

## **Assembling literacies in virtual play**

BAILEY, Chris J <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1969-5001>>, BURNETT, Cathy <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6087-244X>> and MERCHANT, Guy <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8436-7675>>

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## **Handbook of Writing, Literacies and Education in Digital Cultures**

### **Chapter 15: Assembling Literacies in Virtual Play**

Chris Bailey, Cathy Burnett, Guy Merchant

#### **Abstract**

Virtual worlds provide opportunities for new kinds of interaction and new forms of play and learning, and they are rapidly becoming a common feature of the lives of many children and young people. This chapter explores the digital writing and textual activity that circulates around this virtual play and the issues that it raises for both researchers and educators. Drawing on work from a range of theoretical and methodological perspectives we look at the ways in which the virtual is embedded in everyday meaning making and indicate important new directions for future research. In doing this we trace some possible relationships between writing and virtual play and consider how to engage with notions of authorship, particularly given the fuzzy boundaries between human and non-human activity. We propose that encountering such activity with a mood of 'enchantment' (Bennett, 2001) enables researchers and practitioners to approach moments of writing as fluid human/non-human assemblings and in doing so more fully appreciate the complexity and potentiality of virtual play..

### Relevance and Key Concepts

A group of nine children are playing *Minecraft* together during an after-school club. The Minecraft Club, set up by Chris at the request of the children, is a weekly event and it is in its twentieth week. When Chris is asked about Minecraft Club by adults, he tells them that the children are building a community, and to some extent this captures what they do. Anyone flying over Banterbury, as the children recently named it, would spot landmarks that signal a small to medium sized town – houses and flats, a library, a graveyard, shops, a theme park, a zoo. Moreover, if you spoke to the children what they'd say might sound like emerging folklore: the horse funeral, the mocking tower, the 'Room of Doom'. Together the children are conjuring up a new world – their world, one which is becoming ever more substantial. But this cumulative, linear description of what is happening in Minecraft Club belies the richness and complexity of their interactions. While they play in and with the shared virtual world, the boundaries and qualities of this world morph. Building is certainly going on, but there is an emergent, ephemeral nature to what they do, a way of being that can be lost in adult readings of what is produced. And what's more the community they are building (and often disrupting) is not just being built on screen – their interactions *in the classroom*, with the people around them and the stuff to hand seem just as important to their emergent and ongoing being-together as what they do *on screen*.

In many ways the story of *Minecraft* is a familiar one. Markus Persson, a Swedish programmer creates a ‘sandbox videogame’ which then goes viral. The game gets bought up, marketized and subsequently developed to keep pace with a rapidly changing socio-technical environment. Time goes by and *Minecraft* becomes ‘a phenomenon’ with wide appeal (Wu, 2016). Then, in its most recent iteration, it boasts a version designed to work with a VR headset. Fans are enthusiastic. And so the story goes on... As we know, these sorts of playful practices in virtual spaces spread like wildfire, paying scant attention to the borders between nation states, languages, age groups and so on. But divisions still exist; they don’t reach all sectors of the population, and the notion that their spread is global is simply a myth. Nevertheless, in another era, such a phenomenon would be quickly dismissed as a fad, but now we take it more seriously. We get interested, Chris sets up his Minecraft Club, and studies *Minecraft* just as others do in different contexts (Hill, 2015; Hollett & Ehret, 2014). Perhaps we are obsessed by digital culture. In some ways we are in it together, but maybe we don’t quite get it. And then again, at some level we worry about what it means for our children: is it scary, is it normal, or is it rich with possibility – or is it all these things wrapped into one?

In some writing on the subject, digital culture appears like a feral beast, rattling the doors and windows of our classrooms. The trouble is, it is already in the classroom; it is already a part of children’s everyday lives. How could it be otherwise? And so as a result the challenge for educators is what we do about it. Ignore it and it won’t go away. In some ways that’s why we keep agitating for a kind of schooling that addresses 21<sup>st</sup> century literacies (Burnett & Merchant, 2015) and that’s at least in part how the ephemeral practices of playing and building, like those that emerge in Chris’s *Minecraft*

Club, come to matter to us. But as we have already illustrated, playing and building is much more than screen-based activity in a virtual environment. It is always more than that, and in this chapter we outline some ways of looking at what we are calling virtual play, how it combines and re-combines with other things, with ideas, practices and ways of being in the lives of a small group of children in the Minecraft Club based in a primary school serving a rural community in the north of England.

