

Who's Watching Your Children? Value Propositions in Preteen Virtual Worlds

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ABSTRACT

This poster presents a critical, values-oriented investigation of a specific space within the online universe: shared virtual playgrounds designed for preteens. Specifically we investigate three preteen worlds with a focus on the sites' technical features designed to support value concerns (e.g. privacy, security, obedience) and critically examine the potential influence of these features from different stakeholder perspectives. We provide a conceptual framework for analyzing these online environments, drawing upon methods developed for investigating values and information systems. Finally, the poster will outline: 1) a field based investigation gathering designer, parent, and children's perceptions of preteen virtual worlds, 2) a research agenda for the critical study of children's virtual environments as value-laden artifacts, and 3) implications such work may hold for software developers, interaction designers, youth service providers, and researchers in library and information science and human-computer interaction.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.4.1 [Computing and Society]: Public Policy Issues – *ethics, privacy, use and abuse of power*, K.4.2 [Computing and Society] Social Issues, K.8.0 [Personal computing] Games

General Terms

Design, Security, Human Factors

Keywords

Virtual worlds, Preteens, Surveillance, Values

1. INTRODUCTION

Cyber-stalker. Cyber-bully. Cyber-narc. These recently minted terms have become part of the conversation around children's online interactions. As digital technologies and Web access become ubiquitous in homes, schools, and libraries, children are online with greater frequency and at a younger age [1]. Parents, educators, and researchers have raised concerns about how

children interact in online space, the safety and privacy of websites for children, and the difficulties of providing age-appropriate play and learning opportunities for connected youth [2,3,4]. This poster presents a critical, values-oriented investigation of a specific space within the online universe: shared virtual playgrounds designed for preteens. Specifically we investigate three preteen worlds with a focus on the sites' technical features designed to support value concerns (e.g. privacy, security, obedience) and critically examine the potential influence of these features from different stakeholder perspectives. We provide a conceptual framework for analyzing these online environments, drawing upon methods from Value Sensitive Design [5] and inspired by work to envision the long-term influence of information systems [6]. Finally, the poster outlines: 1) a field based investigation gathering designer, parent, and children's perceptions of preteen virtual worlds; 2) a research agenda for the critical study of children's virtual environments as value-laden artifacts; and 3) implications such work may hold for software developers, interaction designers, youth service providers, and researchers in library and information science and human-computer interaction

2. TENSION ON THE VIRTUAL PLAYGROUND

The preteen years are a key developmental period during which children build their personal and social identity [7]. Targeted to attract children ages 6-12, avatar-based playgrounds such as Club Penguin (clubpenguin.com), Webkinz (webkinz.com), and WoogiWorld (woogiworld.com) offer multi-player games, interactive adventures, and monitored chat environments. These sites claim to offer age-appropriate social activities with design features that ensure safety and privacy. Descriptive information aimed at parents suggests that the virtual world activities offer skill-building opportunities for players (e.g., spelling, reading, budgeting money, caring for pets, and getting along with others). Parents and child advocates have nonetheless challenged the suitability of these online spaces, and further suggest that these sites may negatively alter real-life pro-social development [8,9].

Designers of the preteen environments have attempted to be responsive to parental concerns. Sites use specific design features and strong prohibitory language as strategies to dissuade and prevent children from sharing of potentially inappropriate information. Yet, what is inappropriate information or deviant behavior? Is there a cost to this type of labeling? For example, Webkinz informs parents that within their KinzChat area, "We control everything the users are able to say..." [10]. Sites also strongly encourage peer surveillance and immediate reporting in order to prevent deviant behavior. The sites claim to "kick out"

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Conference '09, February 8–11, 2008, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

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members whose peers have reported them for inappropriate behavior. In reaction to the tightly controlled environment, some users rebel against the system. For example, there are young users who glorify cheating Club Penguin's reward system, publishing their rebellious exploits on blogs and YouTube [11].

Are online environments with an ethos of monitor and control beneficial to preteen children? Critical examinations of surveillance practices question the policing effects of a panopticon society. Yet when we consider the role of the family, educational institutions, and churches in the social and moral development of children, we must acknowledge the positive, if not necessary, effects of such prescriptive agencies. Moral behavior is modeled to children through their interactions with these types of institutions. The watchful eye of the instructor, parent, teacher or clergy is a powerful tool. Children learn through these means to monitor themselves. Foucault explored the importance of "knowing oneself" and "care of the self" as a foundational task in the development of ethical conduct in society [12]. At some point the lessons learned from social institutions (including the family) must be put to the test through self-reflection as well as trial and error. A society that is centered on surveillance misses the point of teaching self-governance and discipline. The point is not for surveillance to become ubiquitous but rather, through social institutions and interactions to employ an internal overseer in each and every one of us [13]. Foucault's position is that surveillance works best when it is directed inward. Whether or not one follows Foucault's logic, this line of critical thinking stirs more questions to the surface. How does awareness of constant surveillance affect children's play? Are such efforts to create a safe and secure online environment depriving children from developing their own sense of autonomy, responsibility, and privacy through play? How can parents, policy makers, designers, and service providers critically assess the influence of interactions within preteen virtual worlds on children's social and moral development? How are the technical features of these spaces supporting or constraining the values of different stakeholders?

