A Sociocultural Approach to Exploring Virtual Worlds

Rebecca W. Black and Stephanie M. Reich

Introduction

Lacey, 10-year-old girl, and her 14-year-old brother, Ben, sit on the floor of his room preparing to explore a virtual world on his laptop. The process begins with some confusion, as they discuss which avatar to use and complain about the design of the world’s opening user interface. While playing, these siblings hand off control of the mouse frequently, with Ben completing one activity while Lacey directs his attention to objects on the screen. Then they switch, with Lacey controlling the avatar while Ben advises her on where to go next. At one point, they visit a section of the world where avatars are able to interact with each other; however, they quickly lose interest in this activity, citing the restrictive nature of the chat system as a reason. Moving on to a different part of the world, Lacey and Ben share responsibility for reading the in-world text, sometimes taking turns and other times reading the same sentence collaboratively, working together to figure out the cryptic in-game clues. Lacey, who has struggled with reading due to dyslexia, takes the initiative on seeking out these in-game texts, searching
for information about how to complete various puzzle-like challenges. At one point, she suggests searching the Web for a text-based ‘walk-through’ to help them complete a particularly difficult quest; however, Ben persuades her to work through the activity with him using a process of trial and error. At one point they both jump for the keyboard at the same time, rushing to turn off an ad embedded in the world before the pop-up images have a chance to appear on the screen.

This vignette, culled from observation data, can be used as an illustration of how a sociocultural framework can help researchers to capture the many facets and social intricacies of children’s play and learning in virtual worlds. In particular, it highlights three fundamental elements of a sociocultural approach that will serve as foci throughout the analyses and discussion in this chapter. The first element, the role of mediation in learning, is evident in the computer itself, as it provides a cultural tool with text, icons, and images that shape and influence Ben and Lacey’s interactions with each other and their meaning-making practices within the game. The second element, the interplay of social and individual processes in development, can be seen as Lacey and Ben explore the world together, with Ben supporting Lacey’s reading and Lacey in turn helping Ben to strategize and navigate spatial aspects of the world. The potential influence of the social on individual gameplay is also present in the fan-created walk-throughs that Lacey frequently uses to improve her strategies for play. The third element of a sociocultural perspective, which is closely related to the second, involves the influence of cultural and historical contexts on learning and, for the purposes of this chapter, on children’s digitally mediated activities. This influence emerges in the popular cultural content of
the virtual world, the safeguards that restrict Lacey and Ben’s communication with other players within the world, and in the advertising that they rush to turn off. In this chapter, we will expand on the ways in which these three intertwined elements of a sociocultural framework can be used to understand the complex interplay of social, cultural, and meditational factors that afford and constrain children’s learning, development, and play in virtual worlds. In particular, our discussion will focus on how these elements of a sociocultural perspective enhance our knowledge about: 1) scaffolded learning; 2) mediated communication; and 3) culture and community in a virtual space called Webkinz World.

Study Context

While this chapter focuses primarily on the Ganz Corporation’s Webkinz World site, the data and examples discussed in this chapter stem from a larger project involving comparative case studies of several virtual worlds for children between the ages of 6 and 13 years (see Black, 2010; Black & Reich, 2011; Black & Reich, in press.) These cases are based on participant observation and qualitative content analysis of the learning, literacy, and developmental features of these sites. Data include maps of site contents, records of games and activities within each world, screenshots, observations of users in public spaces, and literacy artifacts. Content analysis was conducted using open-ended qualitative protocols focused on technical and aesthetic design features, literacy-related texts and activities, educational and problem-solving-based activities, and community-
building features of each site. Data were analyzed using discourse (Gee, 1999) and inductive thematic analyses (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Texts were also analyzed using grade level and readability measures.

