Chapter 12
Virtual Worlds and Online Videogames for Children and Young People: Promises and Challenges

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ABSTRACT
Online virtual worlds and games provide opportunities for new kinds of interaction, and new forms of play and learning, and they are becoming a common feature in the lives of many children and young people. This chapter explores the issues that this sort of virtual play raises for researchers and educators, and the main themes that have emerged through empirical investigation. I focus on children and young people within the age range covered by compulsory schooling, providing illustrative examples of virtual environments that promote play and learning as a way of underlining some key areas of interest. Drawing on work from a range of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives the chapter emphasises how these environments have much in common with other imagined worlds and suggests that looking at the ways in which the virtual is embedded in everyday contexts for meaning making provides an important direction for future research.

1. WHAT IS A SUCCINCT OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH?
Virtual worlds and video games are high profile and popular forms of entertainment in the new global mediascape. They attract large numbers of children and young people, and this has led to interest in some quarters and concern in others as we grapple with the promises and challenges of new kinds of virtual play. Developers and entrepreneurs are designing increasingly sophisticated virtual environments, and so it seems timely to review the key findings that emerge from empirical and theoretical work, and to address those issues in meaning making and learning that are of interest to parents and educators. In what follows I contribute to this endeavour by looking critically at the specific promises and challenges of using
computer-generated virtual worlds and online videogames with children and young people for educational purposes. The research base in this area is still in its infancy, but we can now draw on studies of children in the early years, of teenagers and adults – studies located in a range of different settings and jurisdictions. This body of work outlines the kinds of understandings that virtual play can foster, and points to how it is integrated into everyday lives, as well as how it might be absorbed into more formal educational practice. However, first hand experience of virtual worlds and videogames is alien to many parents and educators and the media reaction to immersive online play is often one of moral panic (Gillen & Merchant, 2013). As a result it is necessary to be clear about what constitutes or defines these environments, and to explore some of the popular myths and misconceptions that have attached to these new forms of play. I begin with a focus on these issues.

‘This Insubstantial Pageant’: Understanding Virtual Worlds

In Shakespeare’s Tempest, the magician Prospero refers to the play itself as an ‘insubstantial pageant’ and in a much-quoted speech draws out parallels between theatre and life itself. The dramatic performance, and the imaginary world that is conjured up by it, is seen as an insubstantial pageant, a cast of characters involved in a sequence of events that we temporarily believe in. A play could be seen as a prototypical virtual world. As an event it is real enough, it takes place in space and time with all the material supports of a theatre or similar venue; members of the audience are embodied and present, but yet the world they are transported into is constructed in their individual imaginations, and filtered through their own particular lived experiences.

Drama, in common with other art forms, has the potential to entertain and enrich our lives as well as to educate and enlighten us, even to the extent of challenging or changing our world view. Of course it may not always do this - it may not touch everyone equally, and there is evidently enough ‘good’ and ‘bad’ drama performance to create lucrative livelihoods for critics! Nonetheless the enduring popularity of drama and other narrative media such as books, films and videogames reminds us of the significance of imagined worlds in our lives. I want to argue that virtual worlds and video games, rather than being radically new and hard to comprehend, are simply a recent manifestation of this same phenomenon. Although their realisation is new – in the sense that virtual worlds are created from pixels and mediated through screens - the desire to engage in world building, and the cognitive processes involved in meaning making are inherently similar to those at work in constructing other imagined worlds (Gillen & Merchant, 2013).

But for all this similarity, virtual worlds and videogames have introduced a new dimension. We now no longer simply consume the text, we ‘play’ or create it as we go along (Mackey, 2002). It is as if we had taken on a role in the drama and can then dictate the course of events, seeing things from our character’s point of view, or indeed from multiple points of view. In short our actions can influence what we see on the screen. In this way virtual worlds and videogames have many similarities to each other, both being computer-mediated environments in which players have at least some degree of agency. This agency, dictated of course by opportunities and constraints imposed by the game design, is often achieved by adopting a character, or avatar, that can be moved around the screen and can interact with other characters or objects. Although it is possible to engage with virtual worlds and videogames offline, their current popularity can be largely attributed to the fact that online connectivity provides opportunities for play and interaction with others who are not in the same location, as well as those who are.

The technical literature on virtual play draws a distinction between Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) and Multi-User Virtual Environments (MUVEs). MMOGs include...