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8 Gender Play in a Tween Gaming Club

Yasmin B. Kafai

Much of current research on adult gaming has focused on why and how women join online role-playing games and what their experiences in these game communities and spaces are (see Lin this volume; Taylor this volume; and Yee this volume). It is only recently that our attention has turned to younger online players. Being online is an increasingly important part of teen social life in which teens initiate and develop relationships through e-mail, chats, blogs, and virtual worlds. Gaming is still considered a male-dominated domain; studies have shown how girls position themselves as game players by either challenging or conforming to gender conventions (Pelletier this volume; Schott and Kambouri 2003).

As Taylor (this volume) has argued, it is crucial to understand how players inhabit gaming cultures to understand the complex interactions between gender and play. Those few studies that have examined the relationship between girls and gaming focus on how girls play games popular with boys (Carr 2005), how girls compete in teams against boys (Beavis 2005), or how girls at home negotiate access to games with male family members (Schott and Horrell 2000). A common factor in all this research is that girls' access and participation to gaming is studied in relation to male-dominated games and contexts. To expand our discussions, it may be helpful to examine participation in game spaces known to be popular with girls. For instance, Beavis and Charles (2005) found that boys' approaches to playing *The Sims* provided critical insights into the gendering of gaming practices.

In this chapter I examine gaming practices in a virtual world called *Whyville*. More than 68 percent of its registered players are girls, ages ten to sixteen (Aschbacher 2003; see also Kafai and Giang 2007). At the time of this study, *Whyville* counted more than 1.2 million registered users logging more than 50 million page views per year to explore topics in science, economics,

and citizenship. Players, known as Whyvillians, become part of *Whyville's* community by creating their own avatar-based personas composed of different face parts. Through participation in science activities, Whyvillians can earn at every log-in a regular salary in “clams,” the virtual currency. In addition, Whyvillians can design, sell, and trade face parts for their avatars and projectiles for play activities. On a typical day, players log in to *Whyville* and check their y-mail accounts (the name of the e-mail system used in *Whyville*) for new messages and review their clam salary ledgers for current account status. Whyvillians then head out to popular places such as the beach, or one of the planetary colonies, to chat with others. They also meet to play checker games or complete more science activities to increase their salaries. Frequently, one will find them at the virtual mall called Akbar's, browsing through the latest offerings of face parts for eyes, hair, lips, clothes, or other accessories before deciding on a purchase (see figure 8.1).

Whyville is what Danah Boyd calls a digital public (2006) that provides tweens and teens with a “youth space, a place to gather and see and be seen by peers. Publics are critical to the coming-of-age narrative because they provide the framework for building cultural knowledge.” In *Whyville*, players can create their own online representations, and socialize with other players by chatting, hanging out, cruising around, or playing games. These types of digital publics have become very popular among youth, as indicated by the growing memberships in virtual worlds such as *Club Penguin*, *Habbo Hotel*, *Virtual Laguna Beach*, or *Teen Second Life*. Previous research of how youth construct and experience gender in public spaces such as lunchrooms and on school yards used the idea of gender play to help us understand the purposes and contexts in which girls and boys experience and construct gender. Barrie Thorne's (1993; 2005) work, which inspired the title of this chapter, emphasizes gender play as social construction by examining the actions youth take to affirm or negate differences. She also recognized the complexities of gender relations, meaning that gender might not always be in the foreground of interactions, can fluctuate, and gives room for possibilities of change.

The location for our study in *Whyville* was an after-school club in an elementary school. About twenty girls and boys between the ages of ten and twelve participated over a seven-week period; some teens came regularly for an hour while others dropped in and out. We were able to observe, interview, and track tweens' interactions online in our data collections (Kafai et al. 2007). We



Figure 8.1 Different Whyville activities: (a) trading post and (b) beach.

were interested in the many ways boys and girls inhabit and share the boundaries between the virtual world of *Whyville* and the physical location of the after-school club, following Thorne's (1993) suggestion that research should start "with a sense of the whole rather than with the assumption of gender as separate and different" (p. 108) and focus on context in our analyses to cross the gender divide.