Webkinz (Ganz, 2005) are stuffed animals that come with a special code that allows access to an avatar version of that animal within the online world of Webkinz. After visiting the Adoption Center to register, name, choose a gender for, and obtain information about their newly adopted Webkinz avatar, players receive a room for their pet and 2000 KinzCash, a monetary unit that allows them to participate in the Webkinz World economy. Popular activities in the world of Webkinz include visiting the Webkinz Shop to purchase items for pets such as clothing or furniture, playing Arcade games, and visiting the Kinzville Park or Clubhouse to socialize with other players.

The virtual world is colorful and has an abundance of both text and images. The dock at the bottom of the screen provides information about such things as the avatar’s possessions, amount of Kinzcash, and levels of health, happiness, and hunger. Tabs above the dock provide quick links to popular pages, such as My Room (the avatar’s home) and Today’s Activities (time-sensitive activities that provide Kinzcash or items). There is also a map of the different spaces in Webkinz World. Interestingly, while there is a map depicting the geographic layout of the world of Webkinz, the interface does not allow avatars to physically navigate from one space or activity to another. Rather, clicking on the desired destination triggers a page to load while the avatar remains in a
static position. For most areas of Webkinz World, printed instructions are available, and for more frequently visited spaces, short tutorial videos are also provided.

<Scaffolded Learning in Virtual Worlds>

Applying a sociocultural lens to learning in virtual worlds draws our attention to the ways in which a child’s mental functioning emerges through the development of psychological tools and the manipulation of cultural material (Karpov & Bransford, 1995). This includes play that is mediated by symbolic systems such as language, as well as by tools and artifacts such as toys and books. From this perspective, a virtual environment such as Webkinz World can mediate children’s learning in multiple ways. For example, the world of Webkinz serves as the sociocultural context for interaction and activity and provides many of the tools and cultural artifacts that are relevant to in-game activities. While some artifacts are unique to the virtual environment, most activities and interactions mirror activities that children may see in their daily lives, ranging from gardening and decorating a backyard to working at the Employment Agency and socializing with others over coffee. Such activities provide young children with an opportunity to engage in sociodramatic play and experiment with the adult social roles, vocabulary, and language forms associated with these real-world events.

The design of virtual worlds can play a significant role in shaping children’s in-game learning. In a space such as Webkinz World, the digital environment often serves as the
expert or more capable other that supports young players’ learning experiences within online spaces. For example, in Webkinz World support features include video tutorials, text- and image-based instructions, as well as subtle visual and audio cues that guide players’ participation. The following paragraphs will illustrate how a sociocultural perspective can illuminate how such site features both afford and constrain children’s opportunities for learning in Webkinz World.

According to sociocultural theorists, much of children’s learning stems from the “appropriation of modes of speaking, acting, and thinking that are first encountered in collaboration with adults or more capable peers” (Minick, Stone, & Forman, 1993). This process is often discussed in terms of scaffolding or supporting learning within the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky, the ZPD “is the distance between the actual developmental level” of a child “as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978: 86). In this process, the expert or more capable other supports a novice or child in reaching his/her problem-solving potential using a variety of strategies, such as recruiting the novice’s interest, reducing degrees of freedom within the activity, sustaining goal orientation, focusing attention on critical task features, and demonstrating possible solutions (Wood and associates, cited in Stone, 1993). In essence, the adult or more capable other designs the learning experience to support the learner’s success.
While we see this sort of face-to-face scaffolding between siblings in the introductory vignette for the chapter, this metaphor of scaffolded learning also can be applied to our understandings of how a virtual world may be designed to act as a more capable other and provide supports for players’ learning in *Webkinz World* using similar strategies. This perspective also can inform our understandings of how such a design may result in incomplete scaffolding that may limit the ZPD and constrain children’s opportunities for deeper learning and subsequent cognitive development.

