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Learning about Power and Citizenship in an Online Virtual World
Aprendiendo sobre el poder y la ciudadanía en un mundo virtual

Abstract

En este trabajo se presenta una investigación orientada a analizar cómo se desarrollan las relaciones de poder dentro de un mundo virtual dirigido al público infantil y adolescente (Habbo Hotel). Se pretendía llegar a comprender cómo estaba la compañía propietaria de ese espacio moderando, y por lo tanto ejerciendo su poder, a través de los diferentes actores encargados de tomar decisiones sobre el comportamiento de los usuarios dentro del mundo virtual. Al mismo tiempo, se profundizó en el tipo de lecciones que aprenden los usuarios sobre el ejercicio de la ciudadanía, derivadas de las normas de comportamiento impuestas por la compañía. Para comprender qué estaban aprendiendo los menores sobre el ejercicio del poder y sobre el prototipo de ciudadano modelo dentro del mundo virtual, analizamos los sistemas de reglas que regulan aquello que pueden o no hacer los usuarios y procedimos al análisis del contenido de espacios en los que los usuarios hablaban sobre los motivos por los que la compañía los había expulsado de Habbo Hotel. Los resultados de este trabajo ponen de manifiesto que la aplicación del sistema de reglas por parte de la compañía hace que la experiencia dentro del mundo virtual no sea siempre lúdica, democrática, creativa, participativa o plenamente satisfactoria. Esto pone en entredicho algunos de los principales argumentos esgrimidos por diferentes autores en defensa de estos nuevos medios de comunicación.

Resumen

This work presents a research study designed to analyse the development of power relations in a virtual world, known as Habbo Hotel, aimed at the child and teenage market. What motivated this work was the desire to understand how this company wielded its power through the different agents responsible for taking decisions on the behaviour of the users within this virtual world. Simultaneously, this research went deeply into the type of lessons learnt by users as to citizenship springing from the behaviour rules imposed by the company owning this space. In order to understand what young people were learning about the wielding of power, and the prototype model citizen within the virtual world, we analyse the systems of rules that govern what users can or cannot do, and we proceed to analyse the contents of spaces in which users will talk about the reasons why the company had expelled them from Habbo Hotel. The findings of this work reveal that the application of rules on the part of the company results in the experience inside this virtual world not always being fun, democratic, creative, participative or completely satisfying. This thus questions some of the main arguments proposed by different writers on these new forms of communication.

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1. Introduction

Digital technology has often been seen to provide forms of learning that are less constrained and more empowering than those of traditional schooling. According to its advocates, «technology-enhanced learning» is not simply more efficient than old-fashioned face-to-face methods, but also more creative, more collaborative and more child-centred. For example, authors such as Gee (2003) and Prensky (2006) contrast what they see as the compelling, authentic and pleasurable learning afforded by computer games with the constraining and authoritarian approach of traditional schooling. Similar assertions have been made about virtual worlds, celebrating their transformative possibilities for experiential learning, empowerment and learner control (Dede & al., 2005). Virtual worlds are seen to provide positive opportunities for children «to construct, reconstruct and perform identities» through play (Marsh, 2010: 36).

Such arguments about technology are often aligned with broader discourses within education about creativity, personalisation and informal learning (for a general critique of such arguments, see Buckingham 2007). In relation to media, they also overlap with celebratory assertions about the emergence of a more democratic «participatory culture» (Jenkins, 2006) – that is, the possibilities for amateur creativity, «user-generated content» and «prosumption» (the blurring of production and consumption) that are apparently evident in online fan activities and sharing platforms such as YouTube, as well as in social networking sites, online games and virtual worlds.

In this article, we raise some critical questions about such claims by means of a case study of Habbo Hotel, an internationally popular virtual world mainly aimed at teenagers. Our analysis focuses on the power relationships between moderators and users in this world, which are very different from the benign and egalitarian picture that is painted by some enthusiasts – and indeed by the company that produces Habbo.

2. Mapping the field

While some virtual worlds have been in existence for more than a decade, research in this field is still at an early stage. In respect of learning, much of the research derives from the fields of educational technology and user-centred design: the aim here is primarily to identify how virtual worlds might be used as tools or resources for learning, especially in science education. In a meta-analysis of this work, Iqbal & al. (2010) find evidence that the use of virtual worlds can have positive effects on test scores, as well as on learners' motivation and behaviour, but that this depends on the extent to which the learning is (in their words) «inquiry-based, experiential [and] socio-collaborative». Other research from the user-centred design perspective has explored users' motivations in engaging in these spaces (Jung & Kang, 2010; Zhou & al., 2011), and how the analysis of users' experiences might inform the work of developers (Johnson, 2007); while economists have considered how users' interactions might be monetized more effectively (Mantymaki & Salo, 2011).

