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I was pleased to be asked to respond to the six articles that make up the special issue of *Games and Culture*, 5(1) on “The World of Whyville” (Kafai, 2010).

The real, however we participate in it, is always heterogeneous. What matters is always both material and symbolic, and every kind of real phenomenon is accounted as being real by different criteria from every other kind (cf. Latour, 1999). Reality is always “mixed” as we pass between virtual worlds (whether more immersive ones as in videogames, *Second Life* (Boellstorff, 2008), and *Whyville*, or the more familiar ones of film, television, novels, and perhaps even textbooks) and the wider activities of daily life where people and things behave more solidly, if not necessarily more predictably.

For a range of minigenerations, including the 10- to 12-year-old “twens” of Whyville, the everyday increasingly *includes* participation in (immersive, computationally mediated) virtual worlds rather than standing in contrast to them. Social relationships are mediated not just by face-to-face interaction but by text messages, online chat, and encounters in virtual places. We used to pass messages around the classroom on tiny slips of paper, now and then. Today, text messages are ubiquitous, frequent, and all but indispensable to social communication for the digitally young (Ito, Horst, Bittanti, & Boyd, in press). Learning and acculturation cumulate information and practices from experiences in a variety of differently real worlds, and how we choose to sort these out, integrating them or segregating them, remains locally open to multiple possibilities and globally in flux.

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If we want to understand better the hidden culture of childhood in which the human future is being explored, we need research methods that can not only follow people as they traverse multiple meaning-worlds and attentional spaces over spans of minutes or days but can also guide us in integrating the very different kinds of data we will be collecting along the way. The ways in which Yasmin Kafai and her collaborators are exploring the culture of Whyville, as reflected in the articles in this special issue, offer us many lessons for better research in today's mix of realities.

For a Hermeneutics of Mudballs

In particular, "Knowing and Throwing Mudballs, etc." by Fields and Kafai offers us a case study in connective ethnography and the complex hermeneutics of integrating data from online chat, interviews, video, and observations of the new Whyvillians in an after-school club with downloaded logfiles of in-game logins, movements, and interactions through language and the specialized activity of "throwing" things at/to others inside Whyville.

What Fields and Kafai show us is the way in which the traversals on various time-scales, from minutes to days and weeks, of the club members across settings in the club, in school, at home, and in Whyville lead the researchers to enlarge and reiterate the hermeneutic circling of their analysis, as data of each type in each time and place point to and recontextualize interpretations of the others. Nor is this a formal, mechanical process of analysis. Initial interpretations have to be revised. Phenomena that appear newly significant direct attention to including data in later analysis that was not previously salient. The overall conclusions and interpretations depend so intricately on the mixing of what was learned by more traditional ethnographic observations with what was found in the online logfiles, that it becomes clear that only an integrated approach to both can be considered reliable.

The analysis in this chapter primarily organizes this integration around a practice ("throwing things") rather than around persons as actors. This permits us to see more clearly, I think, how our understanding the nature, meaning, and uses of the practice changes as we add additional layers of data and interpretation, drawing on different sources, cases, persons, events, data types, and locations in differently real settings (e.g., the club as a physical place; locations in Whyville as virtual places). People do not have meanings in any simple sense, but practices do. People do have distributions in real and virtual spaces, though we are not normally aware of this. Practices are pretty much definable through such distributions.

We learn how the different variations on the practice of throwing things take on different meanings, with different probabilities, for different participants in different settings. We see that the same practice can have multiple functions, just as the same function can be accomplished through different practices, and it becomes ever clearer that to understand the practice we have to situate it in a system that extends beyond any one of these settings. When we do follow the actors, we see that their experiences with the practice, whether learning it, doing it, or innovating with it, also

likewise traverse a wide range of settings (though not normally the whole set of possibilities in the case of any one individual).

One House, Many Mansions

We make meanings along our traversals across the boundaries of event, place, genre, activity, medium, and “world.” Too often we hear it argued that what players learn in virtual spaces is worthless because it has no application in the “real” world—a world, these critics seem to assume, where what is real to us excludes our experiences in virtual places. Similarly, it is argued that what researchers learn about virtual places has no use or value in this too-limited notion of what the real world is. The studies in this special issue are rich in examples of the pointlessness of making such a narrow construal of the real because of the demonstrated interpenetration of differently real worlds through the passage among them of persons, practices, attitudes, identities, feelings, and meanings.

