*Kelli L. Frank*

# The cost of virtual status: are you "in" or "out"?

## Experiences with popular online virtual gaming worlds

**A study explored children's experiences in 3 online gaming communities putting a special focus on socioeconomic status and consumer behavior in these virtual spaces.**

The seriousness of virtual online gaming and the ways that it informs children's concepts of consumerism can be seen in a recent example from the United Kingdom, involving a 12-year-old boy who loved playing the online game *FarmVille*. *FarmVille*, a free game available through Facebook, allows users to own and operate a virtual farm with crops and livestock. Within a 2-week period, the young boy's dedication became costly when he charged close to 1,400 USD to his mother's credit card, purchasing *FarmVille* add-ons without her knowledge. When questioned afterward about his actions, the boy responded innocently, "they had brought out good stuff that I wanted" (Insley, 2010).

The popularity of children's virtual online gaming worlds has led parents, educators, and researchers to question the value of virtual spaces. Experts posit that "video games, the Internet, and computer interactive products" (Calvert/Jordan/Cocking, 2002, p. 10) have become a larger part of children's extracurricular lives, and that online worlds are becoming influential on the ways children develop and learn (Beals/Bers, 2009). Worldwide, one-third of all virtual worlds are designed specifically for children, and an estimated 20 million children participate in these worlds (KZero, 2010; Jackson/Gauntlette/Steemers, 2008). In response to this rising trend, it is important to consider the ways that virtual online worlds may influence behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes in child audiences, particularly as they pertain to consumerism and socioeconomic disparities appearing in virtual spaces. This article summarizes an empirical exploration of children's experiences engaging with online gaming communities in order to capture the potentially harmful impacts of consumerism and merchandising on children in relation to online virtual gaming worlds.

### Virtual worlds at a glance

The 3 virtual worlds analyzed in the study were *Club Penguin*, *Webkinz*, and *Ridemakerz*.

*Club Penguin* is a gaming space where users can embody a virtual penguin to play mini-games, socialize, and freely roam a snowy landscape.[1]

*Webkinz* is described best by the GANZ company itself: "Every Webkinz® pet comes with a secret code that is used to log into Webkinz World. Once there, children can feed and care for their virtual Webkinz™ pets, decorate and furnish rooms for their pets, enter challenges, play games and do odd jobs to earn KinzCash – the virtual currency which pays for food, clothing and treats."[2] (Webkinz Foundation, 2010)

*Ridemakerz* allows children to customize a toy car at the Ridemakerz store that will later come to life online once the child enters a code into the game.[3] Once online, the child functions through a created avatar, which will drive around in cars, socialize with other players, and take part in challenges and games.

### Method

Using participation observation, the study was conducted from October 2010 to January 2011. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from 3 of the most popular gaming websites targeting tweens, *Club Penguin*, *Webkinz*, and *Ridemakerz*. Data were collected during observation sessions lasting approximately 30 to 60 minutes and totaling an average of 3 to 4 hours per week.[4] Additionally, in order to assess what children do in game space, each activity and mini-game option in the 3 worlds was recorded along with the rewards for game play. Content and semiotic analysis was used to facilitate a deeper understanding of signs and symbols when they appeared in game space.

## Results

Users predominantly spent their time in 3 different yet interconnected ways, including playing mini-games, earning currency, and spending currency. Some of the mini-games offered compensation to the users in the form of money or advancement in the game, while others were educational or just for fun. *Club Penguin* claimed to provide educational lessons, such as money management and arithmetic. However, content analysis revealed that only 36 % of mini-games had any educational elements. Additionally, characters could largely ignore the educational games (and often would because they had lower payouts and thus were less appealing). The analysis revealed a strong correlation between the games that users preferred to play and monetary rewards.

Of the activities and games played in the 3 worlds, approximately 80 % paid out rewards in the form of virtual currency. Rewards became very important to consider in this study because virtual currency heavily dictated user experiences in the virtual realm. Money was necessary for expanding property and filling homes with extensive virtual commodities. It also served to purchase "body ornaments" or flair, which enhance a user's appearance.

### *Virtual currency dictates user experiences*

Body decorations were available in many forms depending upon the wealth, status, and location of the user in the game. Of the characters encountered in *Club Penguin*, 85 % were sporting body ornaments, such as clothes, accessories, or flair. Of



Ill. 1: **A non-member's igloo in** *Club Penguin*. **The igloo lacks decorations, the user owns only one pet**
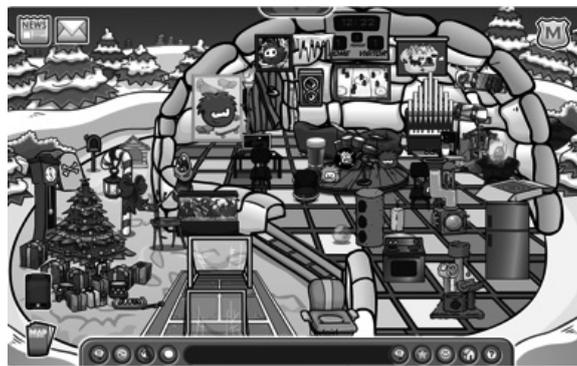


Ill. 2: **A paying member's igloo in** *Club Penguin*. **The user has purchased a number of items for his/her igloo and owns numerous pets**

Screenshots from www.clubpenguin.com © Walt Disney Company

the characters in *Webkinz*, 80 % had body ornaments and 100 % of the characters in *Ridemakerz* were sporting body ornaments.