Some studies have used more ethnographic approaches to explore the use of virtual worlds in formal or informal educational settings. For example, Wohlwend & al. (2011) used «geosemiotic» methods to analyze the relationships children established in an after-school club around their use of the virtual world Webkinz. Merchant (2010) investigated the possibility of using virtual worlds for literacy learning in a mainstream classroom. Both studies point to the crucial role of contextual factors, and some of the complexities at stake in the interaction between online and offline experiences. However, both ultimately seem to repeat the polarization between the «free» world of the online community and the constrained world of educational institutions. Merchant, for example, discusses «how the social control of pedagogic practice mitigates against significant innovation, as new literacy practices are pressed into the service of older ones» (Merchant, 2010: 147) – an argument that implicitly positions the «new literacy practices» of the virtual world on the side of «innovation» and in opposition to the «social control» of traditional pedagogy.

A couple of studies come somewhat closer to our main concerns here. Lehdonvirta & al. (2009) discuss what they call the «simulated consumption play» or «virtual consumption» that occurs in Habbo Hotel, which is made possible through the exchange of virtual commodities for real money. They describe forms of consumer behaviour in Habbo that are manifested in participants' clothing styles, their display of possessions and their decoration of personal spaces; and they show how these serve to establish membership of exclusive social groups and to maintain status hierar-

chies. According to these authors, participants in Habbo are learning to be consumers, and to adopt preferred consumption styles; although they also argue that these practices may have inadvertently «green» environmental consequences, insofar as they provide an alternative to the accumulation of material goods.

Meanwhile, Ruckenstein (2011) offers a detailed case study of Habbo Hotel that raises broader questions about what Boelstorff (2008) terms «creationist capitalism» – that is, the move towards «participatory culture» or «prosumption» briefly identified above. Ruckenstein argues that children's interactions in these worlds demonstrate «the interlinking of children's social interactions and economic profit-making» (Ruckenstein, 2011: 1062): the commercial success of the operation depends upon children's «activity» and even their «creativity» (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003). However, Ruckenstein adopts a somewhat uncritical stance towards the role of the producers: statements of company representatives –and their claims that the creation of the world is «in the hands of the users»– are largely taken at face value. The company, she argues, creates a sense of «intimacy» with its customers (Ruckenstein, 2011: 1068); it offers children «consumer choices, recognition, and involvement» (Ruckenstein, 2011: 1073); and it is a «child-friendly environment» in which «children are acknowledged as «beings» rather than as incomplete becomings» (Ruckenstein, 2011: 1074). While Ruckenstein is clearly aware of the profit-seeking motivations of «creationist capitalism», she ultimately appears to accept the view of enterprises such as Habbo Hotel as providing «a space of autonomy and independence for children» (Ruckenstein, 2011: 1067). Our research provides significant grounds for challenging such claims.

3. Habbo Hotel
Habbo Hotel is a virtual world, similar in some respects to the adult Second Life. Users create digital avatars and furnish virtual «rooms» in which they live, and are able to engage in a range of interactions (including chat, competitions and games) with other users. Habbo Hotel was created in the year 2000 by the Finnish company Sulake Corporation. Unlike other virtual worlds such as Second Life, Habbo Hotel aims at a teenage audience: approximately 90% of registered members are between 13 and 18 years old.

Sulake's overall revenue grew by more than 20% between 2009 and 2010: its income during that year was over €56 million, and its gross profit was €5.4 million, at 9.5% of revenue. In common with some other virtual worlds, Habbo's business model is primarily based on «micropayments» rather than subscription.

Habbo purports to be a safe social environment for children, and reassures parents of this in its online parents' guide. Users are informed about the Habbo Way, a simple set of «community guidelines» to be followed online (which will be discussed below); and there is a «panic button» through which users can access a child protection help-line (run in the UK by a police agency called CEOP, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre). However, the site also presents itself as a world that is created by its users: a promotional video in the Parents' Guide claims that the Hotel is not created by a «mysterious genius» but by «other Habbos just like [you]» – «the genius of Habbo is its users!». In line with arguments about «the wisdom of crowds», the aspiration appears to be that the community will be self-regulating: users develop creative activities in collaboration with each other, and are effectively in control of the conduct and development of the world itself. According to its self-promotional texts, Habbo is a free and democratic environment where the only limitations and restrictions are those that derive from the lack of imagination of its users. In practice, however, the operation of the world is governed and monitored by several different categories of staff.