In this study we focused on game play in *Whyville* in an after-school club because it allowed us to observe tweens' online and off-line interactions designing avatars and learning teleporting. We know from our analyses of data that all *Whyville* players participate in these activities (Kafai et al. 2007). Previous research has shown that becoming a proficient gamer is a complex enterprise that involves peer networks (Gee 2003). In our observations of the *Whyville* club, we found that most boys and girls preferred playing together in all-female or all-male groups of two or three around one computer to sitting with someone of the opposite sex. These gender play patterns are fairly typical of what has been observed in other public spaces such as school yards, lunchrooms, and classrooms (Thorne 1993). We identified three exceptions that facilitated peer networking and teaching across gender boundaries: prior experience, proximity, and public play. In the following sections, I present examples of how these three aspects come into play when learning teleporting and designing avatars.

Multiple Access Points to Insider Knowledge

Insider knowledge, or as Consalvo (2007) called it, "gaming capital," is at the core of gaming, which players either discover through trial and error or interacting with others. We selected the two activities of designing avatars (Kafai, Fields, and Cook 2007) and traveling to secret places (Fields and Kafai 2007a) because both illustrate key aspects of becoming and being a player in *Whyville* and are of relevance to the field of game studies. Like most of *Whyville's* activities, both involve multiple types of logistical and cultural knowledge. For instance, designing the look of one's avatar is a common practice that is easily visible to all on *Whyville*. But there is still a lot to be learned about the cultural practices of how to assemble an attractive and interesting avatar in this world. In contrast, traveling to a secret place, such as the planet system in *Whyville*, is an activity that cannot be observed directly in people's online interactions

because the typed command is only visible to the player outside of *Whyville*. Most other sites in *Whyville* can be selected from a pull-down menu that allows players to navigate between different sites.

Teleporting

Like all other games, *Whyville* has its share of secret commands and places. We selected a simple command, called teleporting, which when typed in a player's chat automatically transports the player to social places not listed in the destination menu on *Whyville* (e.g., “teleport moon” takes a player to a space in *Whyville* called the Moon not accessible in any other manner). We focused on how club members learned about this command that one cannot observe in others' chats (the typed command “teleport moon” is not visible to others) unless people are publicly discussing a social gathering at one of the teleport locations (see figure 8.2a). The only exception to this can be found on select cheat sites where instructions on teleporting are included in tips for new players (see also Fields and Kafai 2007b).

For most club members, information about teleporting spreads along gender lines. For example, one experienced club member liked to throw projectiles with three other boys, Gabe, Aidan, and Kyle, so it is not surprising that all of them would learn in quick succession how to teleport. We observed the same pattern of knowledge sharing in a group of girls. But we also noticed how proximity in seating and prior experience provided exceptions to these more typical forms of distribution along gender lines. Some club members learned how to teleport in the club by asking other club members physically sitting next to them. Gabe learned from Briana while they were working on separate computers side by side. Gabe learned to teleport in the context of a social need to meet his friend Marv, a classmate who did not participate in the after-school club. In addition, since he was sitting next to Briana, she was able to observe him typing and corrected his initial mistake of typing “teleport to moon” instead of “teleport moon,” a mistake that she made frequently when she learned how to teleport on *Whyville* earlier that day.