Whyville developed “beauty contests” not presumably as an outgrowth of male sexual exploitation of young women but as a way young women could show off, compare, set, and contest community norms for the interesting and valued appearance of avatars. A practice moved across worlds and changed its meanings, given the different gender ratios and gender dominance, as well as the primary fact that in Whyville, looks are far more under one’s control, more an artform than an innate physical capital.

Racism also moved into Whyville with the attitudes and experiences players brought from elsewhere. However, the possibility of experiencing how others react to you in a Black body gives White tweens a perspective not otherwise available. As often happens in avatar-based worlds, it is also possible to experience cross-gendering. We do not know, yet, what role these experiences will play in later attitudes, but we do know that identities and attitudes, like the social relationships, which are so important to their formation, are developed in the joint world, the one reality of all our cumulated experience.

There are a number of examples of learning something specific in Whyville. The mudball slingers learn to spell “throw” according to the dominant social dialect of English and its historically obtuse spelling system. Interestingly, in Whyville, that spelling is immediately useful to produce the effect of getting the mudball or the heart where you want it to go. The effect and the value are far more evident than is the long-term social usefulness of “good” spelling in the classroom world. Many citizens of Whyville learn something about science in the course of playing its mini-games, but they may learn more about how to use cheat-sites to increase their income of clams. At least they have a choice of what they want to learn and do and are not penalized for finding a different way to beat the game, as too often they would be in a classroom learning environment.

Many Whyvillians also learn something about contagion and epidemiology during an outbreak of Whypox. Here again, there is a direct and immediate impact of the

phenomenon on daily life (spots on your face, achoo's in your chat!) and so an immediacy of motivation to learn how to avoid or shorten the outbreak. However, as Kafai, Quintero, and Feldon point out, there are other kinds of learning happening here, too. Whyville's virtual-CDC (Centers for Disease Control) provides a popular chart of the overall spread of the epidemic, a community-level emergent phenomenon and representation not available to individuals through their own experience. It gives a different view of what is happening, and it offers a different way to relate to the community, to situate one's own experience within what is happening more widely.

It is hard to imagine that any of these kinds of learning remain confined to the Whyville world or even that what matters to "real-world" relevance is the degree of similarity to ordinary reality. Indeed, it seems that it is exactly the differences between the realities that make these kinds of learning more likely.

War of the Worlds

Although differences in affordances mean that there will be new opportunities to learn things that fit with both worlds, it is perhaps more interesting still to note that these differences also give rise to challenges to the logic and culture of the dominant world.

Many interesting social and cultural phenomena in Whyville seem to turn on the possibility of modifying the appearance of your avatar. Kafai, Fields, and Cook analyze the significance of the avatars in terms of our usual notions of identity and its markers, as well as Gee's useful perspective on the relations between player identity and avatar identity. However, something is clearly shifting here between how the appearance-identity relation works in the ordinary world versus how it works in Whyville. The usual notion of identity is that it is intrinsic, a character, or quality of ourselves. But the appearance of an avatar is perhaps more like a costume we wear or an artwork we produce, something we make more than something we are. The shifts here are subtle and perhaps matters of degree, but I suspect that our usual notions of identity are being placed in flux in the special circumstances of the Whyville reality.

This is perhaps highlighted in a different way when the question arises in Whyville of whether every registered player gets one vote in an election or whether it is every active avatar that should? Who are the citizens of Whyville? The people who are recognized as individuals in the outside world? Or the people you see and interact with inside Whyville? If I animate more than one avatar, how does that affect the kind of identification relationship between player and avatar? What does it mean for an avatar to be one of me? Do I own these avatars? Are they things/personas I make? Or are they parts of me? Aspects of me? Pure fantasy creations? Can I choose to or simply come in time to identify more with some of them than with others? Do they create a space of possibilities within which I can navigate among possible features of "my" identity? Do they take on identities of their own which I must respect when

animating them? Are they more like friends than like aspects of myself? How do I know, and how does it matter?