To illustrate, the world of Webkinz uses a range of meditational means to support young children’s learning and participation and to make the site accessible even to novice technology users and early readers. The main user interface, known as the dock, uses a mixture of text and icons to help players with important tasks, such as keeping track of their in-game inventory, monitoring their pet’s condition, and moving around the world. For example, a pet’s levels of happiness and hunger are represented by a smiley face and fork respectively, while the inventory and action tabs are represented by colored building blocks and bouncing balls coupled with text. This combination of icons and text can help pre-readers to navigate the game more easily, and also allow early readers to develop print awareness and begin making the connections between the concepts represented by the icons and the words for these concepts. In addition, by placing the pet’s happiness, hunger, and health level indicators, as well as action buttons for the pet’s inventory and for certain popular areas of the site in prominent positions on the dock, the site design is supporting players’ successful navigation of the site by drawing new players’ attention to
and continuously highlighting features that are integral to the overall Webkinz World narrative (adopting, caring for, and purchasing items for a pet).

*Webkinz World* also uses numerous video tutorials and animated non-player characters (NPCs) (characters that are fixtures within the game rather than player-controlled avatars) to support children’s learning and participation in the site. These features leverage the affordances of the virtual environment by using a synthesis of sound, color, and movement to draw children’s attention to important aspects of and demonstrate possible strategies for excelling at games and activities. These features also support players’ comprehension of site materials. For example, NPCs offer instructions both aurally and textually via text bubbles that appear above the NPC’s head while it is speaking. In addition, as the NPC introduces aspects of the user interface, it will often point, tilt its head, and/or direct its eyes towards the object or portion of the screen being discussed as a way of emphasizing important game items and vocabulary.

Some of these NPCs also have interactive components that provide customized feedback depending on what action a player has taken. For example, in the Employment Agency, the feline office worker T. Von Meow will tell players who have already visited the agency during an eight-hour period (players are able to complete only one job every eight hours) that they are a bit early and will direct their attention to a digital clock on the wall that counts down the time remaining until they are eligible for another job. As another example, Arte, the canine proprietor of the Curio Shop, changes his greeting for players depending on how much they purchase and tip in his shop. At the highest level of
purchasing and tipping, Arte holds up a sign to indicate when players can purchase rare items (virtual clothing and furniture items that serve as status symbols) in the shop. This information is valuable because without the exact time, players must use a system of trial and error, visiting the Curio Shop repeatedly at random times in order to find rare items. Moreover, Arte prevents players from “gaming” this system by refusing to accept more than one tip per day from each player. In this way, the site can guide players away from prohibited activities and toward desired actions.

While the actions of the NPCs, video tutorials, and multimodal instructions for *Webkinz World* activities provide strong support for learning to navigate site features, the site does not provide the sort of higher-level feedback that would allow for deeper and richer understanding of the concepts introduced through games and activities (see Black & Reich, 2011 for a detailed discussion of the zone of proximal development in *Webkinz World*). In fact, incomplete or inadequate scaffolding may limit children’s opportunities for development and independent problem solving. For instance, the Jellybean Challenge is an activity on *Webkinz World* in which users are shown a glass jar filled with jellybeans and are given three opportunities to guess how many jellybeans are inside. While providing multiple opportunities to complete the challenge is laudable, the structure of the activity provides no information that would improve a user’s performance over time. No information is provided about the size of the jar or how many jellybeans it could hold when full. Further, after each incorrect guess, the user will encounter one of four responses: “Wow, that was way off!”, “You’ll need to be closer!”, “Not a bad guess!”, or “Oooo, that was close!” No feedback is provided about whether the guess is
too high or too low or if subsequent guesses are closer, or at least heading in the correct direction. Interestingly, an Internet search of Webkinz fan sites found that these four responses are clues (e.g., “Wow, that was way off!” = guess is off by 1,000 or more jellybeans, “Oooo, that was close!” = guess is off by fewer than 200 jellybeans). There is no way, however, for users on the site to know that these answers are associated with information on how to complete the challenge. Thus, while users get multiple chances to successfully complete the task, there is no scaffolding to support users’ reasoning and performance on the task.

