a Virtual World

reviewed by Jason Haas

Title: Connected Play: Tweens in a Virtual World
Author(s): Yasmin B. Kafai, Deborah A. Fields & Mizuko Ito
Publisher: MIT Press, Cambridge
ISBN: 0262019930, **Pages:** 216, **Year:** 2013
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For decades, Yasmin Kafai has been an essential, careful scholar of the learning interactions and possibilities between children and technology. It is unsurprising then that this volume (written with her now graduated doctoral student, Deborah Fields) is a fantastic further contribution to the field. In the book, Kafai and Fields detail their work studying the activities and culture of tweens (nine to twelve year-olds) in the online virtual world, *Whyville*. What they document provides both a compelling portrait of what virtual worlds have to offer young people as well as an atlas for where further interesting work may lie.

In *Connected Play*, Kafai and Fields are first concerned with how children play and then how that play manifests in virtual worlds. Those familiar with their *Whyville* work from their special issue of *Games & Culture* (2010) may have some idea what to expect, thinking of meanings underlying the practices of mudball fights or the learning possibilities in virtual epidemics. That work is represented here, but their work studying a small number of students' *Whyville* use in an afterschool program as well as studying the play of hundreds through datalogs is couched in a broader perspective. They describe and categorize the different types of play they observed in compelling detail, carefully describing "Identity Play," "Social Play," "Boundary Play," and "Science Play," in *Whyville* before discussing the design implications of their work and speculating on the future of children's play in virtual worlds.

The chapter on Identity Play helpfully details how Whyvillians relate to their avatars and how players coordinated their efforts to iteratively help Numedon (the distributor of Whyville) make players' starting avatars representative of a greater diversity of racial features, namely skin tone. The Social Play chapter delves usefully into how design affordances of Whyville come to shape, be shaped by, or embody tweens' social interactions, including hanging out, mutual learning, flirting and norm creation. The Science Play chapter looks principally at the Whypox epidemic in detail, investigating how events like the Whypox epidemic can foster learning in virtual worlds, highlighting the collaborative reasoning and coordinated action it can inspire.

I took particular delight in the Boundary Play chapter. In this chapter, Kafai and Fields elaborate on the ways in which transgressive play occurs in Whyville. They focus in particular on "scamming" and "cheating." In Whyville, scammers run confidence schemes to trick other (most likely new) players out of their clams (the currency of the realm). Cheaters, on the other hand, participate in a wide network of online websites and players where the strategies and solutions to the world's science puzzle games (Whyvillians principal source of income) are shared. For both of these behaviors, Kafai and Fields observe and document the processes of norming and disputation that occur. For the most part, these behaviors are harmless and players seem to abandon the more egregious practices after a fairly short time. The researchers observe extensive learning through these cheats and are inspired to suggest a design paradigm of games designed for players to "cheat" for learning purposes! There

is some sound thinking in this section, and I sincerely hope that, while there are many more details to be explored, there is extremely fertile design ground around cheating-to-learn games.

As part of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning, there is a major emphasis on "connected learning," (as seen in the title), a learning movement advanced by the MacArthur Foundation that originates in the self-directed learning observed in young people with new technologies and online. A chief goal of connected learning is the connecting of young people and their learning to their peers, their mentors, to subject matter experts, as well as to their formal educators and parents. One of the book's great virtues is the obvious length to which the authors went in order to make their prose clear and approachable by a great diversity of audiences. While the book still mounts a considerable contribution to the scholarly community, much of the more nuanced discussion is managed in a single chapter at the back of the book with surprising efficiency and effectiveness.

I was surprised how little in the book was written about the creators of *Whyville*, Numedon Inc. The authors make clear that they received a great deal of cooperation from the creators and designers of *Whyville*, but much of their involvement is kept at an arm's length. When the company provided access or provided some other service, they are thanked, and when discussions of specific design decisions occur, there is some secondhand perspective from the company provided. Nevertheless, scholars have been seeking access to the proprietary information on virtual worlds that companies keep for their own purposes. In this case, *Whyville* was created by neuroscience PhDs Jim Bower and Jen Sun, and you might imagine that they would be sympathetic to the production of knowledge and willing to open up their processes and share with Kafai and Fields. However this possibility is not realized in this text. The sections of the book that address either the actual, current designs of *Whyville* or possible design experiments that might be conducted in virtual worlds flail a little bit in the absence of a more thorough understanding of what *Whyville* is and why it is the way it is from the creators' perspectives as a backdrop.

Finally, I hope that this book will be taught/presented/read/considered in conversation with Danah Boyd's *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (2014). Even as there are slightly different age groups under discussion in these two volumes, there are important questions raised by Boyd's book that create a lens through which the tweens of *Connected Learning* might be questioned, namely the "why virtual space?" question. Kafai and Fields present a thorough picture of how tweens play in *Whyville*, and they do an admirable job of investigating the in-person aspects of this play that they observe in their afterschool setting (Kafai, 2010). It is worth considering the bargain today's children are seemingly offered though—receiving more and more virtual playgrounds and hangout spaces at the cost of physical, embodied places to play and grow.

References

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Cite This Article as: *Teachers College Record*, 2014, p. -
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