Virtual play is a generous description of engagement with *Minecraft*. It is borrowed from the work of Pearce & Artemesia (2010) and has been used to describe the ways ‘in which digital and networked media...support play and play-related activities and interactions’ (Merchant, 2016: 301). It provides a way of talking about the sorts of affiliations and communities that grow up around a digital game like *Minecraft* (see Willet, 2016) and, indeed, in Chris’s Minecraft Club. Virtual play is generous in the sense that it shows how there is far more at stake than just the game itself. In this way the idea of virtual play cuts through some of the binaries that constrain discussions of digital culture - binaries like online/offline, on-screen/off-screen, human/non-human and so on - and as such it forms an animating concept for the empirical work we describe. But in what ways might virtual play relate to literacy and how might we begin to conceptualize writing in this context?

In what follows we suggest three provisional categories that trace different ways of thinking about current research in the field. Given all that we have said so far about the fluid nature of virtual play we acknowledge at the outset the overlap between these categories, but this does not detract from the differences in emphasis that they suggest. The first of these *writing the world* focuses on modifications to the screen-based world and implies a radical re-working of how writing itself is conceived, drawing heavily on

an expanded notion of authoring. It encompasses activities such as content creation and the manipulation of in-world objects in which meanings are made using available semiotic resources, such as through the act of building in *Minecraft*. The second category *writing in the world* is concerned with more conventional communication conducted within a virtual space, and usually involves direct interaction with another player or players. This sort of writing often involves alphabetic literacy such as in-world message exchange or synchronous chat, and where the game allows, creating texts such as signs, labels books and so on. Finally, *writing from the world* refers to the creation of texts that are related to, but not embedded within the game or world. So this category includes producing paratexts related to a virtual environment, such as a message boards or blogs, as well as other forms of writing about online experiences, such as those that might be undertaken in classroom contexts.

### **Writing the world**

With a sufficiently broad definition of writing, the ways in which in-world content is purposefully created or manipulated in order to communicate meaning to others is certainly worthy of attention. Studies that have addressed writing in this sense range from the organization of social events such as regattas or building structures in *Second Life* (Gillen, et al., 2012; 2013), to game design using *Adventure Author* (Howells & Robinson, 2013) or similar tools (Burn, 2016). This category also includes working with commands that make things happen, such as those required to throw projectiles in *Whyville* (Fields & Kafai, 2010), or manipulate objects in *Scratch* (Peppler, 2010). Some more fundamental activity in virtual worlds and video games involves ‘playing the text’ (Mackey, 2002) often through the use of keystrokes. Although we would argue that navigation in terms of moving through a virtual environment, shifting perspective or

view, and changing between screens does not count as a communicative act, modifications of avatar design, clothing and accessories introduce the notion of authoring the self online (Martey & Consalvo, 2011). Examples of this can be found in the work of Carrington & Hodgetts (2010) and others. Research studies in this category often do not refer to these sorts of activity as writing, but they certainly do conceive of phenomena like avatar appearance as communicative codes, and therefore as a product of purposeful social action.

### **Writing in the world**

This category is concerned with the use of the specific communication tools that are available to players in virtual environments. These studies regularly focus on messaging or in-world chat (Merchant 2009; 2010) and have received considerable attention, particularly from educators advocating for the educational benefits of using virtual worlds in classrooms. In this vein, Marsh (2011; 2014) studied young children's communication in *Club Penguin* arguing that virtual play is a significant feature of contemporary childhood and early literacy development. Interestingly, in this context, young children will typically be using ready-made postcards or menu-based 'safe chat' for communicating with other club members who are online (Marsh, 2014). Selecting an item from a menu and clicking send is, of course, a communicative act, but it certainly pushes on conventional views of what constitutes writing. Other examples of this sort of activity involving in-text messaging can be found in Dickey's work with older students in a variety of learning designs based in *Active Worlds* (Dickey, 2003; 2005).