These examples demonstrate how sociocultural theory can help researchers to better understand the efficacy and fallibility of the Webkinz World site design for supporting children’s learning. In addition, we are able to see the important role that human interaction can play in scaffolded learning, as players’ contributions to external fan sites provide more detailed feedback for successful navigation of Arte’s Curio Shop and for successful completion of the Jellybean Challenge than the game itself provides. In the next section, we use a sociocultural framework to further examine the affordances and constraints of the Webkinz World site for human interaction and player learning.

Mediated Communication in Virtual Worlds

A sociocultural perspective on learning emphasizes the relationship between human mental processes and social contexts (Wertsch, 1991). Through this lens, children’s
interactions with people and objects in their immediate social environments play a crucial role in their cognitive development. When looking at children’s learning and participation in virtual worlds, such a perspective draws attention to the sorts of interactions taking place between players and the ways in which the site design mediates these interactions. In the following paragraphs, we discuss how the design of communication features within Webkinz World both affords and constrains children’s opportunities to teach and learn from each other.

Within many virtual worlds for young children, pre-structured and dictionary chat systems are the primary mediators of in-game social interaction. With pre-structured systems, players are able to choose from a set of pre-constructed words, phrases, and sentences, while with dictionary systems, players are able to type in their own messages provided their words are included in the site’s list or “dictionary” of permissible words. To illustrate, KinzChat is a pre-structured messaging system that is available to all players in Webkinz World. KinzChat allows players to choose from a set of topically organized, pre-constructed phrases that focus almost exclusively on Webkinz-related topics. On the one hand, because most of the phrases are simple and contextually situated within the game context, this form of messaging may make it easier for early readers and writers to discern word meanings and construct and interpret messages, thus affording them opportunities to interact and coordinate activities with other players.

On the other hand, while KinzChat does afford opportunities for interaction, concerns about online safety have shaped the design of such systems. As a result, KinzChat is
limited in its potential for fostering authentic communication between players and promoting young children’s language and literacy development. The most obvious problem with pre-structured messaging systems, such as KinzChat, is that they do not allow children to practice putting their thoughts into words or expressing themselves. In fact, the Webkinz World Frequently Asked Questions for parents clearly states that “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” (Ganz, 2009, para. 1). Another problem with the pre-structured system is that users must scroll through numerous topical categories to find the one option that best approximates the information that they are trying to convey. This not only is time-consuming but also may result in a stilted and somewhat unoriginal communicative context. Moreover, as discussed by Black and Reich (2011), the process of choosing an option that is embedded in topical categories may be developmentally untenable for younger players (or even some adults, for that matter) who lack sophisticated class inclusion abilities. As such, the designers of these types of pre-structured messaging systems miss many opportunities for constructing chat in ways that would scaffold children’s linguistic development and awareness.

KinzChatPlus, which requires parental approval, is the other in-game messaging system in Webkinz World. Similar to a dictionary messaging system, KinzChatPlus allows users to type in their own messages “as long as they are not on the excluded list of words and phrases developed for this form of chat” (Ganz, 2009). According to Ganz, excluded words include those such as proper names and numbers in an attempt to discourage users
from sharing personal information about themselves. Other types of exclusions include words and phrases that might be considered profane, insulting (e.g., ugly, stupid), sexually suggestive (e.g., on you, coming, baby), or words that are culturally specific (e.g., piano is allowed but not sitar). This less restrictive type of chat system allows children much greater freedom for conveying their own thoughts and making meaningful social connections with other players than the pre-structured system. However, because the system prohibits misspellings, certain words, and turns of phrase as a means of preventing players from circumventing the rules for exclusion, it seriously curtails opportunities for early writers to use invented spelling, simple misspellings, and many of their preferred syntactic choices to convey meaning. In addition, because the dictionary messaging system is composed of a selection of words and phrases that is generated by adults who are operating from a particular sociocultural context (i.e., the sorts of adults who design and create content at a large North American corporation), children are restricted to utterances from within that worldview.

