The emotionality of character loss: Collaborative problem-solving narration in children’s social networking

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In this paper, we explore how expressions of emotions and moral accountability figure into the organization of children’s communication with other children engaged in social networking on and offline, at the interface of the physical and the virtual (cf. Burnett, 2016). The selected data are drawn from a videoethnographic study investigating young children’s (8-10 years) media literacy practices in peer groups in an afterschool center situated in a multiethnic suburban setting. Drawing on multimodal interaction analysis, the focus here is on trajectories of collaborative problemsolving by which the participating children handle unexpected actions and events in an imagined online world. The focus here is on how the interchangeability and loss of characters in the figured worlds of a social networking site for children called Momio, becomes a shared topic of concern for the children involved. We track the launching of a problem-solving event concerning the loss of a character (avatar) and the bewildering disappearance of its belongings. We will show how the children draw upon on the social and the material environment to collaboratively solve a recurrent problem in the online world. In sharing information, they position one another as more or less experienced and knowledgeable online users, who knew when user names and passwords can be shared and when they should be treated as individual and private to prevent the risk of character loss. We specifically focus on how the interrelationships among the children extend beyond what they do as they communicate in an imagined online world and how interpersonal relationships are constituted with other players and participants in the local peer culture. The study highlights how children’s situated interactions is located within the social, material, and cultural structures of everyday peer group cultures moving across on-line and off-line worlds and cannot be viewed in isolation from each other.

Keywords: social networking, problem solving, figured worlds, children’s peer cultures, situated interaction