Sheffield Hallam University

Free the sheep: Improvised song and performance in and around a minecraft community

BAILEY, Chris J <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1969-5001>

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Free the sheep: improvised song and performance in and around a Minecraft community.

Introduction

'What does it mean when this performance takes place at this time, in this place, with these people taking part?' (Small, 1999, p. 13)

There is a growing interest in research around new communicative practices associated with virtual worlds, particularly in educational settings (Beavis et al., 2009; Merchant , 2012). Recent research into the use of virtual worlds in such contexts has examined the rich opportunities they provide for teaching and learning (O'Mara, 2012), identifying their potential for developing players' creativity (Peppler and Solomou, 2011), whilst also acting as spaces that enable meaningful social interaction (Marsh, 2011). Other work has examined literacies in such contexts, positioning them as communal processes (Burnett and Bailey, 2014) whilst considering complex notions of collaboration through participants' 'multiplicity of presence' (Martin et al, 2012) arising from the on and off screen interactions that occur around collaborative virtual world gameplay. However, little is understood about exactly how the complex interactions afforded by such spaces shape - and are shaped by - children's social relationships. This article offers a close examination of the action that manifests around one 'micronarrative' (Jenkins, 2004, p.679) from a group children's gameplay, in order to explore the ways in which children negotiate the complexity of being together in and around a collaboratively produced virtual place.

During a year-long ethnographic study of a school-based Minecraft Club I became interested in the ways in which children's activity and interaction were often accompanied by instances of improvised singing. In this article I outline a number of these occurrences, identifying some common characteristics that these instances share. I then look in more detail at one particular example - a song called 'Free the Sheep' - in order to highlight the complex ways in which instances of impromptu singing, or 'spontaneous vocalising' (Young, 2004, p.60), weave into the fabric of the social situation. I argue that singing of this kind contributes to the construction of the children's social interactions, providing a rich resource for the children's digital play. A focus on singing also contributes to discussions on how elements of wider culture enter schooled settings, becoming a playful means through which children perform and experiment with identities (Kontovourki, 2014, p. 4).

What do we know?

This project is framed by studies of on/off-screen meaning making around virtual world video games, where virtual world play is seen as distinct from other classroom practices (Dickey 2011; Ito, 2009), due to its multi-sited and multi-participatory nature. Participants inhabit multiple 'inter-related social realities' (Merchant, 2009, p.42); players are located physically in the same material space whilst also maintaining a presence in the game. Interactions play out across these spaces as they communicate and collaborate, on and off screen. The presence of multiple bodies in these 'hybrid spaces' (Burnett and Bailey, 2014) adds to the complexity of the events. The complex nature of this 'layered presence' (Martin , 2012) that arises when virtual worlds are embedded in classroom contexts can lead to an unravelling of certainties about researching literacies (Burnett and Merchant, 2013). As well as emphasising the complexities of researching such environments, researchers have

demonstrated ways in which online and offline behaviours are enmeshed - for instance, how cultural capital can be accrued through gameplay expertise (Marsh, 2011); how gameplay can be influenced by expressions of identity (Beavis and Charles, 2007) and how gameplay can be intertwined with complex power relations that extend to the material world (Walkerdine, 2007).

By focussing on children's use of song, this article draws upon existing literature relating children's behaviour in informal, non-digital play setting (Opies, 1959; Marsh, 1999; Young, 2004), as well as that which deals with their appropriation of wider cultural artefacts in more formal classroom environments (Rampton, 2006; Taylor, 2006; Maybin, 2006). Opies' (1959) ethnomusicological account, 'Schoolchildren's Lore and Language', provides many examples of children incorporating games and song into their playground interactions, such as this short (conveniently sheep-related) re-wording of a verse from 'Mary Had a Little Lamb':

'Mary Had a Little Lamb,

She also had a bear,

I've often seen her little lamb,

But I've never seen her *bear*' (p. 90)

Here, parody is a significant theme, with children reworking rhymes and songs to subvert their original meaning. Marsh's (1999) work around the playground demonstrates that children's autonomous appropriation of these resources enriches their performative and creative play. Although Young's (2004) work focuses on pre-school children, her categories built around 'spontaneous vocalising' are useful later when considering the songs used by this older group of children during Minecraft Club.