Club members with some *Whyville* experience took the lead in learning about teleporting and our analyses indicate that this applied to all six boys and girls. These teens had more opportunities to be on *Whyville* during the day than other club members. While it is not clear how the sixth graders were introduced to teleporting during that time, it seems natural that these would

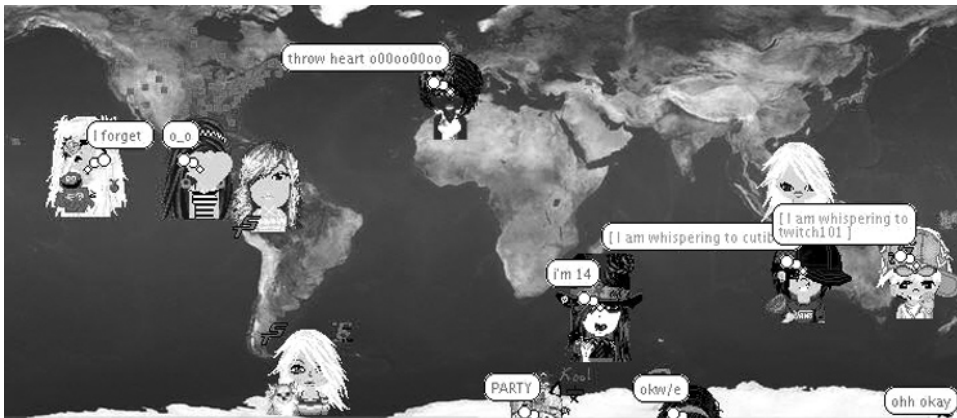


Figure 8.2 (a) Teleporting and (b) Saturn.

be among the first club members to use teleport. We know that two among the first youth to teleport found out on *Whyville* by asking questions online. This is perhaps the easiest learning method to identify since it is literally spelled out in the text. Consider one club member with the screen name “bluwave” who on the third day of the club sought online advice on a lot of things including whispering, making friends, dancing, and teleporting. Like many of the club members, bluwave did not ask how to teleport but how to get to the moon. She tried asking anonymous people several times before getting the answers she needed. What’s important here is that familiarity with the world and knowledge of how to gather information in *Whyville* played an important role in how she gained access to this insider knowledge.

Over time, teleporting became a much more public activity, with youths yelling across the room to one another to “meet me at the Moon!” This probably allowed other youth to overhear their conversations. In addition, as more youths teleported, others could glance at computer screens while wandering the room and see places like the Moon. The rest discovered a particular teleport location, Saturn, in an unusual clubwide social incident five weeks into the project. On this day, Leslie, who had learned about Saturn through experimentation a few days earlier, organized a get-together with Marissa, Ulani, and Isabel on that planet, inviting them by y-mail to meet her at Saturn. This invitation seems to have provided the instigation for Marissa and Ulani to teleport for the first time, and while Isabel knew how to teleport to the Moon, Mars, and Earth, she had not been to Saturn before that day. While at Saturn, a Whyvillian who was not part of the club insulted Ulani, who yelled out to the club that someone had insulted her on Saturn. Immediately several other club members teleported to Saturn, two for the first time (they had to ask how to spell it), and threw projectiles at the offender. By the end of the day, almost all the club members had been to Saturn, doubling the daily average of Saturn visits by club members, a trend that continued through the remainder of the week.

While our initial expectations—based on teens’ self-chosen arrangements—would predict that insider knowledge would stay within gender boundaries, our observations indicate otherwise. Proximity as prior experience and public play were equally important avenues for sharing insider knowledge across gender boundaries. In fact, one could argue that the club setting

facilitates a sharing across gender boundaries as the last incident illustrates when all club members, girls and boys, rallied around Ulani. This illustrates the passing between outsider and insider status in both the physically and virtually located communities of our study (Fields and Kafai 2007a).

Avatar Design

In *Whyville*, players have the ability to customize their avatars with various two-dimensional face parts and accessories; more than thirty thousand elements have been drawn and sold by other players. Perhaps no other aspect of game research has focused more on issues of gender stereotyping than players' representation and choices of avatars. Taylor (2003) illustrates how different factors and values about immersion, identity, and legitimacy determine in which ways game designers structure virtual environments and content available to players. Most commercial games provide players with menus of choices for selecting avatar types and for customizing clothing, hair, and other features of their appearance. In contrast to these select-from-a-menu choices of most multiplayer online games, virtual worlds such as *Teen Second Life* and *Whyville* are entirely based on player-generated content. These avatars are not ephemeral and spurious creations: players spend considerable time selecting and customizing them and then interacting with others online.