### **Writing from the world**

Situations in which writing activity comes about as a result of virtual interaction, but is not directly dependent upon it for its production have also received attention



from researchers. Of particular note is the work of Beavis and colleagues (for example Apperley & Beavis, 2011; Beavis, 2014), which focuses on building connections between game texts and the curriculum; Dick's (2011) work on enriching literature study with virtual world play; and Berger & McDougall's (2013) study of videogames in the English curriculum. These studies tend to focus on children and young people's experience of game texts and virtual worlds as a starting point for critical engagement. Another strand of work, which is directly concerned with the relationship between virtual play and literacy, draws attention to the 'constellation of literacy practices' of informal gameplay. Here, Steinkuehler (2007) highlights not only the complexity of in-world communication, but also the considerable amount of writing that gets produced in both official and unofficial fandom.

### **Tensions/Conflicting Viewpoints**

While these categories signal different ways of thinking about relationships between writing and virtual play, they do not sit easily with our complex take on virtual play outlined above, and indeed many of the authors cited would also challenge these distinctions. Certainly in some ways Steinkuehler's work on constellations of literacy escapes our categories. By surveying the literacy practices that young gamers routinely engage in, she shows how these move in and out of inter-related virtual environments. Even if we can identify specific domains in which writing is produced, the meanings made always seem to exceed the immediate context, relating for instance, to shared experience, popular culture, real-world friendships and events (Leppänen et al., 2009). Although much has been written about immersive engagement, ideas like Flear's notion of 'flickering' in which players' attention constantly moves between concrete activity and imagination (Flear, 2014) and that of 'layered presence' (Martin et al., 2012), in

which players are almost simultaneously attentive to multiple dimensions of online engagement, material, emplaced and embodied experience, offer persuasive alternatives.

In Minecraft Club, for example, distinctions between writing the world and writing in/of the world are difficult to tease out. Children move fluidly between on/offline writing, and the scope of writing variously constricts and expands; off-screen interactions feel just as much part of writing the world as do on-screen activities. If we look for example at children's writing 'in' and 'of' the world, the children regularly produce notices, books, messages, and signs, just as young children in an early years setting do (Roskos & Christie, 2001). Most of these texts are made on-screen, but sometimes the children write on scraps of paper or in notebooks, creating lists of wished-for resources or making plans for future construction projects. These texts celebrate, mediate or perform ways of being and doing in Banterbury, variously demarcating spaces, serving specific purposes, or providing an outlet for individuals' ideas or feelings. Some texts are rapidly discarded or erased while some have a longer life in the play. Others are ignored but survive in the world – testament to previous moments of significance, shared interest, enthusiasm or outbursts of hilarity. And yet others gently tease, recycle in-jokes and contribute to the on-going banter of virtual play (Bailey, 2016).

In thinking about this blurring of on/off-screen activity, we can draw parallels, as others have done, with process drama (O'Mara, 2012; Dunn & O'Toole, 2009). Unlike the kind of rehearsed performance that typifies theatrical performance, process drama involves participants working together to produce a 'dramatic elsewhere' or 'dramatic world' in which events are unpredictable, driven by what people do and with no

external audience (Dunn & O'Toole, 2009). This feels very much like what happens in Minecraft Club, as children improvise with what's available, and do things – e.g. build or make traps - in response to others' actions. As in process drama, the world is conjured through shared belief born of being and doing things together, of seizing opportunities, following possible directions and accepting and building upon what others do or make - either literally or figuratively. O'Mara has explored how videogame play, like process drama, involves both being in and looking at the dramatic world. Just as process drama involves participating in a dramatic world and reflecting on that experience, so virtual play combines an immersive engagement in a fictitious world with the mechanics of navigating commands and toolbars, and managing interactions around or between screens.

