

Critical Multicultural Analysis of Out-of-School Text

Club Penguin is a 3-D web-based Arctic-themed virtual world specifically aimed at kids age 6 - 14 years. Currently it has over 700,000 paid members, and over 12 million active accounts.

For full analysis, visit the blog that accompanies this presentation handout, located at:

www.liamodonnell.com/critical-literacies/

Icons & Chat - Navigating Club Penguin

Club Penguin uses a combination of colourful 3-D graphics, fun fonts and animated icons to create an inviting world for kids to play in.

The annotated screen grab below highlights the key features in the Club Penguin navigation.

1. Newspaper Icon - Appears on every page to give updates on the latest games, happenings or item catalogues. The use of a newspaper icon taps into the player's prior knowledge of real world texts to allow for easy comprehension.

2. Nightclubs, Coffee Houses and Gift Shops - These are the first three locations a player sees when they log in. Why the need to have adult themed locations? Perhaps to cater to that universal desire of kids to appear older?

3. Moderator's Badge - The moderator's badge appears on every screen and links players to a real life person who is watching the behaviour and chat of other players. While moderation is necessary for a safe environment, the idea that someone is "always watching" reinforces the acceptance of a surveillance society, while at the same time creating a panopticon where players check their behaviour for fear of being reported.

4. Speech Bubble Text - These appear above the head of a player's avatar when they type a text message or "speak" in the world. This method is common in mmos and carries over from comics. Another example of using prior knowledge to convey meaning in a new medium.

5. Map Icon - Appearing on every screen, the map icon allows players to move rapidly through the world of Club Penguin. Clicking on a location will take players to the location. Once again, prior knowledge of a real world text is used to convey meaning.

6. Chat & Emote Bar - This is where text messages are typed to communicate to other players in the world. It works very much like instant messaging, with many of the associated shortcuts and abbreviations making their way seamlessly into the chat between penguin avatars. For safety, there are pre-scripted sentences and emoticons that allow parents to limit their child's range of communication to other players.



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Side-Stepping Race in Penguinland

By using penguins as avatars, the makers of Club Penguin side-step the issue of representation in their virtual world. What does colour mean in Penguinland?

Other virtual worlds that use humans as avatars provide features that allow players to choose skin colour and hair colour, but offer only a single choice of avatar body shape: thin. This lack of choice is definitely a cause for concern, but an issue for the players of Club Penguin, where every avatar has the same zaftig figure.



English is the language of Penguinland. As with many western virtual worlds, players who speak English as their first language have a distinct advantage over English Language Learners, whose grammar and typing speed are often giveaways to elements of their offline identity.

Literacy of Status in Club Penguin

Club Penguin uses a simple user interface that combines colourful graphics, a variety of text fonts and animations. But even without typing a single letter, there are literacies of status at play with in the world.

Tale of Two Avatars

Every player creates a penguin avatar. A player's penguin is his or her "face" to the world of Club Penguin. Players can buy clothes, hats, toys, pets and more for their penguins.



These accessories serve little purpose other than being "cool" or fun and displaying your commitment to the world.



Flappy Fry is my avatar. As you can see he is very plain. I have not bought him any clothes, toys or pets, because I am not a "paid" member of Club Penguin. I can spend my coins only on a very limited number of items, until I subscribe to the world using real world cash.

Although this doesn't seem to directly impact how Flappy is viewed or treated by other penguins, there is no hiding of status in these worlds.

Brandaozinha, on the other hand is a very affluent penguin. She (or he) is clearly a paid member of the world. Every item in her profile from her crown to her lollipop - even the spooky background - was paid for using coins earned by playing games in the world.

Although Club Penguin is ad-free, it is not free from reinforcing the framework of consumerism to its players.

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Consumerism in Penguinland

Currently, the two biggest activities in virtual worlds like Club Penguins are playing games and acquiring “stuff”.

In Club Penguin, players play casual games to earn coins. They then can spend those coins on a wide variety of items from clothing, to surfboards, to pets and more. Every few weeks, a catalogue of new items is released to the world, giving players more “stuff” to acquire and show off.



The dominating theme in Club Penguin as with other mmos is consumerism. Playing games is fun but the real purpose is to earn coins and then use the coins to buy stuff.

Given the potential for what these online spaces can teach young players, it is disappointing the mantra of “he/she who has the most wins” becoming the norm.

Pimp Your Igloo

In addition getting stuff for your penguin, players can also pack their own igloos full of items that serve no other purpose than to impress others.

Once again, this idea of status and stuff permeates throughout Club Penguin, separating the “haves” from from “have nots.”



Using Club Penguin in the Classroom

Direct classroom applications for Club Penguin are extremely limited, due to:

- monthly subscriber model, costing around \$60 per child per year
- problematic reinforcement of consumerism that places an emphasis on status
- simple, click and point, mini-games that teach nothing beyond how to win the game
- current “digital divide”, disparity between tech-rich and tech-poor schools, makes computer-based learning limited

However, creating classroom applications that tap into the elements of Club Penguin and other virtual worlds is possible. For example:

- students design and draw their own avatars - either in animal form, from a time period in history, etc. Award the avatar with a title or badge when the student completes a task or does something of merit (ie “Master of Sharing”, “Plant Waterer Extraordinaire”)
- challenge students to design their own virtual world that doesn’t rely on acquiring stuff. What would the goal s be? What would it teach? Who could visit your world?