All girls and boys in the club, with no exception, were engaged in designing and accessorizing their avatars. In fact, activities involving the design, selection, sale, and sharing of face parts are among the most popular in *Whyville* (Feldon and Kafai in press). We also know from the repository of the *Whyville Times* (*Whyville's* weekly citizen-written newspaper) that online representation is of interest to all *Whyville* players: close to six hundred articles refer to face parts and about three hundred articles openly share opinions about how to look good, where to shop, and how *not* to dress. One of the reasons why this might be the case is that all players are given the same avatar when they join *Whyville*: their faces are ovals only furnished with a set of eyes and a mouth, signaling newcomer status. While avatar looks can be copied by buying face parts, players need to learn how to earn clams that provide the funds for purchases. Players also need to select the face parts among the thousands of available offerings and establish what might make them look attractive, which involves a complex mix of personal choices, observations of other avatars, and reading the online newspaper (see figure 8.3).



Figure 8.3 Choosing a nose in *Whyville*—a sequence of face changes.

Girls' and boys' engagement with avatars did not change during the seven weeks of the club. Club members would invite same-sex peers to comment on their avatars. For instance, when Marissa called to Molly, "Do you want to see me with earrings?" Molly came around the desk to look at Marissa's screen, and then said, "They look so pretty!" Marissa smiled and said, "Thank you," and the two girls continued to look at the screen. When Paul, Ethan, and Blake found Alex online, Paul called, "He's ugly. Alex, you're ugly!" His tone was light and cheerful, but one boy called back across the room, "Look who's talking, Paul!" Many of these exchanges happened on a daily basis with club members in close proximity.

Boys would also often create affinity looks where two or more players would have coordinated face parts for group ventures into *Whyville*. A primary motivation for a particular avatar look was to affiliate with something or someone they liked, such as a video game character, relative, hobby, or nationality. For instance, one boy created his avatar because "I like Dragon Ball Z and he looks like someone from Dragon Ball Z." This young man made his entire character to look like a favorite video game hero. In contrast, another teen in this category would pick a single part that showed an affinity, like a baseball bat for a love of baseball or a shirt with a sister's name on it. We know that these displays of affinity sometimes led to friendships on *Whyville*—conversations would start based on observations of shared interest in something displayed on a player's avatar.

Both girls and boys talked about avatars being "hot," "ugly," or "cute" when talking about their online appearance and often collaborated with

opposite-sex peers when searching new face parts for their avatars or friends. For example, Jill appraised the “bling” (the name of the accessory) necklace that Cole was buying for his girlfriend. She also offered her accessories for free but declined when Cole wanted to have all of them, even if they’re “girlie,” for his girlfriend. She then moved on to critique with Cole his avatar’s looks and accessories including the lip piercing. One could argue that club members considered one another experts in avatar design, especially when purchases or trades were for the opposite gender.

All these examples showcase players designing avatars of the same gender. While we did not find references to gender-swapping in the context of daily club interactions (Berman and Bruckman 2001), some teens revealed in interviews that they had multiple accounts allowing them to earn several salaries, as in the case of one sixth-grade girl named Bev: “[My second account] is a boy! And it’s called cuteguy and I just made it for more clams, but sometimes when I am bored I hang out in that account.” Besides making her second account a boy, Bev also claimed to create an entirely different look for cuteboy than her primary avatar. A sixth-grade boy named Walter used his second account as a disguise: “Well actually [my second account] is a girl account that I use to trick people that I don’t like on *Whyville*. So if they mess with me, I, um—I don’t know, I do something to them.” These justifications provide some interesting insights on how tweens used gender in their avatar designs other than to accessorize their looks.