But there are differences too. In virtual play the world is not just imagined or embodied but materializes as a shared text, enacted (or temporarily etched) on screen as avatars move through the world, entering new scenarios as they go. The traces of this play may live on in the ever-changing *Minecraft* text long after children's interest has moved on. And while process drama usually involves a collaborative engagement with a shared project, virtual play in Minecraft Club is as often divergent as convergent. Pairs and groups may temporarily collaborate on building projects, but individuals may just as often seek out new territory or combine in interest/friendship groups. And the direction of play is both enabled and constrained by the deep architecture of Minecraft as well as its iterative renewal through the ongoing introduction of various modifications (mods). Yet despite all this, Minecraft Club sustains a sense of ensemble. In many ways it is built through a generative sense of being together, as children try

things out, help one another, fall out, make themselves and each other laugh, and sing (Burnett & Bailey, 2014; Bailey, 2016).

As we reflect on this divergent, ebullient and highly generative activity it becomes difficult to define where writing begins and ends. In the next section we propose a way of conceiving the relationship between virtual play and writing as an ongoing process of assembling. This perspective, we argue, allows us to see authorship as expansive, distributed and fluid, and this in turn provides new directions for research and practice.

### **Current or Emerging Theory: Assembling Virtual Play**

Deleuze and Guattari use the word 'assemblage', translated by Massumi from the French *agencement* (1987), to capture the way in which social, semiotic and material flows converge and diverge from moment to moment. This notion has been used persuasively to explore how things of different 'orders' – political, economic, organizational, subjective, affective and so on- come together to generate and uphold certain ways of doing and being in educational contexts (Youdell, 2011). It is useful, for example, in thinking about how literacy gets constituted and sustained in particular ways in educational contexts. We could certainly explain some rather stultifying contemporary literacy provision in English schools in terms of an assemblage of, among other things, curriculum, assessment, school governance, teacher disaffection, international league tables, market forces and a punitive accountability regime. However our interest is in using assemblage to think about fluidity and possibility rather than intransigence. In this chapter, and in other work (e.g. Burnett & Merchant, forthcoming a) we therefore follow John Law's lead, approaching assemblage as,

...a process of bundling, or assembling, or better of recursive self-assembling in which the elements put together are not fixed in shape, do not belong to a larger pre-given list but are constructed at least in part as they are entangled together. (Law, 2004: 42)

From this perspective, things enact one another as they tangle together; things 'make a difference to each other: they make each other be' (Law & Mol, 2008: 58). And these 'things' include not just what is physically present, but what is folded into that presence. This focus on the *process* of assemblage is important to us, and something we like to foreground by using the gerund 'assembling' rather than the seemingly more static 'assemblage' (Burnett & Merchant, forthcoming a). As well as sensitizing us to how things assemble in 'relatively stabilized ways' (Law & Mol, 2002: 2), it alerts us to *what else* gets produced in the moment of assembling, and to the potentialities generated as things assemble in multiple ways. This perspective has a number of implications for how we might think about relationships between virtual play and literacy and about how we might usefully think about writing in this context. In order to introduce these points, we pause to consider a series of episodes that happened one day in Minecraft Club, before going on to reflect on how things assembled, and how these assemblings may be significant to our discussions about literacy.

### **Banterbury Library**

*'...a lot of people think that Minecraft is just about building structures but you can build books and stories and stuff as well, which is quite good...it's a feature that is in Minecraft all the time, and it's part of real life...there's books in real life...'*

In one of Chris's group discussions with Minecraft Club members, the children talked about how it was possible to 'build books'. This phrase succinctly captures the uncanny way in which a textual form so deeply implicated in the history of print text re-surfaces in the world of *Minecraft*. But after all books – the printed sort – were as much a part of the children's everyday life as *Minecraft* itself, and they had their place in Minecraft Club. In fact print texts such as the *Redstone Handbook* (Farwell, 2015) were sometimes used for reference.

Chris's research notes chronicle his discovery of the first book, 'Mia's Dead'. A screenshot of a chest in a windowless room, reminiscent of depictions of Carter's excavations of Tutankhamun's tomb, bears the caption: 'This is the first book that I became aware of in the club, during week 20'. To the side is a small facsimile of the text, looking just like a museum piece. It may not in fact have been the first book, and certainly there were rumours of other titles including 'Mia's Twin Fish' and 'Mia's Other Twin', but Chris's discovery led him to conclude that 'these books produced by Thomas form the basis of what became Banterbury Library... setting the tone of many of the books that followed.'