In relation to singing in more formal contexts, Rampton (2006) studied teenagers' appropriation of popular song, as a means of expressing their identities. Taylor (2006) identified an instance where children hummed the 'Match of the Day' theme tune, conceptualising this as a symbolically representative intertextual reference (p. 77). Maybin (2006) provides an account of a time where she observed girls quietly sharing a song during a lesson (p. 154) as a means of forming a sociable connection.

This study also draws upon literature that explores the meaning of performance as a collective, social act. Most notably, Small (1999) uses the term 'musicking' (p. 13) to describe participation *in any capacity* in a musical performance. Positioning 'music' as a verb rather than a noun places acts of performing and listening as central to understanding the meanings made around music, destabilising the notion of the musical object itself as the sole bearer of meaning. Small (1999) therefore argues that the emotional response of those involved in 'musicking' is directly linked to their relationships with the specific performance, rather than with the song itself. In this article, I illuminate the function of spontaneous singing in Minecraft club, firstly by exploring the range of children's 'musicking', and then through examination of how one particular song was woven into their virtual play.

Methodology

This article draws upon data collected during the first three weeks of an ethnographic study of an after school club, running for 26 weekly term-time sessions. The study followed a group of eleven 10-11 year old children's engagement with Minecraft Edu - a modified version of the virtual world video game Minecraft. Minecraft Edu allows for a Minecraft world to be hosted on a computer rather than a remote server, enabling other locally networked computers to connect to this shared virtual location. The club was held in the children's classroom, where they played the game on laptop computers, represented by avatars, using Minecraft's Lego-like building blocks to create a 'virtual community'. I acted as club supervisor and participatory researcher, often maintaining a presence in the game, represented by an avatar playing alongside the children. The children engaged in collaborative, creative play whilst making individual and collective decisions about the use of the shared virtual space. The participants' location in the same room enabled face-to-face interaction; they frequently talked about their gameplay, whilst also discussing a range of topics not directly related to the game. Although there was an on-screen text-chat function, more often it was the face-to-face interactions that prompted action in the game, as the children discussed their plans for their play. Similarly, in game events often led to action or discussion in the room.

Using an ethnographic approach, I sought to explore participants' lived experience, examining how a group of individuals interact whilst engaging in virtual world play. Drawing on observational data from both in-game interaction and in the embodied setting, as well as participants' reflections, the work employs 'multiple lenses' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) to take account of the multiplicity of voices and perspectives present in Minecraft Club. A range of data collection methods were employed. Video data were collected using a handheld GoPro action camera operated by me or, more often, by the children who used it in a variety of ways. Often they wore the camera on their heads, using the attached head strap, or carried it around the room. They filmed their on-screen play, positioning the camera next to their keyboard, whilst also providing audio commentary. Sometimes children addressed thoughts directly to the camera. These recordings allowed for repeated viewing of their off-screen interactions, alongside some of the on-screen action. Screencasts recorded gameplay, both from my perspective and from the laptops of one of two different children each week. These video sources also provided audio recordings of interactions in the room, including children's speech and singing. I took photographs as a record of the organisation of bodies and objects in the room, whilst in-game screenshots provided a similarly static record of in-game objects and artefacts, such as the children's virtual constructions and their text chats. Finally, I made fieldnotes during each session, providing an incomplete running description of events, people and conversations (Fielding, 1993, p.162).

In order to gain the children's perspectives on the club, additional discussion sessions were arranged, aside from the club's regular time. Each of these seven sessions involved a different, self-selecting group of three or four of the club's participants. Each 30 minute discussion was held at school, during lunchtime. Here, the children discussed the club whilst creating models using the iPad version of Minecraft, in part to capitalise on the existing popularity of Minecraft with the participants. At the beginning of each session I invited the children to build a model using the game to help them express their ideas or opinions about the events that had recently taken place during Minecraft Club, enabling them to express their 'visual voice' (Gauntlett, 2007, p.107), rather than relying solely on the 'inherent linear mode of speech' (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 126). In the extracts presented here, I invited the

children to comment on their singing during the club. Beyond this, the children guided the discussions in order to open up the conversation as much as possible, in order to investigate the children's 'lived experience' of the club.