While there is concern from parents and policy-makers about Internet safety and children’s communication with unknown others online (U.S. Department of Justice Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.), how decisions are made about what is included or excluded in pre-structured chat systems is unclear. As Grimes (2008) astutely pointed out, the term ‘safety’ remains vague and undefined with little, if any, “nuanced discussion of how the pre-approved words and sentences become approved in the first place: How are they selected, who selects them, and on what basis” (Grimes, 2008: 2). While an in-depth discussion of how decisions about word selections in KinzChatPlus are
made is beyond the scope of this chapter, the issue is particularly relevant to understanding how the sociocultural context of Webkinz World can significantly impact the shared meanings and experiences that children are able to develop through their play.

In addition to the restrictions of the KinzChat and KinzChatPlus systems, the ways in which users can access and communicate with one another in Webkinz World are additionally restrictive. Users in the world of Webkinz are able to connect to other users in two ways. They can, when their avatars are in close proximity or through an asynchronous message (if the username is known), request a user to be their friend (which will need to be reciprocated for access to be granted), or they can opt to ‘speak’ while in public spaces and wait for another avatar to also publicly announce something. In the latter case, communication is not directed to any specific person and will not necessarily elicit a response from others in the space.

When users are ‘friends’ (i.e., a friend request was sent and accepted by the other), they can then communicate via their cell phone (located on the dock). This phone also enables users to invite others over to their homes (My Room). For a successful phone call, both users must be on the same color channel. Unfortunately, there are varying numbers of colors depending on the type of account each user has purchased (i.e., standard or deluxe) and there is no option in the KinzChat system that identifies phone color choices. Thus, users must, through trial and error, change colors until they arrive at the same color as their friend. So while there is a messaging system, it is somewhat prohibitive in allowing planned communication with known (or at least online-befriended) others.
In the subsequent section, we discuss how a sociocultural framework draws our attention to the ways in which participation in a virtual world, as a cultural activity, can influence children’s social and cognitive development, not only through exchanges with the game and with other users, but also through ‘interactions’ (Rogoff, 1995: 174) with other social and historical ‘players,’ such as profit-driven corporations, advertisers, and game designers, to name just a few. Moreover, many of these interactions are mediated through the multimodal texts and literacy-related artifacts of the site; thus, this section will pay particular attention to the role of linguistic, semiotic, and technical mediation in creating culture in virtual worlds.

Community and Culture in Virtual Worlds

Another primary focus of sociocultural theory is the connection between individuals embedded in a social and historical context (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). As such, learning is first an intermental process (between people) prior to becoming an intramental one (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). From this perspective, children’s learning and development are part of a process of socialization into shared cultures and “systems of meaning” ( Göncü & Katsarou, 2000: 223) of a given sociohistorical context. In order to use a sociocultural lens in studying Webkinz World, attention must be paid to the cultural underpinnings of the site and, to a larger extent, how community is or is not manifested in this virtual space.
In many ways, the world of Webkinz is modeled after consumerist, Western society, in which wealth and attractiveness are believed to be important components of health and happiness. These values are conveyed through the artifacts on the site (e.g., the dock prominently displays possessions; almost all games in the Arcade terminate with the image of a piggybank being filled with coins), as well as through contact with NPCs and even the site-generated speech bubbles from one’s own avatar. Thus, these cultural norms are conveyed through the majority of the texts, activities, and areas of *Webkinz World*. To illustrate, when playing Quizzy’s Question Corner, one’s own avatar will comment with “wow, we’re making money now,” and when visiting the KinzStyle Outlet, PJ Collie (the trendy-dressed dog NPC) will welcome you with “This is where you will find all the hip, funky, and fashionable threads that will keep your pet lookin’ stylish!” Even when logging on, the initial page (the Kinzville Times newspaper) will highlight things to buy, play, or shop for, such as “if you’re a shopaholic, you’ve got to check out Spree, a fabulous game in the Arcade!” Throughout the virtual world, children then enact (and perhaps internalize) these values through gameplay; earning Kinzcash, shopping and dressing their avatar, and expanding and decorating their avatar’s home. These consumer values are also reinforced through banner advertisements around the gameplay screen and periodic in-game commercial campaigns for such things as movies and books.