Discussion

In this chapter I aim to understand how tweens gain access to insider knowledge in virtual worlds by observing girls and boys in an after-school gaming club. Our gaming context, however, was different from previous research: *Whyville.net* is a virtual world in which more than two-thirds of registered players are girls. A visit any time during the day would confirm that the majority of avatars visible on the screen are female. One of our initial concerns was whether boys would be interested at all in joining the *Whyville* club—a concern that was quickly dispelled through boys’ active engagement and continuous visits to the *Whyville* club and the online space.

In our analysis, we focus on two key aspects of gaming in *Whyville*: designing avatars and teleporting to secret places. We observed some fairly typical

gender divisions in who talked to whom in the club, but we also found quite a number of instances where gender boundaries were crossed. We examined the social interactions that contributed to the distribution of gaming expertise. Our example of teleporting is only a small facet of what is needed to become a competent player in *Whyville*, but it allowed us to track on multiple levels different forms of and access to knowledge distribution. While there are situations in which boys or girls choose to organize their play along gender lines, we also have as many examples where other factors structure participation. Prior familiarity such as the daytime playing of sixth graders creates shared experiences, and collaborative play informs others about teleporting. At other times, proximity allows other players to see what's happening or to ask for assistance. We see these different forms of participation as illustrations of the social networking that goes on in gaming communities.

It is possible that the avatar design in *Whyville* creates a more equitable game space. As the interviews with club members reveal, *all* boys and girls were invested in customizing their avatars. It is worthwhile to illustrate in more detail the different intentions that covered aesthetics, coolness, and functionality. Many of the teens would experiment with different themes to design their avatar, in part as a challenge: "I try to pick themes and sometimes they are dorky I think, but I just try to have fun and change it." Some teens did make their avatars similar to themselves either in physical appearance or in personality while others tried to have a certain look or develop a sense of belonging that they could not have in "real" life. Describing his avatar, one boy said, "I want to get a haircut like that but my mom won't let me." Similarly, a girl remarked while discussing her avatar, "I wish I had black hair . . . [and] I don't have really pretty lips like she does." Much as some people peruse magazines or fashion sites for looks to imitate, youths also copied other people's looks, seeing a face part on one Whyvillian and searching for it in Akbar's to put on their own face: "I take their looks and then if I see somebody I like again then I copy them. . . . we were taking people's looks." One boy defined himself against the trend: "I wanted to look different from other people." What these statements reveal is that *Whyville* not only offers room for customizing avatars but also provides room for different purposes of doing so.

This range of avatar customization is rather extensive and unique to *Whyville* when compared to the choices provided in most commercial video and role-playing games. Such game worlds are designed with particular story

lines and thus the constraints imposed on the diversity of virtual characters ensure that the play experience stays within the boundaries of the fantasy world. By contrasting, in *Whyville* the provision of all avatar content and interactions resides in the hands of players. Thus the purposes for creating avatars differ from other games; the primary purpose is to enhance socialization between players, a primary activity among teens. In fact, one could say that play in *Whyville* is avatar design because it occupies a considerable amount of time spent in *Whyville*.

These findings provide at least some initial pointers on how avatar customization in virtual worlds can structure access and participation of players. The current success of online role-playing games that allow players not only to select their roles but also their forms of participation seem to provide further support. Gender play in public spaces, as Thorne defined it, is about the possibilities of affirming or opposing differences and with that, giving room for change. The new digital publics can be seen as a crucial context for youth development as teens decide which groups they identify with, what kind of people they wish to be within those groups, and what is required to be those people (Bers 2006). But it also leaves us with many other issues. For instance, this incredible range of customization led to a number of social issues in regard to avatars—class stratification (newbie vs. oldbie), pressure to fit in with the latest trend, and even inequitable racial representation (see Kafai, Cook, and Fields 2007). Further research is needed on how individuals use the broad resources of this environment to play and experiment with appearances, even to the point of transgressing situated social boundaries including flirting, cross-dressing, and supposed anonymity.

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