This combination of data sources, from multiple perspectives, made it possible to take account of the multiple modes of interaction occurring during the sessions. This article draws upon data from the first three weeks of the club. Singing caught my attention at an early stage in the fieldwork as I had not considered a club involving collaborative virtual world gameplay to be the natural home for children's singing and songs. The frequency of instances and the different ways in which these manifested encouraged me to look in more detail at the role that these performances played in the life of the club. Seeing a ‘potentiality’ (Maclure, 2013) in the data, I collated the examples of impromptu singing from the first three weeks of the club (Table 1). These examples were drawn from my field notes and multiple viewings of the video data. I then focused in more detail on one example, choosing the song 'Free the Sheep' as I was interested how this example involved multiple participants whilst also being related to an in-game event.

A comic strip (produced using Comic Life: https://plasq.com/apps/comiclife/ios/) was used to transcribe the episode involving the 'Free the Sheep' song. This comic strip combined elements from the project's multiple data sources, enabling the inclusion of visual data alongside textual transcription of the children's singing and speech from the audio data, thus allowing for the visual representation of multiple modes on a page. The comic strip approach was integral to the process of data analysis used here. Firstly, the compilation of the transcript required repeated and focussed engagement with the data. Secondly, through the resulting 'dynamic feedback between image and text' (Smith et al, 2015, p. 7), the use of a comic strip enabled an account of this hybrid space to emerge that would not be possible through a reliance on text alone. Utilising such 'multiple modes of sense-making' (p. 7) allows for an 'expansion of our ways of seeing – and hence our ways of thinking' (p. 7). In this way, I was able to explore how multiple modes came together as part of the particular performance, finally considering this alongside the wider literature on children's use of song and performance.

Singing and Song

The children's singing during the club often drew on songs they had heard in other contexts. Songs were frequently adapted, lyrically and melodically, from the text of these songs and composed in the moment by single or multiple participants to reflect some in-game action or theme. Sometimes children sang alone, at others they performed together. Songs were rarely performed in full and were always seemingly unrehearsed. These songs followed different trajectories - some were performed once and then forgotten; some reappeared multiple times during a session, others appeared in multiple sessions in the same or an evolving form. They could be thought of as being memetic or viral in nature - as indeed many of them were in origin.

Table 1 provides some examples of the songs appropriated by the children, during the first three weeks of the club, alongside some detail on the possible origin of the original song text and a brief summary of the context of its appearance.

Table 1 Songs in Minecraft Club

Young's (2004) categories relating to 'spontaneous vocalising' help to build an understanding of these performances. Young's (2004) concept of 'movement vocalising' (p. 67), involved children accompanying their mobilisation of object and bodies. This could be applied to the performance of the songs '*The William Tell Overture*' and *'I Can Swing my Sword',* albeit here the children are mobilising virtual objects and avatars rather than the real-life objects and physical bodies. The idea of 'free-flow vocalising' (Young, 2004), which provides a means of self-regulating the physical and mental energy in order to focus on a task (p. 66) could help to explain the performances of *'Follow the river' and 'I'm going to the basement'.* Similarly, the remaining examples could be described as 'reworkings of old songs' (Young, 2004, p. 66), where children mobilise the songs as 'pliable tools' (p.66), using them for their 'malleable properties' (p. 66). So, although varied in origin, *'Sittin' on tha toilet*', *'Everything is Awesome'* and *'Free the Sheep'* could all be seen in this way. But whilst the reworking of the former two examples largely involved the presentation of segments of existing songs into a new context, using 'repetition and variation' (p. 65), the latter example also involved a reworking of the lyrics for a new purpose.

In order to gain the children's perspectives on the use of song in the club I asked some of the participants, during a discussion session, about the spontaneous singing. One child, Tom, highlighted the significant role that music and song play in their day-to-day lives, linking this to Minecraft: *'We listen to a lot of songs! And we try to put Minecraft into song…*'. A second child, Callum, responded, '*Singing makes you happy!'* suggesting that he considered the physical act of singing to be inherently enjoyable. Seconds later, he noted that, *'singing's fun and Minecraft's fun!'* As if to illustrate this, Tom began to sing whilst creating his model, singing/ rapping: *'I'm going in the basement / in in the basement / I'm going in my basement*'. For these children, then, the primary focus was on the enjoyment of singing.