It may matter to the future evolution of our notions of identity, individuality, legal responsibility, and personhood as the experience of flexible person–avatar relationships becomes more common and more socially and economically important. These options were not evident when I wrote about such issues some time ago (Lemke, 1995; chap. 5), but they go to the heart of some of our deepest cultural assumptions. Insofar as the real includes the virtual, there are possibilities here for profound challenges to our dominant culture, from within.

Carnival, Feeling, and Power

In addition to the many phenomena, methods, and relationships, which the articles in this special issue reveal to us, they also raise numerous further questions, as I am sure their authors intend. I would like to pose some of these and try to weave together a few more possible connections.

The account of “Tator Day” when all Whyvillians revert to the basic appearance of newbies suggests possible similarities with the phenomenon of the *carnivalesque* as it is discussed in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1993). In the medieval days of Carnival, the acute hierarchical distinctions in society were allowed to lapse and beggars could sit on the throne (in theory). A release was provided for the tensions in the social order, however brief; a reminder of early Christian egalitarianism and brotherhood. Later, masks were worn to produce an effect of anonymity for the same purpose.

Is Tator Day in Whyville in the process of developing its own traditions and rituals? Its own social functions? Do players take advantage of the potential anonymity of everyone looking alike to do things they otherwise would or could not? Or does everyone just run as fast as possible to claim face parts and restore some semblance of the normal order of things (and people)?

Against the background of this unusual moment, is there increased awareness of social hierarchy, unfairness, or relations of power? And just how is power exercised in Whyville? Among players and between players and administrators or their player-representatives? Is Tator Day just a time for different kinds of fun? And if so, how do they differ?

In the discussions of racism and gender issues in Whyville in these articles, we see the community coming to terms with social distinctions and classes imported from outside. However, are there new social groupings forming in Whyville? And newly emergent attitudes toward them? Categories or castes that may go beyond merely transient groupings and alliances to begin to present itself as a “kind” of Whyvillian? Is social structure emerging in Whyville? And if so, how does its form reflect the special affordances of that reality?

In the wider relations between the players and the designers/administrators, we might be able to see another function of the cheat-sites. They might be considered

like the hosts of fan-sites that grow up around the transmedia franchises (Jenkins, 2006) of popular culture media. Elsewhere, I have argued that these collateral, fan-produced media help restore the balance between intellectual property “owners” who control the content of the official sites (e.g., for *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, or *World of Warcraft*) and the player or fan community, whose productions, whether of cheats and walkthroughs or of fan-fiction and game mods, in time become an integral part of the overall transmedia complex, as essential to having a mastery of the domain as are the official media (Lemke, 2010).

There may be inherent conflicts between players and designers because of their different positionings and goals, the differences in what they can and cannot do, what they want to do *via* Whyville. If social status matters more than picking up scientific knowledge, then accumulating clams as a social resource (however spent) becomes the goal and cheating on science tasks to get more is legitimate for their interests. Aiding others in this agenda is then legitimate and even altruistic for the cheat-site builders and contributors. As Fields and Kafai show us, whether we regard cheating as learning by other means or not, paying attention to these auxiliary sites is important for an understanding of what is going on within Whyville itself. What will determine the future extent to which Whyville functions as a science learning site or as a more exclusively social interaction site? How will this be negotiated between designers and players, and how much control will each ultimately have? What is happening now that helps us understand this dynamic?

Designers can try to control player, and in this case learner, behavior or they can design for greater choice and openness. Some of the science tasks can be “solved” without the expected standard learning, by workarounds or cheats, and players have a choice of how to proceed. The Whypox event is a learning opportunity but does not compel players to undertake its study. Kafai, Quintero, and Feldon suggest that the main formal opportunities for this study, through the virtual CDC, are rather too didactic and disconnected from social activity for the spirit of Whyville and its members. Are there lessons to be learned here about the need in good learning environment design for freedom of choice and direction, for immediacy of connection to in-world life, and for opportunities to learn collectively with others in world? What are successful strategies for designing for this kind of openness, rather than simply imitating the largely failed strategies of compulsory curricular education?