History aside, books and library-play slowly became a feature of the club and in a later session, whilst laptops were being stowed away and Chris was reminding club members about chargers, one of the children could be heard singing 'We got *Minecraft* books, We got Minecraft books' and a group of boys, now calling themselves the Banterbury Library Boys started making plans. The seed of an idea was beginning to germinate. Book production was to become a theme in subsequent sessions lasting for four or five weeks. In many ways, this typifies the fluid and emergent nature of the

virtual play in Minecraft Club, as groups temporarily coalesced around an idea or interest which would then play itself out over time.

The texts produced for the library were playful and unfettered by the usual conventions of classroom writing. They could be described as transgressive, and often involved ribald and scatological humour directed at other club members. In this way they were imbricated with the gentle teasing and banter that contributed to the negotiation and re-negotiation of social relationships within the club. Indicative titles collected by Chris include 'The Sick Buk', 'Revenge', 'The Poop Buk', 'The Plastic Buk' and 'The Rap Buk', and these titles often hinted at their content. But the books weren't just written and stored away in a chest in Banterbury Library, they were performed, read aloud and shared on screens as they were composed. They lived as texts that wove in and out of the unfolding virtual play.

Although there was little attempt at controlling the subject matter, as this play evolved the Banterbury Library Boys entered into a power struggle. One boy produced 'The Spam Book' comprised of a random string of text, whilst another was criticized for not producing a full page. A series of pronouncements were issued: *You can't put a book in if they aren't correct; and on the back page it has to be capital P 'Property of' and then 'Banterbury Library' and it has to be 'the buk' B-U-K.* Here, lessons about authority and language were clearly being rehearsed. But even these were not immune from challenge. Firstly, an appeal was made to what you might call the social order of play: *Yeah, but me and you were the ones who came up with the idea in the first place* and then reference to the real world: *And how come books have to be exactly the same. In real libraries books aren't exactly the same!* But this was subsequently brushed off with the assertion that: *This is Minecraft and this is how we want to do it!*

### **Assembling Banterbury**

We are struck by various aspects of this play, and our first instinct, as seasoned analysts of children's classroom practices, is to frame them using various social-cultural constructs: the social shaping of gendered identity by the 'Banterbury Boys'; the Banterbury Library Books as new genre; the transgressive nature of peer culture; and the power struggles arising from the push for conformity. Such interpretations articulate in interesting ways with our thinking about writing and virtual play, and echo other debates about writing in other contexts, linked for example to: writing as identity performance; the emergence of new genres in digital environments; the regulation of schooled writing; text production as always inflected by power relations, and so on. Another starting point for thinking about Banterbury Library is to use our three earlier categories to tease out some of the complex ways in which writing entangled with play. We could certainly identify writing 'in world' (the books), and chart the negotiated - and contested - development of the library as an ongoing textual unfolding. We can even start to think about how we might adapt writing pedagogies to account for this kind of creative activity, providing opportunities for children to develop expressive, rhetorical or critical dimensions of textual production for example. However, for us the drawback of both of these starting points is that – through sieving out writing from virtual play and holding it up against other social practices or writing events – we write out the messy complexity that seems central to what happens/gets generated; we neatly parcel it up, explain it and sort it out. And yet just as we pull dimensions of the play apart, they all too easily snap together again, mingling with one another, acting on and being enacted by - and becoming - each other.