In order to examine, in more detail, how song manifests and is embedded within the club I focus, in the next section, on the example of 'Free the Sheep'.

'Free the Sheep'

'Free the Sheep' was born during session three of the club, appearing around a gameplay event. One child had built 'The Sheep Hotel' as part of a large collaboratively constructed zoo. This towering structure more closely resembled a tree than a hotel, with a network of branches, each ending with a fenced platform holding a single green sheep. When other children noticed this construction there were light-hearted conversations around whether it was cruel to keep sheep trapped in such conditions. Below I tell the story of 'Free the Sheep' by presenting the comic strip transcript (figure 1) detailing the song's trajectory, from the first appearance of the song until its end, including two short pieces of musical notation to convey the melody used by the children.

The sheep song began with one boy singing *'Free the sheep'* to the chorus melody of *'Do They Know it's Christmas?'* in place of the words *'Feed the world*'. His initial improvisation

was quickly taken up, without discussion, by another boy, seated next to him. The song evolved, with new words being added and removed as their play progressed. The song's development was punctuated by conversations between the children.

Figure 1: Comic Strip Transcript of the performance of 'Free the Sheep'

Whilst other children were involved, through gaze and action, the audible dimension of this evolving song was initially driven by the wordplay generated between the two boys, around the original song's melody. Finally, however, a girl seated across the room from the boys remixed the song by replacing the melody but retaining the newly adapted lyrics.

Later the same week the boys involved reflected on this episode during a discussion activity. (Mia was not available to attend in order to provide her insight.) Callum suggested that the song was *'annoying because they were freeing my green sheep*', whilst Ben positioned the song as part of *'a protest group on Callum because he trapped the green sheep...That was not nice to animals!'* Tom, however, evasively stated *'I didn't sing it - I was just building'*!

Drawing on the data above, the next section explores a number of characteristics that help to explain the function of this song's performance and its impact on the club. I examine the situated meaning of this performance of 'Free the Sheep', in an attempt to answer the question posed by Small (1999): *'What does it mean when this performance takes place at this time, in this place, with these people taking part?'* (p. 13)

Enjoyment through 'musicking'

This performance of ‘Free the Sheep’ was enacted verbally, but also through bodily movement. Ben was seen moving in time with the music, grinning throughout with shoulders shifting, his body rocking and his hands in the air. Mia also moved her shoulders as she performed her version. Enjoyment may therefore have come, for these performers, through their active, shared enactment of the performance. There was also potentially satisfaction to be derived from being present in the usually formal classroom setting, ignoring the conventions of polite schooled behaviour that would otherwise require restrained body movement, controlled discussion and contained voices (Dixon, 2001).

Reflecting Small's (1999) assertion that 'the essence of music lies not in musical works but in taking part in performance’ (p. 9), Maybin (2006) talks of an 'emotional sociability' (p. 155) present when observing two girls sharing a song during an otherwise formal classroom activity. In this example, as Ben smiled to himself, Adam - seated next to him but not performing - looked on and grinned; here this sociability manifested itself between performer and audience. The brief duetted segments of this song also contributed to this sociability, through the indulgence of shared performance. These examples reflect Frith's (1996) suggestion that songs draw individuals into 'emotional allegiances with the performers' (p. 121), making connections between those participating in the performance event.

Pleasure was also derived from the participants' relationship with the text being performed. It seemed that the performance of this specific song was designed to entertain the singer(s) and the audience - there was a mischievous incongruence in the appropriation of a song originally about world famine for the relatively frivolous purpose of highlighting the imaginary plight of a pixelated sheep. The children's shared involvement in the recreation and

performance of the song therefore provides one explanation of the enduring appearance of songs during the club.