### *Paid membership means virtual wealth*

Only the holder of a paid membership could acquire additional wealth, made manifest through body decorations, specialty items, pets, homes, vehicles, and other valuable commodities. In-game wealth offered opportunities for freer expression, movement, and status. For non-members, the more time a user spent in the game and was denied access, the more tantalizing a paid membership became. There is potential for a virtual class system to emerge from this infrastructure, where users recognize how they are separated based on virtual symbols of wealth and status.

It was hardly coincidental, for exam-

ple, that every player in Disney's *Club Penguin* started with the same base character – a penguin avatar whose only unique characteristic was its color. Beyond this, making a penguin stand out required the user to have a paid membership. Without a paid monthly membership, the penguin stayed bare and had limited access in the game. However, with a paid monthly membership, the penguin immediately received a lump sum of coins and had the purchasing power to indulge in virtually any costume, object or outfit in the game. The message here was clear: a paid membership gives you money, which gives you power. Without the power to consume, the penguin was lacking in appearance and experience. What emerged was this need to have more, to be the best looking, and to stand out from the crowd.

Recognizing social hierarchies in virtual worlds involved acknowledging signs and symbols of status. In *Club Penguin*, *Webkinz*, and *Ridemakerz*, a player's status can be valued in 3 major ways:

First, the look of an avatar can reveal membership status, wealth, and the player's experience in the game. Membership also offers access to restricted areas in the game where certain rare merchandise can only be purchased.

Second, a player's home can be a major symbol of status. Whether it is an igloo in *Club Penguin*, or a garage in *Ridemakerz*, rooms can be added on, property can be extended, and spaces can be absolutely packed full of purchased items. The disparities of purchasing power and experience between a paying member and non-member can clearly be seen by comparing ill. 1 and 2.

Third, objects and artifacts in virtual worlds are a sign of wealth and status as well. The quality as well as the quantity of objects a user owns can impact where they land on the social ladder.

## Lessons learned?

Wealth disparities that exist between the non-member and the paid member in virtual game space exaggerate these notions of social inequality. For non-members, acquiring wealth and status is an exhausting uphill battle that is unfruitful unless the user spends an exorbitant amount of time in the world. Thus, the paradox is revealed: it takes money to purchase the things you need to fit in, but earning enough money is nearly impossible and requires many hours of gameplay. The remedy for the non-member is, of course, the acquisition of purchasing power in the game, and that is gained through a paid monthly membership. Becoming a member allows the user to skip all the hard work of completing challenges and winning games to earn extra points. The real-life monetary contribution that secures a monthly membership provides users with the purchasing power to consume the virtual commodities they desire. In turn, the virtual commodity market of *Club Penguin* "saves" the individual from a bland, less creative, and more restrictive existence in the game.

Such was the case with the 12-year-old boy from the UK whose spending was a response to "all the good stuff" set before him in *FarmVille*. His desire to spend was arguably too hard to resist. Children are always learning, engaging, and picking up clues from the world around them. As virtual online communities become incorporated into children's broader life space, they should be examined to the degree that many other influences are. In particular, producers of online worlds that claim to teach specific educational skills, such as

money management, should be held accountable to providing this content. It is difficult to believe that children are learning money management when they never need to balance a budget or pay rent, only continue to consume desired virtual commodities. Producers should also consider what children glean from consumerist messages. When all signs in virtual space are telling a child to be concerned with buying as much as they can and nothing is being taught about how to manage money responsibly, the potential impact could be detrimental. Presenting children with a balance of responsibility and splurge could potentially help them foster a healthier understanding of financial management.

It is imperative that media producers consider these questions when they develop quality content. Without regulation of gaming content, children could potentially adopt self-conscious attitudes as a result of virtual consumerist messaging. It is this reduced sense of self-worth that is concerning, potentially leading children to consider unsustainable spending habits, both inside and outside of the virtual realm. ∎

## NOTES

[1] Club Penguin *is owned by the Walt Disney Company and is managed by the Disney Interactive Media Group. It is designed for children ages 6 to 12 and there were approximately 12.5 million users as of January 2011 (Mason, 2011).* Club Penguin *is available in 193 countries worldwide and in 8 languages.*

[2] *The popular virtual world of* Webkinz *is owned and maintained by the GANZ Company. GANZ was established in 1950 and remains one of the oldest and most successful privately owned family toy businesses in American history (GANZ, 2009). The site is available in 12 languages worldwide and has more than 6 million monthly users (Webkinz, n.d.).*

[3] *Ridemakerz is owned by Larry Andreini and was launched in 2006 (Ebenkamp, 2008). Currently,* Ridemakerz.com *is free to play and does not require purchasing merchandise or a membership; however, the site is only offered in English.* Ridemakerz *partners with Ford, Dodge, GM, and Mini Cooper to use their brands in merchandise (Ridemakerz, 2011).*

[4] *The user spent more than 70 hours as a participant in the 3 virtual online worlds collecting data and recording observations with other users. Coding of*

*the data was done using 6 content categories and SPSS software. These categories captured the types of characters seen by the user, locations within the worlds where the user was approached by other characters, methods of approach for meeting characters, and in-game opportunities available to the user.*

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