An alternative approach might be to approach this example of virtual play by thinking about it as what Law and Singleton (2005) call a 'fire object'. Now of course Banterbury Library is a strange kind of object. It might more comfortably be described as a set of practices or a sequence of loosely associated actions, interactions and texts. And yet it does seem to become a 'thing' that has resonance for the children and around which various episodes revolve. For Law and Singleton any 'thing', whether concrete or abstract, comes into being through relationships between a set of absences and presences; it is generated through relationships with what's present as well as all the absent things folded into that presence. If we think about Banterbury Library as a set of absences and presences, we might think about all the experiences, considerations, beliefs and ways of knowing that assemble to generate what gets produced in the moment. So Banterbury Library has a certain visual presence in Minecraft Club (conjured through a combination of keys, pixels, screens, etc.), but all kinds of absences also make their presence felt in what it becomes: the programming of *Minecraft*, for example, the recent history of Minecraft Club, the children's previous experiences together and apart, and so on. Importantly, as the Library gets taken up by different children on different days it becomes different things as presences and absences assemble differently: a site of transgression; a focus for convergence; a point of contention; of belonging or exclusion, etc. And as it does so – and perhaps this is the important part for thinking about writing - it can generate, or set alight, new possibilities. As such it might be seen as a fire object. For Law and Singleton, fire objects are,

...energetic, entities or processes that juxtapose, distinguish, make and transform absences and presences. [...] The argument in part is that fires are energetic and

transformative, and depend on difference – for instance between (absent) fuel or cinders and (present) flame. Fire objects, then, depend on otherness, and that otherness is generative. (Law & Singleton, 2005: 343-344)

For us, thinking about clusters of activity- such as the Banterbury Library example - as fire objects disrupts our tendency to define and sort virtual play using habitual ways of thinking. This is not to devalue more established ways of describing literacy practices from a sociocultural perspective, in relation for example to gender, genre or power. Much significant work has interrogated virtual play in relation to such themes (e.g. Beavis & Charles, 2007). It prompts us to focus on the stuff that escapes ordered tellings and this in turn leads us to other ways of thinking about relationships between writing and virtual play.

Firstly, it illustrates how it can be fruitful to think more expansively about writing. From this perspective, we might see writing as part of an ongoing flow of activity that generates affective intensities that in turn drive things forward. As such writing can't be researched as a bounded phenomenon, but must be approached as always entangled with multiple human/non-human activities. Writing unfolds moment to moment and always in relation to a shifting assemblage of people, things and available signs. It is both generated by and generative of an ongoing unfolding. Rather than focusing on what assembles to produce particular written artefacts or writing events, this perspective foregrounds how writing assembles with other things to generate a flow of activity.

Secondly a focus on absence as well as presence foregrounds the multiple time-spaces folded into any moment, mediated by both human and non-human participants. Children bring to *Minecraft* their varied experience of playing *Minecraft* elsewhere

(emerging from diverse human/non-human assemblages of Minecraft-homes-families-friends-routines-preferences-etc.), not to mention their complex and varied experiences of being at school, of being together in this class, and their encounters with gameplay and artefacts produced by the wider Minecraft 'community'. These prior experiences and imaginings assemble with Minecraft to produce a particular kind of play. But Minecraft Club is not just enacted by the children; *Minecraft*, and the screens, batteries, keyboard, internet connection, etc. also enact Minecraft Club. Folded into the empty expanse of *Minecraft* are histories, precedents and decisions that frame the possibilities enabled (or constrained) by screens and book pages of certain size and shape, keyboards, pixels, commands, available avatars, resources and so forth. These resources are not just taken up by children but act upon them framing and prompting certain kinds of actions. The children and Chris (with all their histories, allegiances, preferences, imaginings, etc.) assemble with the stuff of *Minecraft*, the stuff of the classroom, stuff produced or given credence by other *Minecraft* players, and so on and on.

Thirdly, in working with this complexity, we take from Law the idea of multiplicities – that multiple assemblings co-exist and work to disrupt and unsettle each other. Banterbury Library becomes different things within different assemblings, and writing therefore comes to do and mean different things too. What is interesting is what happens as these different assemblings - of Minecraft Club, Banterbury Library, writing, gender, power, transgression, etc. - co-exist and are held together in the moment, interrupting or entangling with one another. Of course, working with the idea of multiplicities means it is never possible to gain a 'full picture' of what is happening in virtual play. Whatever we choose to focus upon, there is always something else

assembling, and this has implications for how we think not just about educational practice, but about research. To return to Law and Singleton:

...if objects are both present and absent, then we cannot know or tell them in all their otherness. Things will escape. If the world is messy we cannot know it by insisting it is clear. (Law & Singleton, 2005: 349-350)