Playful parody and remixing

Unlike the teenagers in Rampton's (2006) study, who performed the original lyrics of the songs they sang in school, many of the performances during Minecraft club involved a rewriting of the original text to create a parody. The Opies (1959) suggest that parody 'gives an intelligent child a way of showing independence without having to rebel' (p. 87). As well as being a parody, the creation of 'The Sheep Song' can be understood as an oral *'composition in performance'* (Lord, 1995, p.11) that allows for impromptu adaptation and wordplay by multiple participants. Reflecting the 'cycle of experimentation' seen by Marsh's (1995) study of playground games, this song text underwent a number of adaptations in its short life. Through brief, often unspoken negotiation between the two main performers it was quickly recreated in the moment by combining elements of action from the game's events, the reactions of the players and the pre-existing song text.

The song began with the words *'free the sheep'* sung to the chorus melody of *'Feed the World'*. *'Feed'* in the original song then became *'free'*, *'world'* become *'sheep'.* From here, words were systematically re-worked and replaced. Initially, the *'let them know it's Christmas time'* of the original version was replaced with *'and protest against Callum's sheep hotel'* but this was later dropped, reverting to the original words. Later, *'Christmas time'* became *'prison time'*, then reverting back to a religious event with *'Easter'.* This then became *'freeing time',* with the words *'once and for all'* attached, perhaps to indicate that this was to be the final verse in their adaptation of the song. In this way, the performance was 'dynamic, never static', changing from one occasion to the next (Edwards and Sienkowicz, 1990, p. 218). The original song provided a framework for the wordplay; syllables usually matched those of the original text, acting as scaffolding for the emerging words. The appeal of creation seemed to stem partially from the appropriation of the events into the song.

In addition, at the point at which the singer appeared to be unable to think of any appropriate words and, after a pause, continued with the original (*'Free the sheep / Let them know…. it's Christmas time'*), there was a humorous absurdity inherent in this mismatch of themes. As Maclure et al (2010) suggest, humour relies on 'the ability to see the absurdity, irony or double meanings in social situations' (p. 9); this singer seemed to be in possession of this 'double vision' (p. 9). Here, however, it was not only the words that were adapted; at the end of this episode, another player took the boys' words, attached them to a different melody at a higher pitch, adding a single, repeated word: *'Boogie'*! There was a final, polyrhythmic performance of both versions of the melody until the song's progress was abruptly halted by Callum's firm request to *'Stop it!'* Like elements of the text of Minecraft itself, the song was constantly under construction, never complete (Burnett and Bailey, 2014) and, once it had served its purpose, it was abandoned before a definitive version was formed.

The Power of Performance

This frustrated request to *'Stop it!'* helps to illustrate the affective impact of the song's influence and emphasises the fact that singing can be a powerful act. As Young (2004) suggests, 'learning to make words 'sing' is to imbue language with meaning and expression, to animate and emote the words. When plain talk starts to sing, when words resonate, it

makes ordinary language more intense and vital, more meaningful and communicative' (p. 65). This song, in this context, had a heightened presence when compared to the spoken words alone. Of course, the original version of *'Do they know it's Christmas?'* capitalised on this power, with the emotive vocalisation of words combined with melody being harnessed to draw attention, and money, to an important issue. It could be coincidence that Ben chose to appropriate the tune from an emotive song in order to convey his message. However, it is also possible that the song, with its commentary against world poverty and inequality, was intentionally chosen as a means of critiquing the morality of the virtual events by invoking the moral integrity of the original version. Whilst it may have proved more socially difficult for Ben to directly question the morality of Callum's in-game actions, the intertextual mobilising of Bob Geldof et al.'s morality instead of his own made the implied criticism less personal whilst retaining the powerful message. Regardless of Ben's original intention, his use of this song was successful in drawing attention from other members of the group. As Frith (1996) suggests, 'Singing draws a different sort of attention to the words... and it draws a different sort of attention to the singer' (p. 172). The performance therefore became a subversive tactic that extended beyond the text itself. This attention was significant as it brought the singer to the centre of the in-game event, moving him from an otherwise peripheral, observational role. The song provided a hook that drew them into this particular event through what Rampton (2006) suggests is music's 'compulsive appeal' (p. 103).

