

# Children's Social Participation in Virtual Worlds

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## ABSTRACT

*Virtual worlds provide an arena for children to express themselves and to interact with others. They are a natural and frequent part of children's life today. However, there is not much research on what actually happens in the online worlds and what kind of opportunities those worlds could offer to children and thereby enhance their social participation. The aim in this study is to explore the potential of virtual worlds for children's social participation. The empirical part of the study consists of interviews with 21 Finnish children, aged 11-15 years. By interviewing children, the authors examined their social practices in virtual worlds. In the study, the authors found seven types of social practice that make it possible for children to socialize with others, learn new things and skills, express themselves publicly and play in virtual worlds. Virtual worlds provide an arena for children to overcome the limitations of the real world. However, the freedom also has side effects: misbehavior.*

*Keywords: Children, Expressing Oneself, Learning, Playing, Social Participation, Social Practices, Socialization, Virtual Worlds*

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## INTRODUCTION

Social media and particularly virtual worlds are a part of most children's everyday life from an early age (Livingstone et al., 2011). Virtual worlds are also natural space for children to express themselves. Thus far, however, there is not much research on what actually happens

in the online worlds that children use and what kind of opportunities those worlds could offer to children and thereby enhance their possibilities for social participation (see Kafai, 2010). Several studies have been conducted on the use of media (e.g. Kotilainen, 2010) and also on risks in the use online worlds (Livingstone et al., 2011; OECD, 2011). The previous research

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literature on virtual worlds has mainly focused on adults or young people rather than children under the age of 15 (Meyers, 2009).

The aim of this study is to explore children's social practices in virtual worlds and thereby to contribute to the discussion on opportunities and risks of media and involvement in user-generated content for participation (e.g. Leung, 2009; Loureiro et al., 2012; Sangwan et al., 2009; Östman, 2012). We examine online worlds as children's participatory media. Participatory media refers to many-to-many media which makes it possible for everyone to express oneself, explore one's identity and connect with peers by broadcasting and receiving text, images, video, data or discussions (Rheingold, 2008). Virtual worlds are defined as synchronous, persistent networks of people, represented as avatars and facilitated by networked computers (Bell, 2008).<sup>1</sup> They are only one but a significant part of the online world. Hundreds of millions of children around the world use virtual worlds (KZero, 2011). In virtual worlds, children spend their time by engaging in different activities, for example developing an own avatar, chatting and playing.

## **VIRTUAL WORLDS AS ARENAS FOR CHILDREN'S SOCIAL PARTICIPATION**

The way people engage in media has changed in recent years. Today, children and young people are not only consumers but also active creators of media culture (Schäfer, 2011). Some researchers see an entirely new kind of culture emerging from the use of participatory media. Jenkins et al. (2009), for example, writes about participatory culture, which refers to "a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement" and "strong support for creating and sharing one's creations" (p. 3). Cultures of participation are dictated by the result of changes in human behaviour and social organization and facilitated and supported by a variety of different technological environments, such as virtual worlds (Fischer, 2011).

Previous studies have shown that there are four basic features of virtual worlds as participatory media. First, virtual worlds provide users an arena to present their voices in public and, thereby turning their self-expression into a form of public participation. Rheingold (2008) writes about the public voice which, with other voices, is a basis of the 'public opinion'. The expression of the 'public opinion' refers, according to Habermas (1974), to criticism and control which citizens informally and, in periodic elections, formally exert to influence decision-making by state. Many researchers have indeed seen the Internet and virtual communities as a new public space for politically oriented conversation (Barlas & Caliskan, 2006; Papacharissi, 2002). However, as virtual worlds are considered public spaces, children's viewpoint on participation and political discussion has to be separated from the adults' one. From adults' viewpoint, it may be relevant to talk about virtual worlds as spaces for political discussion. From children's viewpoint, however, regarding virtual worlds as public spaces refers to their potential to be children's arena for presenting opinions about their everyday matters (see Tuukkanen et al., 2012).

Secondly, virtual worlds are collaborative in nature. Virtual world users encounter and engage in many social phenomena and processes in virtual worlds, such as solidarity, trust between people, common rules and shared attitudes (Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Heinonen, 2008; Sangwan et al., 2009). Heinonen (2008) writes about 'communality', which refers to the feeling of belonging to a virtual group. The sense of community can also be characterized as an imagined reality (Thomas & Brown, 2009) or as a social identity (Siitonen, 2007). Castells (2000) talks about 'real virtuality', referring to a system "in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience" (p. 373). This means that virtual reality is not artificial but real, which applies to online identities as well; users' identities are enabled and constrained by social structures (Fuchs, 2008).

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