3. CONCEPTUAL INVESTIGATION: PENGUINS, WEBKINZ, & WOOGIS

In order to shed light on the above questions, this project initiates a conceptual investigation into the value propositions found within three preteen virtual spaces. We are using the term conceptual investigation in the mode of Value Sensitive Design [5]. This type of investigation systematically identifies the stakeholders affected, values implicated, and tensions that develop through use of an information technology. The project builds on nascent empirical work in this area [14], and follows in the tradition of earlier conceptual explorations of values in teen game design [15,16]. However, the project is particularly interested in thinking critically about the long-term influence of information systems on children's social and moral development [6].

Brief descriptions of the three sites are provided below. Due to space constraints, after each description we provide a short, representative narrative of how one common design feature (chat), is presented to one stakeholder group (parents), to address one value concern (safety). Thus, each overview describes how that particular site conceptualizes and attempts to manifest the value of safety for arguably the most powerful stakeholder group, the parents.

3.1 Club Penguin

Club Penguin is a virtual playground employing the metaphor of the Antarctic where children are encouraged to "waddle around and make new friends." Children register with the site to engage in activities as anthropomorphic penguins in an animated snow-covered community of shops, games, and activity spaces. Children can perform tasks in the community (making pizzas at the pizzeria, unloading coffee beans at the café, and of course, rounding up puffles) in order to earn virtual currency ("coins"). They use this currency to purchase clothing, pets, and accessories for their penguin avatars and to decorate their "igloo" or private online space. Children can create friend lists and chat with other penguins via a simple dashboard interface. Adult moderators monitor chat, and will penalize or eject children who violate the chat guidelines.

Although an explicit definition of safety is not provided, Club Penguin explicitly and prominently addresses safety concerns with a description on the parent page of chat limitations. "Ultimate Safe Chat limits what users can say to a predefined menu of greetings, questions and statements, as well as emotes, actions and greeting cards. When it comes to chatting, these users can only see other Ultimate Safe Chat messages" [17]. Thus, within Club Penguin's Ultimate Safe Chat, the value of safety is threatened by conversations in which either children or adults reveal inappropriate information. Since Club Penguin is unable to control who is in the space, they let everyone in, but totally control what is said. Safety is "realized" through total control by the features themselves.

3.2 Woogi World

According to the storyline behind WoogiWorld, the Woogis are an advanced alien race corrupted by excessive online time without careful monitoring. The children of Earth can help the Woogis by adopting them, and teaching them appropriate activities and limits. In WoogiWorld, children control a Woogi character, perform tasks, play games, and earn virtual currency ("Woogi Watts"), which they can use to decorate their "wigwams" or accessorize their adopted Woogi avatars. Virtual activity spaces are learning oriented, and include a science lab, savings bank, and a library. Children are also provided incentives for off-line activities, including chores and playing board games with family members. A simple, adult monitored chat interface is provided, and several games are designed as social, multiplayer experiences.

WoogiWorld describes its goals on the site's front page: "teaching kids Internet safety, life values, and fun." By far the most radical in terms of moral stance, WoogiWorld includes a definition of safety in its parents section: "A combination of appropriate mindset and behavior validated by a community of like-minded people" [18]. WoogiWorld, however, does not describe specific technical features that promote safety. Instead it describes to parents how the sites rules, standards, and regulations are embodied by the children who are now serving as their own moderators, in addition to the site's adult moderators. In order to enable chat features, Woogis (preteen participants) have to go through a short, intense training program on appropriate and inappropriate behavior. In WoogiWorld, once again the value of safety is threatened by conversations in which inappropriate information is shared. Similar to Club Penguin, WoogiWorld is unable to control who is in the space. However, WoogiWorld explicitly creates habits of mind by instantiating certain behavior in certain games and activities. Thus, in addition to technical

features, WoogiWorld addresses parents concerns for safety through developing a strong ethos of appropriate interactions within this online space.

3.3 Webkinz

Webkinz is an online space where children care for virtual pets, play games, answer trivia challenges, and interact with other pet caretakers. Each plush Webkinz toy comes with a registration code to permit a child to adopt the pet online, essentially unlocking its “virtual” life. Once registered, children are encouraged to login daily to care for their pet avatars by bathing them, feeding them, and buying accessories, clothes, and furniture with “KinZCash,” the currency awarded for successfully completing online games and other activities. You can befriend other pet caretakers, chat, and leave gifts for your friends and their adopted pets.

Similar to Club Penguin, Webkinz does not provide an explicit definition of safety, but equates safety with control of children’s discursive practices, both what they say via chat and what they are allowed to see of others’ chat. Parents are informed that, “In our KinZChat area, the chat is entirely constructed. There is no way for users to type what they want, exchange any personal information, ask or say anything inappropriate. We control everything the users are able to say” [10].

4. FUTURE WORK

Future work will include; 1) a field based investigation gathering designer, parent, and children’s value perceptions of preteen virtual worlds based on this conceptual work; 2) longitudinal data collection with preteen children interacting with virtual worlds, collecting their developing perspectives of how the worlds operate and how they perceive appropriate and inappropriate behaviors in each world; and 3) developing design criteria and recommendations for software developers, interaction designers, youth service providers, and parents concerned with the long-term influence of virtual worlds on preteen social and moral development.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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