*Webkinz World* also expresses values such as responsibility and caring for others. For example, users are instructed to care for their Webkinz pets, the messaging system is structured to restrict negative interactions, users must regularly water and maintain fruits
and vegetables in their yard, and additional pay features, such as the Caring Valley (enable users to plant virtual trees), contribute money towards children’s charities. It is worth noting, however, that these messages about responsibility and caring are not integral to successful play in the site. For instance, while one’s garden will die if not tended to within a seven-day period, there are few consequences for not caring for one’s avatar. When the Webkinz pet’s health, happiness, or hunger meter becomes low, a thermometer will appear in its mouth and heating pad will rest on its head. However, having health and hunger at zero (out of 100) will not affect gameplay. The avatar will not be slower, lethargic, or unable to access any area of Webkinz World.

While a self-proclaimed “educational” environment, the culture of Webkinz World does not appear to value education, the process of learning, or being smart. Instead, users can compete to be the prettiest or best dressed, but no such competitions exist for knowing more than others or excelling in intellectual pursuits. Further, many of the comments made in the virtual world about school are quite disparaging and few activities focus on learning specifically. For instance, one’s own avatar, while playing in the Arcade or in Quizzy’s Question Corner, will make such comments as “If only this counted as homework, huh?” or “Maybe we won’t have to go to school now.” Such statements seem to belittle the importance of school and perhaps even learning in general. While some comments are made about intelligence – “oh, I’m getting smarter by the moment” or “I’m going to be the smartest Webkinz around” – few activities focus on learning new material. Rather, the games are based on the demonstration of already known facts (trivia), spelling, or addition. On the whole, most activities are focused on earning
Kinzcash, rather than educational benefit or the simple acquisition of knowledge. Even the Kinzville Academy, where pets can take courses, is in no way associated with academic subject learning. Instead, lessons focus on strength, agility, speed, creativity, style, cooking, and grooming. There is one intelligence course that involves solving word puzzles. While there is no traditional academic focus in these activities, there is a financial incentive, as completing these courses then enables users to take higher-paying jobs at the Employment Agency.

While there are clearly cultural norms on Webkinz World, whether the virtual world is a community is unclear. As Rogoff (2003) noted, “people develop as participants in cultural communities. Their development can be understood only in light of the cultural practices and circumstances of their communities” (p. 3–4). It is this awareness that leads to an additional question of whether the world of Webkinz is indeed an online community or simply a virtual space, mirroring dominant cultural norms. While many have theorized about what makes a community, some key tenets seem to be a sense of interdependence, communication, and emotional connection (Dalton, Elias, & Wandersman, 2001; Sarason, 1974). In looking specifically at online communities, the ability for personal expression, sharing information, and establishing social connections also seem to be important (Nip, 2004; Reich, 2010).

In some respects, Webkinz World provides many opportunities for personal expression. Users can select what type of Webkinz pet to purchase, pick clothing for their avatar, arrange the layout of the avatar’s home (My Room), and decorate the space with
purchased and won items. In addition, there are some means for establishing personal connections with others through the KinzChat, KinzChatPlus, and KinzPost systems. However, as discussed earlier, these clothing and furniture items, as well as the messages in the pre-structured and dictionary communication systems, are created by adult game designers and restrict young players’ freedom of expression. In exploring how interdependence – a level of reciprocal influence – might be established in *Webkinz World*, we see few opportunities for users to contribute meaningfully to the world or to other users. As Robbins (2005) points out, from a sociocultural perspective, the ability of the individual to influence and be shaped by his or her community is of utmost importance.