Dyson (2003) observed a classroom interaction where 'one child would begin singing a song and the singing itself would recruit other children' (2003, p.31). Here, the performance itself was seen to have a recruiting power, encouraging others to join in with the singing. This can be partially attributed to the humorous nature of the song, reflecting Maclure et al's (2010) assertion that humour has a 'productive role in maintaining solidarity and identity.' (p. 9). In addition, the multiple voices of the original song, sung by a diverse range of performers, also provided a template for a performance that invited shared participation from the club members. There was no stage in this classroom and therefore no physical barrier between performer and audience. A presumed familiarity with the song's melody also allowed others to be included. The singer seemed to leverage this recruiting power to actively encourage others to 'free the sheep'. Performance is not a neutral act (Small, 1999, p. 18) and here the song was positioned as a 'protest', during the session and the later discussion. As a result, there was collaboration on the song from a small group of children, but also collaboration on the events in the game from a larger group; even those who were not singing began to take notice of the sheep hotel. With no evident discussion, participants began breaking the sheep hotel to 'free the sheep', suggesting that the performance of this song directly influenced events.

Whilst the song, therefore, recruited and united a number of children in the act of freeing the sheep, it also excluded others - not least Callum, the sheep hotel's creator. The single mention of Callum's name in the song was accompanied by a gaze in his direction across the room, as if to direct this line at him personally. Whilst 'Everything is Awesome' (Table 1) was used by multiple members of the group as an inclusive celebration for the club's community, this performance indicated a value-laden position relating to the game. By asserting the need to 'free the sheep', the lyrics represented (perhaps *mis*represented) the sheep hotel as a negative force and, by implication, stigmatised an element of the community. The moral tone of the song meant that it would have been difficult to retort by singing words of his own, therefore demonstrating how the more general power of song to

be utilised as a tool to recruit and exclude in children's social contexts (hybrid spaces or otherwise) should not be underestimated.

Conclusion

Underlying the elements that characterise the singing of ‘Free the Sheep’ was an ongoing, reciprocal relationship between gameplay and performance. Something that initially seemed peripheral to the gameplay actually became integral to the children's social experience during the club. This demonstrates the importance of ensuring that such details are not written out of accounts of children interactions around technology, if we are to understand the potential of such environments. The song itself initially emerged as a reaction to an in-game event. Then, in turn, the physical enactment of song appeared to influence events, both in and out of the game. In this hybrid space, the game was not just the unfolding of events on-screen, rather it occurred between and across the virtual and the physical spaces. To use Tom's words, the children tried to *'put Minecraft into song…*' However, this example also shows how they managed to put song into Minecraft, in the formation of the text but also, critically, through its enactment. In this context, the performance was used for recruiting, regrouping, uniting and opposing in multiple locations - reflecting the fluid grouping present during the club itself.

Moreover, the process of the song's creation did not mirror the ordered, structured turn taking that is often portrayed as characteristic of schooled collaboration. This reflects the children's wider participation in the club, where involvement in construction tasks was often spontaneous and groupings were fluid. Here, in common with the creation of the virtual world, song texts were being constantly constructed by the group. A song was structured and limited by melody, rhythm and imagination, just as in-world creations were limited by the game mechanics and their appropriation of the game's resources. This example demonstrates, therefore, how children were able to autonomously appropriate resources from the melting pot of their own experiences, collaborating and adapting them for use in seemingly unrelated contexts. The children controlled the resources being drawn upon, as well as their means of creation, rather than relying on guidance from the club's supervisory adult. In this way, it could be said that the 'supervisory gaze' was subverted (Carrington, 2005) as the children utilised unexpected or unlikely sources in spontaneous, creative and unpredictable ways.

Ultimately, the enactment of this song and its impact served to illuminate how the children's creative practices helped to fundamentally shape the space of the club. The resources drawn upon by the children, their performances and their in-game creations did not exist in isolation - they were networked and dependent on each other in a number of complex ways. Here, elements of a charity record from 1984 were incorporated with the creation of a virtual world community in 2014 which, in turn, had an impact on the relationships and experiences of those present in the room. Focussing on one element in isolation, therefore - whether this was the song or the virtual world under construction - would not have revealed their role in terms of the children's interactions; it was also vital to look at the relationships that form between and around them. This suggests that, in such contexts, an examination of the performance is, therefore, as vital as a focus on the textual creation itself. Focussing on the performance of this song helped to trace the social shifts within the club – providing a focal point for looking at how these children managed the complex business of being together.

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