4. Research questions and methodology
Our focus here is on the forms of economic and political learning that are occurring in this virtual world. To what extent can we see Habbo Hotel as a free space, created only by its users? How do the constraints it imposes – the rules and forms of surveillance that are in operation – serve to produce certain types of behaviour and prevent others? How do the producers of Habbo Hotel seek to construct a certain kind of user – a «model citizen», perhaps, or a self-regulating consumer? And in what ways do users themselves respond to this, and resist it?

Our analysis is carried out in two stages. Firstly, we have looked at the explicit rules that are identified by the company in documents such as its Terms of Use and Privacy Policy, Habbo Way and it's Official Parents' Guide. Secondly, and at greater length, we have explored users' accounts of how these rule systems and power relationships operate in practice, using data drawn from user or fan forums, written both in English and in Spanish. As we started to explore these forums, we became particularly interested in the large number of complaints posted by users who had been expelled or banned from the Hotel, either permanently or temporarily. Although we began by looking only at official forums, we found that Sulake had disabled some of the groups in which these complaints were voiced. We therefore analyzed the content of two official forums and five unofficial forums where users talked about these experiences.

We found that there were some significant contradictions and inconsistencies between the official rules and the accounts given by users. The forms of power and discipline at work in Hotel seemed at some times more permissive and at other times much more authoritarian than those that were described in the official documentation. In some instances, users' accounts of practices in Habbo appeared to contradict the guarantees the company gives to parents about security. Yet in other cases, Sulake's official reasons for banning users, and their accounts of the process by which this took place, were at odds with the experiences described in the forums, where users frequently protested about apparently arbitrary and unaccountable expulsions.

Our interest here was not to conduct a statistical analysis of the most frequent reasons for expulsion, but rather to understand how the company was moderating, and therefore exercising power over, the actions of users. In particular, we wanted to understand the processes through which expulsion took place, how it was explained by the company, how users perceived and responded to this experience, and the consequences it had for them. We also needed to explore the roles of the various actors involved – the company, its official moderators, the volunteer hobbas and users themselves. Our approach draws on critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 2006), in the sense that we are interested in how power operates both in the form of the language and in the content, for example of the system of rules that operates in Hotel.

The data compilation process in the different message-boards analyzed covered the period February to May 2102. The total number of posts we analyzed across the seven forums was 2650. In order to conduct a qualitative analysis of the data compiled from the message-boards we created a system of categories and codes generated by means of an inductive-deductive process that allowed us to carry out a thematic coding of contents. This way, we identified units with meanings to which we assigned one of the codes included in the defined categories system. This process followed the phases highlighted by Huber (2003) for qualitative data analysis, i.e. the reduction of data compiled in the different message-boards, the reconstruction of structures and the comparison of analyzed cases.

5. Results
5.1. Making the rules
The somewhat sinisterly-named Habbo Way is a brief statement of the rules that apparently govern this virtual world. With the exception of the imperatives in the final sentences, it is worth noting that all these rules are framed as negative constructions. However, the potential beneficiaries of observing these rules are diverse. While some of the rules appear to proscribe behaviour that would harm other users, several relate to behaviour that would primarily harm the company (by disrupting its business model or its technological control). Others –such as the rule relating to sexual activities– would seem to reflect *adults'* perceptions of what is inappropriate for children. Yet in all these respects, children appear to be defined primarily in terms of what they cannot or should not do.

Secondly, despite the force of the concluding reference to «crime», there is somewhat of a contradiction between this document and the legal framework that the company observes. While The Habbo Way offers a comprehensive list of banned behaviours, the company itself, in section 2.2 of its Terms and Conditions, states that «Habbo UK and Habbo Affiliates have no obligation to monitor visitor postings to the Website». This effectively assigns responsibility to users themselves for monitoring and regulating their own behaviour.

