

## **Virtual worlds and children's friendships**

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Much research about children's internet use focuses on the online risks children encounter or the educational benefits of using digital technologies for children (Bartlett, 2013; Green, Brady, Olafsson, Hartley and Lumby, 2001; Grimes, 2010; McQuade, Colt and Meyers, 2009; Valcke, De Wever, Van Keer and Schellens, 2011; Wishart, Oades and Morris, 2007). This paper focuses on the social benefits children gain when playing in online virtual worlds, especially the benefits associated with friendship. Children are spending their leisure time playing and creating their own worlds with their friends, in popular virtual worlds such as: *Minecraft*, *Clash of Clans*, *Star Stable* or *Terraria*.

These friendships are compassionate, voluntary relationships that can be defined by attributes such as: liking (desire to spend time with one person over others); reciprocity; affection; and fun (Bukowski et al., 1996), all of which have an important social function in society, especially for children. Making and maintaining friendships are an essential part of children's social and emotional development. Social confidence, altruism and self-esteem are all positively related to having friends. Children also learn and develop a number of social skills such as how to negotiate, compromise or cooperate with others (Granic, Lobel and Engels, 2013; Olson, 2010; Shen, Liu and Wang, 2013).

Using both virtual and face-to-face ethnographic methods, the authors explored how 5-12 year old children use virtual worlds, and the ways in which friendships are defined, created, and maintained through a variety of affordances within children's virtual worlds. Many of these online environments encourage children to establish connections

with others, but how do kids create and maintain friendships in these spaces, and who is considered a friend?

In some virtual worlds friendships are formed and encouraged by the affordances of the virtual world. Certain games place people on teams (World of Tanks) or ask people to join clubs (Star Stable). Thus, the game itself generates an imagined community, whereby the creation of social connections and emotional bonds are formed with unknown players. The authors examined how young children negotiated these affordances, and how they benefit from being a part of an online community.

The authors also investigated the relationship between children's offline and online friendships and the manner in which playing online with known friends helps maintain or augment existing friendship groups. They found that collective play in virtual worlds enhances children's social capital and enriches both the quality and quantity of play between friends and helps maintain these friendships through having 'good times' together.

This article concludes that children's virtual worlds are play spaces where friendships are performed and maintained by many children. In this sense, these spaces have the potential to contribute to children's social skill development, as well as their social and emotional well-being. In addition to this, they are learning how to collaborate and co-operate with others in small online communities, and to develop their digital skills.