Fragile Avatars: Playful Betrayal in Children’s Online Hacking Practices

# Details

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## Sample

Ethnographic material for this article was collected during fieldwork in 2012 and 2013, in an ethnically diverse, suburban neighbourhood in Kristiansand, a city of 90,000 inhabitants in the southernmost part of Norway. By following a group of twenty 8- and 9-year olds attending the same school class, the aim of the study was to investigate digital literacy practices. I spent most of my time in Kristiansand follow- ing the children through their everyday life both in and out of school, in part through observation, and in part through informal interviews and by using questionnaires. I also interviewed parents, teachers, and other people in the local community, such as librar- ians, school administrators, and health workers.2 In February 2016, I returned to Kris- tiansand, and carried out additional interviews with three of the focal children and their families. (Helgesen, 2019)

## Implications For Parents About

## Implications For Educators About

## Implications For Policy Makers About

## Implications For Stakeholders About

# Abstract

As children in Norway increasingly spend time in online worlds, often identifying closely with their avatars, the potential for experiencing distress as a consequence of losing control of these digital selves has also increased. This article investigates the local notion of ‘hacking’ among a group of 8- and 9-year-old friends, and shows how users of the online world MovieStarPlanet must be attuned to the always imminent threat of having their avatars seized by other users. Expanding on Gregory Bateson’s concept of framing to illuminate the paradoxical nature of online play, the article argues that hacking practices involve the simultaneous conjuring of apparently contradictory frames. Taking advantage of the fluid boundaries between play and non-play, the children made subversive use of egalitarian values of inclusion to exploit the trust of their friends, allowing them to mute and exclude other users.

# Outcome

(Th)e partial and ambiguous identification with digital enactments of selves in online worlds can lead to a great deal of distress for users who lose control of their avatars. The concept of framing, I have argued, can illuminate the dynamics of online play, by pointing to how avatars constitute both key sites of playful self-formation and sources of fragility. Bateson’s framing concept goes beyond both Huizinga’s magic circle and Goffman’s framing concept, by attending to the inherently paradoxical nature of play. When friends simultaneously appeared as strangers and friends, issues of friendship and trust became intertwined. As a conse- quence, new arenas for social exclusion emerged as avatars became sites of volatility and social exclusion, and egalitarian values were used in subversive ways to mute and exclude others. (Helgesen, 2019)