Part of the explanation for this contradiction may lie in the different audiences for these documents. The straightforward language of The Habbo Way suggests that it is targeted at children; although its placement on the parents' section of the site also contributes to the establishment of a «brand identity» premised on safety. In light of high levels of parental anxiety about children's online activities, the existence of such rules –and their negative framing– reassures parents that this is an environment in which their children can safely socialize. Once inside the Hotel, it appears that the control exerted by the company is by no means as tight, at least in some respects. For example, there are rooms in which avatars can «have intercourse« (complete with product placements in the form of Durex contraceptive vending machines). While such rooms are nominally unavailable to minors, they can be accessed freely as there is no verification of the age requirement. Our analysis of the user forums suggests that users themselves frequently do not access these documents, and hence appear to be unaware of rules until they are enforced (often unexpectedly and without warning).

5.2. Power in play

Theoretically, one could argue that there are two types of power in operation here – or perhaps a continuum between them. On the one hand, there is a form of «hard» power, of the kind embodied in systems of negative rules with clear penalties for infringement; while on the other, there is a form of «soft» power, which seeks to cultivate forms of self-regulation within the community itself. While the former is characteristic of what Foucault (1977) terms a «disciplinary society», where power is imposed upon populations from above, the latter could be seen to represent a «late modern» form of governmentality, in which citizens are responsible for controlling their own behaviour (see also Rose, 1999). In the world of Habbo, both systems are in operation. On the one hand, users are expected to internalise systems of rules by engaging in self-surveillance and self-policing; yet on the other, «hard» power –and the technologies and procedures that sustain it– comes into play when self-regulation apparently fails.

Looking in more detail at the reasons why users are expelled or banned from Habbo, the operation of power appears to be both more detailed (or «capillary», as Foucault would have it) and yet also more arbitrary. The Habbo «help» entry on «what have I been banned for?» lists a range of official reasons for expulsion (see table 1).

…	Disruption Bans
…	Sexually Explicit Behavior Bans
…	Personal Identifying Information Bans
…	Harassment Bans
…	Hate Speech Ban
…	Scamming Ban
…	Terms & Conditions Ban
…	Inappropriate Name/Room/Group Ban

Table 1: Official reasons for expulsion.

Both the system of disciplinary classification and the range of sanctions identified here are more elaborate than in The Habbo Way. A wider range of practices is named, including several that appear to undermine the company's technological control (such as «flooding», «scripting» and «hacking») and/or its economic control (owning «a retro hotel» or advertising «free credit scams»). Others, such as sexual contact via webcams, sharing child pornography or attempting to sell drugs, are illegal or deemed inappropriate, and might not perhaps be tactful to mention in Habbo Way designed to be read by parents. Yet while the system of sanctions is more detailed, these rules also leave significant room for interpretation – for example, as regards the «severity» or «extremity» of an offence, the exact number of times it has been committed, the period of time over which it has occurred, or the reasons why it might be deemed «inappropriate». The need for such a detailed specification is notable in itself, as it would seem to conflict both with the assurances about safety provided to parents and the model of the self-regulating community that is invoked elsewhere in Sulake's texts.

5.3. Practicing discipline

When we look at the user forums, however, numerous further reasons for banning or expulsion are identified. These range from reasonably straightforward («organizing competitions») to relatively obscure («wearing the uniform of a blocking team» or «suspicion of spending too much money»). However, in a great many cases users profess either that they do not know why they have been banned or that they do not understand the explanation they have been given. Very many also complain that they have been falsely accused, either by the moderators or by other users; that their behaviour (especially joking) has been misinterpreted; that the company has banned them without investigating the complaints against them; or that they did not know that they were committing an offence in the first place (for example, being in an «illegal» room without knowing that it was illegal). In some instances, adult moderators appear to have detected sexual connotations, for instance in user names, where it is claimed that none were intended. The forums suggest that the imposition of discipline is much less consistent and accountable than the official rules propose: declared rules may or may not be enforced, they may be interpreted or explained in very different ways, and previously undeclared rules may be invoked.

One issue that attracts considerable attention is to do with the ways in which the company interacts with users, especially when reporting on the reasons for expulsion. Users who are banned either permanently or temporarily receive an automatically generated email that very briefly explains both the reasons and the date and duration of the ban. Our analysis reveals a considerable degree of dissatisfaction with this practice: users frequently complain that these standardized messages fail to explain clearly the reasons why they have been expelled. This is a form of automated, one-way communication that provides no opportunity for dialogue, let alone accountability: «Credits.US@Sulake.com for more information (id: 1386423). The ban will expire at 10/16/214:32 AM Eastern Time».

