

A new online risk? How young children negotiate avatar death in virtual game worlds.

Ashley Donkin, Edith Cowan University

Children's virtual worlds have become popular places for children to play and socialise with their friends. Children gain many social and emotional benefits from playing in these virtual game worlds. However, there are also potential risks to children playing in these spaces, which include: bullying and griefing; social exclusion; misuse of online profiles; and negotiating with online commercial content (Holloway, Green & Livingstone, 2013, pp. 17-18). Whilst research into children's use of virtual worlds is ongoing, to date, minimal research attention has been given to the representation and experience of virtual death; it is often completely overlooked (Black, 2010; Black, Korobkova & Epler, 2014; Green, Brady, Holloway, Staksrud & Olafsson, 2013; Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig & Olafsson, 2011; Marsh, 2010, 2014; Shen, Liu & Wang, 2013; Valentine & Holloway, 2002). Virtual death refers to the death of an avatar in a virtual game world (Klastrup, 2007). In many virtual game worlds, death is a common occurrence that players have to manage.

The author, whose current research investigates 5-12 year old Australian children's use of virtual worlds, has observed that many child participants avoid virtual games where their avatar might die. A small number of child participants in this study play in survival virtual games; although, they also commented that they are bothered when their avatar dies. Additionally, whilst many children try to avoid the death of their avatar, they still engage in killing other avatars, and/or non-player characters in their games. This paper examines the representation of death in children's virtual worlds, and how children avoid, manage, or contribute to death in their games. The paper also discusses the contribution this research makes to our understanding of the risks children encounter whilst playing in virtual worlds.