The study’s data show that interest in learning more about Whypox is greatest among those with neither especially strong nor especially weak emotional reactions to the Whypox. Unsurprisingly, those who do not care much about something do not want to go study it. (A lesson we have already learned in most of our nation’s classrooms.) That those who react most strongly also shy away may have something to do with their emotional reactions being negative (fear, embarrassment, frustration, anger) and perhaps with negative emotions tending to register as stronger in most ways of assessing emotional response. I wonder about those with strong positive reactions, those who find the whypox hilarious, or fascinating in itself? And what exactly are the emotions that place people in the middle range, those who do more

often want to know more about why? Moderate negatives (e.g., concern vs. worry) or moderate positives (amusement, interest)?

The role of affect, emotion, or feeling in both play and learning is not so easy to study. In part, because our own dominant cultural tradition, especially in the academy, has long sought to oppose feeling to reason and to portray reason as itself subject to rational analysis, while pretending that feelings are just vague and irrational, impossible to study or analyze. So much that we are taught to believe about feeling in relation to meaning, or affect in relation to cognition, is contrary to what we experience in games and learning activities. Just as is the case for cognition, so also are affects: actively produced and used, situated and distributed among other persons and with elements of our environment, socially shared and jointly constructed, and culturally specific. Passion for something leads to the commitment of time and energy needed to learn about it deeply and comprehensively. Shared joy in learning reinforces the collective intelligence with which we and our friends can figure out what we could not do alone. Events and affordances in the environment both trigger our feelings and provide the means by which we can evoke our own feelings and provoke those of others.

There is a lot of significant feeling among the Whyvillians, as Kafai and her coauthors show us. Evaluations are pervasive and every evaluation is both the construction of a meaning and its grounding in a feeling. The actions we take in Whyville, based on our feelings of the moment, are then responded to by others and by the environment itself in ways that then provoke further feelings as well as provide options for next actions. As this cycle continues, it is evident that we can hardly explain a trajectory of behavior without factoring in the feelings that mediate evaluations, choices, and actions and which are themselves responses to what is going on around us. The research in these articles pays a lot of explicit attention to evaluations and up to a point to feelings more directly, though we know how difficult it is methodologically and theoretically to gather useful data and do cogent interpretations on the relations of feelings and meanings in action. Just as we live one life across the boundaries of differently real worlds, so we have one integrated trajectory of experience of meanings-with-feeling. As researchers, we learn much about the hermeneutics of an integrated study across such boundaries from the methodologies in these studies, and we should feel impelled by the questions they raise to look more deeply into the unity of meaning and affect in our own domains of research.

Let me return in closing to the themes of power and carnival and to the enterprise of understanding better the hidden cultures of childhood. Those cultures are hidden from us not so much by their invisibility or the need of children to keep grown-ups out of their playworlds (because we have forgotten how to play), but because our very presence in them, our gaze upon them, disrupts them. It does so because of the inherent power inequalities between us, and our willingness, well known to children, to exploit our advantages. It is a fundamental question of the social sciences whether and to what extent it is possible for a dominant caste to gain true understanding of the

culture of a subaltern community. In what ways are adults blinded by our position relative to the young and our potential power over them? Blinded from being able to see what matters to them in the ways that it matters?

In some approaches to participant action research, developed from a critical ethnographic tradition (Fine & Weis, 2004), where these issues have been deeply considered, the response has been to engage members of the studied community as much as possible as research partners. Although the larger portions of the community remain at a distance from the project itself, some members become, over time, more trusting and trusted, more equal and respected partners in more and more aspects of the research, from design to data collection to analysis, interpretation, and communication. This direction seems to be one reasonable line of possible development for the Whyville research or similar projects. Granted, the transience on a timescale of a few years of player membership in Whyville may limit an ideal realization of this strategy but it has been used with students in schools and inmates in prisons where “membership” (and certainly participation) may likewise have been limited to a few years at most. In some cases, graduates of earlier projects, and now presumably Whyville alumnae, might still continue as useful mediators, ambassadors, and interpreters between researchers and current Whyvillians.

Not every day is Tator Day, nor Carnival. On most days we conduct our research, and the communities we study conduct their daily lives, within flexible but still influential structures of power and powerful feelings. We need to find creative ways to turn this fact to our advantage as researchers and to join in the fun of play and learning. Because, for us, every community is Whyville.

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Bio

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