Furthermore, several users complained about how difficult it was to contact the people responsible for the moderation: «They replied to my e-mail after a week (…) you were banned for a reason and if you send us an e-mail again, your e-mail will be ignored. (…) They do not pay any close attention to the help system. They simply read the first 3 words and pick a reply from the set replies (warhodes, 11-22-2009, 09:41 AM)».

In these examples, there are frequent complaints about both the arbitrariness and the inflexibility of the moderators. On the one hand, users' activities are subjected to a filter that automatically identifies banned terms whose usage can mean immediate expulsion; while on the other, the application of the code of conduct also seems to depend on the moderators' interpretations of the rules, which are frequently unpredictable. The forums are full of the explosions of frustration that result :«I reported and got press ignore seriously ignore cant stop trades, lol and here i get banned for 1 day, idc about 1 day but why me, is there something in me that they smell and ban me? (01-21-2010, 07:41 AM)».

As this posting implies, the disciplinary system operates partly through users «reporting» (or informing upon) other users who are seen to be contravening the rules. However, our research suggests that this system is itself open to abuse: some users abuse or blackmail others by threatening or bringing false charges against them.

This particular combination of arbitrary authority and self-policing resembles that of a totalitarian state. Users are coerced into following the rules that are imposed, even if they do not agree with them or understand them; but they also learn that benefits will accrue to them if they monitor and report on the activities of other users (even if these claims are false). They learn that the company and its agents (the moderators) have ultimate power, but also that they can gain advantages by exercising power at the expense of other, weaker users: «I used to report people who gave out Habbo fansite URL's. They would get permanently banned for scamming, and I don't regret it (PumpkinLamp, Apr 25, 2009 (3:27 PM) Official site)».

It is common on the forums to find messages from users who complain that they were harassed or bothered by other avatars, and that they were finally expelled because the avatars who were harassing them made false claims about them to the moderators: «He immediately starts role playing attacking me and what not. (…). He then says add dead to your name, i look at him and explain to

him why i am not going to do that. (...). He walks out of the room five minutes la8er it logs me off and says Ive been banned for 1 week for harassment! (...) (jordan657, 04-30-2010, 02:19 PM)».

As these messages suggest, such claims are not investigated or verified during the moderation process: those who have been reported by other users are just automatically expelled. Unlike in any other legal process, there appears to be no presumption of innocence: on the contrary, the company seems to convey to users that they are always guilty of the accusations to which they are subjected. While some users employ this to their own advantage –making accusations against any avatar whom they happen to dislike– others appear to enjoy testing the limits of the rules for their own amusement: «i got banned for sayin hello would u like to buy some dru.s from me and plus i was kidding god how is a 15 year old gonna get his hands on some dru.s (prince.trunks, Jan 13, 2008 (7:33 PM) (Official site)».

5.4. The consequences of discipline
As these examples suggest, it is possible for users to open additional accounts (albeit from another IP address) and re-enter the world as a different avatar. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that expulsion is often an event with serious consequences, in which users stand to lose both economic and social capital that they may have accumulated over a considerable time.

With regard to economic capital, users who are expelled cannot recover the virtual items (such as pets or furnishings) they have purchased. Although users can manipulate such items for the duration of their stay in the Hotel, they continue to be «owned» by Sulake. As we have indicated, the company's marketing rhetoric places great emphasis on users' creativity. However, in practice users are not permitted to make or import their own virtual assets or designs: their creative possibilities are limited to the selection and (limited) manipulation of products from the company's catalogue. What users can do with these objects is also comprehensively monitored by the company, and the objects cannot be exported to other virtual environments.

The primary appeal of Habbo Hotel, we would argue, is not so much the limited opportunity for creativity it affords but the social interaction between the users. Yet, as is characteristic of all «consumer societies», products (in this case, virtual products) are the means through which that interaction takes place, and it is these that enable the users' interactions to be monetized: who you are is very largely a question of what you can buy. From a traditional Marxist viewpoint, we might argue that users are engaging in forms of work (time-consuming «creative» labour) that serve to create surplus value in the form of social capital – that is, social relationships that function as a form of currency.

Expulsion also means the loss of this social capital. Users who are expelled summarily lose not only their «possessions» but also their «friends»: they have no way of maintaining the relationships they had established within the virtual world – not least because the rules forbid them to exchange data about their accounts on other communication platforms. Sulake also owns any social capital that users generate within the world, and this serves as a further means of keeping users captive. The serious social and economic consequences of expulsion are reflected in the strong sense of disempowerment that runs through the forum postings: «believe me, i know whats its like to get ****** up by these mods. you spend money and they dont even think for a second about your friends, money spent, etc. ('long and fat', 04-30-2010, 05:50 PM)».