Individuals and their social partners and the activities in which they engage are continually transforming and developing in mutually integrated ways. Likewise, communities or contexts are constantly changing and being changed, which in turn results in changed opportunities for learning and development. (p. 143)

In looking at the structure of *Webkinz World* and users’ abilities to shape their environment, or at least communicate with others, contribute ideas, or create new games or activities, there is little available. Users can email the site administrators and suggest changes be made, but there is nothing more direct. Instead, it appears that users may be using the fan sites around *Webkinz World* to promote communication, collaboration, expression, and interdependence.
Fan sites such as the *Webkinz Insider* assist newcomers and more novice users in navigating the world of Webkinz through a forum and Twitter updates. The communication features are not very restrictive and tips, explanations, and cheats are readily available. Similarly, *Everything Webkinz*, a site created by three mothers of Webkinz users, hosts many virtual events that may also engender a sense of connection. These events include room decorating contests, holiday parties, raffles, and scavenger hunts that encourage interaction between users and facilitate more cooperative interactions, if not more scaffolded learning opportunities. Further, the site administrators continually solicit member input, providing another mechanism for users to meaningfully participate.

While *Webkinz World* may not demonstrate the key components of an online community, it does promote distinct cultural values. Further, the fan sites associated with *Webkinz World* appear to provide more community-like opportunities and interactions for users. As such, our understandings of the affordances and constraints that *Webkinz World* offers for children’s learning are improved by the widening of research boundaries to include the additional fan spaces around *Webkinz World*.

**Conclusions**

To date, the bulk of socioculturally oriented theory and research has explored the cultural influences of offline spaces. However, in modern societies, the artifacts, signs, social norms, and communicative practices of online spaces increasingly make up the cultures
or shared “system of meaning” (Göncü & Katsarou, 2000: 223) into which children are socialized. Therefore, it is appropriate to extend this perspective to the study of online and technology-mediated spaces as well. Recent research on children’s engagement with new technologies has provided insight into many specific elements of a sociocultural framework. This includes explorations of how expert others scaffold children’s development of “technoliteracies” (Marsh, 2004) and contextually appropriate gaming literacy practices (Steinkuehler, 2007), examinations of the role of technological (Gillen, Gamannossi, & Cameron, 2005) and popular cultural media (Wohlwend, 2009) artifacts in mediating children’s literate play, as well as investigations of the impact of culture and community both online (Black & Reich, in press) and in classroom contexts (Merchant, 2009) for children’s learning in virtual worlds. These studies have all contributed greatly to our understandings of the varied roles of new technologies and media in children’s development. However, building on insights gained from these studies, as well as from the observations and content analysis discussed in this chapter, we suggest that the focused and systematic use of a sociocultural framework can assist researchers in identifying design features that facilitate or limit children’s technology-mediated play and learning in virtual worlds. More specifically, the sociocultural lens can provide insights into the intertwined elements of scaffolded learning, mediated communication, and culture and community that shape the explicit and implicit lessons that children are learning in these online spaces.

As the opening vignette demonstrates, digital environments often provide rich opportunities for meaningful interactions between children. However, virtual worlds can
be viewed as the social and cognitive partners in children’s development as well. The
designed space, activities, feedback, and implicit values of these worlds can impact users – from serving as the more competent other in scaffolded interactions to conveying social and cultural meaning in gameplay. While decades of research have applied a sociocultural perspective to children’s daily lives, we argue that this lens should be expanded to include children’s play in virtual worlds as these sites attract millions of unique users each month (Compete, Inc., 2011). Virtual worlds, like Webkinz World, can serve as both a social partner and a space rich with cultural norms and values. Further, fan sites around these virtual worlds may provide online communities where users are able to continually transform and develop the space in integrated ways.

References