### **Implications for Research and Educational Practice**

There is plenty to know about virtual play, and there is plenty to know about play in and around specific games like *Minecraft*. So although this chapter focuses on children and *Minecraft* ‘in vivo’ (self-consciously recognising that an incomplete depiction is inevitable), researchers are challenged to illuminate its use with demographic studies (Minecraft-statistics.net (n.d) is the only extant source), to explore particular pedagogic applications of Minecraft (e.g. Short, 2012), and to study *Minecraft* across home-school settings (Dezaunni et al., 2015). We also need to know how and under what circumstances games like Minecraft appeal to some and not others, and whether there are noticeable age, gender or other social trends. Moreover it’s clear that there is much to be gained from fine-grained studies of interaction that trace such things as engagement and collaboration (as in Taylor, 2012; in press). In short the field is rich with possibilities. However, as Law and Singleton suggest, conventional research reports may struggle to account for the complexity explored in the previous section. If we are to work productively with the possibilities generated through virtual play, we need to be alert to *what is assembling*, to engage with multiple ways in which this is happening (to keep asking, ‘what else is going on’) and to consider how we as researchers and educators *assemble with* what’s happening. We end this chapter

therefore with proposals for working with the notion of assembling in practice and in research.

### **Recommendations and Forward Thinking**

We suggest that one way of sensitizing ourselves to multiple assemblings is to work with Bennett's idea of 'enchantment' which mingles affective, sensory engagement with a disruption to taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world. As she writes,

To be enchanted is to be both charmed and disturbed: charmed by a fascinating repetition of sounds or images, disturbed to find that, although your sense perception has become intensified, your background sense of order has flown out the door. (Bennett, 2001:34).

We have attempted such an approach through our own work, juxtaposing multiple 'stacking stories' that trace divergent trajectories through particular moments, foregrounding our personal experiences, and in doing so attempting to evoke not only what was felt as people and things assembled in certain ways, but what might be felt or known if other stories had been told (Burnett & Merchant, 2014; forthcoming b).

Adopting a 'mood of enchantment' helps us engage with the affective dimension of what children and young people are doing, opening us up to the vivid and felt dimensions of children's on/off-screen virtual play. It also, however, provides researchers and practitioners with a means of engaging differently with what is happening, of acknowledging some of the ephemerality that escape ordered accounts of children's literacies. It may help us to look (and feel) beyond *what* children write to *the moment of writing* and all those moments that lead up to and from that moment, and to see those

moments as fluid human/non-human assemblings. From this perspective distinctions between writing the world, writing in the world, and writing of the world start to blur.

The disruptive wonder engendered through enchantment may also be generative for practitioners. Focusing on the moment brings us up close with what Massumi (2002) calls the 'field of potentiality', the endless possibilities that are always immanent. It provides a counterpoint to the linear thinking that dominates the educational discourse in many jurisdictions (or in England at least), with its focus on outcomes-led learning, evidence-based practice and fixed criteria. Rather than looking in linear fashion at causal relationships, enchantment keeps us in the moment, with what's emerging, and with possibility. This invites us to consider what a writing pedagogy might look like if it were approached in a mood of enchantment. A mood of enchantment might be generative in the way that Lenz Taguchi describes when she explores pedagogies aligned with an 'ethics of immanence', that work and play with,

...inter-connections and intra-actions in-between human and non-human organisms, matter and things, the contexts and subjectivities of students that emerge through the learning events. (Lenz Taguchi, 2010: xvi)

In previous work, we have noted how the struggle to grasp the complex, fluid and hybrid nature of digital practices has led us to re-examine our conceptualizations of more established literacy practices (Burnett & Merchant, 2014). We suggest that the perspective on assembling we have sketched above may be generative in thinking about writing of different kinds, including the established literacy practices encountered in schools. Such an approach might undo some of the ennui engendered through the certainty and inevitability of schooled literacy in current times, and open up the possibility of disruption and new directions. This is not to underplay how certain

powerful assemblages hold sway or to deny the challenges of resistance, but to allow other ways of knowing - and being - to seep in.

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