As this latter post suggests, users have little trust in the accountability of the company or its moderators. Like this user, some try to contact the company staff to ask for the removal of the penalties imposed, on the grounds that they are unfair. However, many complain that they receive no reply – or very inadequate and uninformative replies - when they use the available channels; and some resort to using unofficial forums to contact the moderators, albeit with little success. Others simply beg the company for readmission: some confess to having broken rules, but earnestly promise never to break them again. On the unofficial forums, the sense of disappointment and discomfort leads on to a tone of cynical resignation that one could see as characteristic of oppressed groups more broadly. The actions of the company (those in power) are routinely condemned as «stupid», «lame» or «retarded», but there is an abiding sense that little can be done to change matters.

Some users are clearly able to identify the economic imperatives at stake here –imperatives that are often ignored by academic enthusiasts for new media– although they tend to accept these

simply as an inevitable fact of life: «Habbo wants your money, so they don't ban HC subscribers for fun. Keeping paid subscribers around = more money = if anything they'd be more lenient towards them. (Jan 16, 2008 5:23 PM) (Official site)».

The fact that children are the primary «consumers» of Habbo may make them more vulnerable to unfair business practices: compared with adults, they generally have fewer resources with which to defend themselves. In many cases, this sense of disempowerment leads to anger and to forms of activism, which are much in evidence on the unofficial forums. Some users respond to what they regard as injustice by insulting or threatening either the company or the individual moderators (whose names are announced on the official website). Others develop plans to bankrupt Habbo Hotel, for example by hacking the company servers, creating online replicas of the Hotel and developing tools to unlock IP addresses that have been banned. Others have recourse to more conventional forms of consumer activism. There is much discussion among US users about the use of the Better Business Bureau, an agency that seeks redress for consumer complaints. Other users have organized virtual demonstrations; while in the Hispanic community there is a group of users calling itself «Habbo Revolutionary Union».

6. Conclusion

We have directly challenged several of the claims that are made about the educational, social and political value of online virtual worlds. Of course, several of our arguments may well be specific to this particular case, and may not apply elsewhere. However, our analysis suggests that Habbo Hotel is very far from being the free, democratic, creative space proclaimed by the company that produces it – and indeed celebrated by some academic enthusiasts for «technology-enhanced learning». It would perhaps be an exaggeration to describe it as an online police state, but it certainly bears comparison with real-life authoritarian regimes and «total institutions» such as prisons. Far from constructing its users as competent, empowered «digital natives», it operates a system of surveillance and discipline that exerts considerable control over their behaviour. Users are required to regulate their own activity, but in line with rules that are strictly and summarily (but also often arbitrarily) enforced. The forms of creativity that are available are constrained and commoditized, and subject to similarly authoritarian forms of discipline.

We do not in any sense wish to deny that kids can have fun in virtual spaces like Habbo Hotel, or indeed that they may be learning a great deal. However, the question that needs to be answered is: what are they learning? Our analysis suggests, firstly, that they are learning particular economic lessons. They are learning to be diligent consumers, buying virtual products that will help to construct their identities and relationships. They are also learning to be workers, undertaking forms of labour that produce surplus value in the form of social capital. They are doing both of these things in a context where everything they produce and everything they appear to possess is in fact owned by a company that remains largely unaccountable for its business practices. Following from this, they are also learning particular political lessons, about the operation of social power. They are learning to function in a situation where the powerful enjoy absolute authority, and are able to exercise power in ways that are both rigid and yet sometimes quite arbitrary. This is a world in which there is little scope for appealing against injustice, and limited potential for resistance. Far from being empowered in this environment, the citizens of this virtual world are in fact extraordinarily powerless: their only option is to obey, something far from a model of critical citizenship (DeJaeghere, 2009).

Finally, to return to the issues with which we began, it is interesting to compare this virtual world as a learning environment with other institutions and environments in which children learn, such as the family and the school. Far from being more free and democratic, as some enthusiasts suggest, this world actually seems to be much less so. Within most modern schools and families, children have the power to question and challenge the authority of parents or teachers (Aarsand, 2009). While there are certainly limits in this respect, power in these institutions cannot simply be imposed: it has to be negotiated, and it has to win the consent of those who would be governed. By comparison, this virtual world appears to offer a much more authoritarian and much less empowering form of learning.

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