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## Children in virtual worlds

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Jackson, L., Gauntlett, D. and Steemers, J. (2008) *Children in Virtual Worlds: Adventure Rock Users and Producers Study*, London, Communication and Media Research Institute, University of Westminster, pp. 5–8.

## Childhood in the Digital Age

### *Children in virtual worlds: Adventure Rock users and producers study (extract)*

L. Jackson, D. Gauntlett and J. Steemers

#### Executive summary

##### The research study

This report is one of the outcomes of the collaborative research partnership between the University of Westminster and BBC Children's, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and BBC Future Media and Technology. The research project was the first to focus on a virtual world specifically designed for children aged 7–11, offered by one of the largest public service broadcasters. It was the first to examine the value to children of such environments, and the first to study Adventure Rock, a virtual world which is free of directly commercial considerations.

The primary goal was to establish how children 'inhabit' and engage with immersive environments. This was done through half-day creative workshops with 90 children at BBC Cardiff, BBC Belfast, BBC Glasgow and BBC London in December 2007 and January 2008. The first workshop aimed to understand how children create imaginary friends and imaginary places in their 'real world' lives. This was expressed through artwork (drawing and collage) and group discussion. The second workshop aimed to find out how children explored Adventure Rock. In between the first and second workshops the children kept diaries which recorded their activities in Adventure Rock and other virtual worlds for children.

It should be noted that BBC Children's made available to the researchers a reduced 'beta' version of Adventure Rock, therefore many areas were not open for the children to explore, although a good enough number of areas were offered: Star Square, the drawing and cartoon studios, several games such as 'Bike Tangle', and a topic in the BBC Children's message board was opened to receive the children's comments or 'bug reports'.

The parents of the children were given a questionnaire to capture their thoughts on Adventure Rock, and virtual worlds for children; and finally whether their perception

of BBC Children's and the BBC in general had changed over the period of the fieldwork.

Alongside this 'audience' study, we also interviewed and collaborated with the producers of Adventure Rock so that producer intentions could be compared with user experiences.

## **Findings**

### **The position of Adventure Rock in the marketplace**

Adventure Rock is not as sophisticated as many commercial services, but it was highly valued by the children. The children thought it was unique because it offers them a space 'outside' which they can explore; this is likely to be due to the reduction in the 'real world' outdoor areas in which today's children are typically allowed to play freely. The 'adventurers' would have liked to have competed against each other, but this was not possible within the world. The children who took part in the study were very excited by the 3D graphics. Only one other virtual world has comparable quality of 3D experience (My Tiny Planets). The children also liked the fact that Adventure Rock is free, with no need for payments or subscription. The children felt frustrated, however, that Adventure Rock was not available for Apple Macintosh computers or via internet-enabled games consoles.

### **Skills for digital life**

The researchers found Adventure Rock offers both educational benefits and other value to the children, for example by providing a place to develop transferable skills for adult life. More detail on the value of virtual worlds for children is given later in this report. The virtual world offered a first experience of immersive environments, where the BBC Children's audience can learn about more sophisticated virtual worlds and online experiences for children. Adventure Rock is seen as a suitable service for a public service broadcaster to launch, and an important service in order for the BBC to keep pace with external developments in media.

### **Collaborative and social interaction**

Virtual worlds and immersive gaming environments for children offer chat and other collaborative activity. Children were disappointed by the lack of such important social features within Adventure Rock. We recommend BBC Children's is given more financial assistance by the BBC specifically to support the production and ongoing management of social and collaborative online environments for children. If BBC Children's is not given additional funding to enable the department to produce purely web-based public service content of similar social complexity to global commercial offerings, there is a business risk that the BBC will not (a) educate young audiences for digital social life and (b) the BBC may lose audiences aged between 6–12 years of age to commercial operators. It is clear that both children and parents expect CBBC to offer innovative and collaborative services online.

### **Producing virtual worlds for children**

Virtual worlds and immersive gaming environments for children require different time-scales and more complex production activities than non-immersive media. The

development period is typically much longer (two years or more), the beta test and launch is complex, and the world or environment must be both facilitated (moderated and hosted) and iteratively extended. The closure of a virtual world for children requires careful planning, and should be discussed as soon as possible after launch.

### **A different 'contract' with audiences**

Virtual worlds require a closer relationship with audiences, and this includes co-production and co-management. The researchers recommend BBC Children's should consider ways in which children can be more closely involved, from the earliest point in concept development (not mere beta testing, when the production is almost complete). It became clear in the study that the producers need to inform children when areas are closed, under development or where there are any technical problems: a greater degree of transparency is required. Some children became frustrated, angry or anxious when it was not clear whether their inability to access some areas was a technical limitation, or their own fault. The relationship with audiences also involves rights and responsibilities for both the producers and audiences.

### **Peaks of motivation**

The researchers found the children were highly motivated at particular moments during their exploration of the world, for example, reaching Rainbow Canyon or finding their first page. It is suggested that these moments be further identified as it would be a good time to introduce further quests or challenges. The children also expressed a wish to have acknowledgement from the BBC during these peaks of motivation, and to be rewarded for their achievement.

### **Identity**

The researchers found the older children, particularly, wanted to have more say about their identity and more ways to express their persona. Some of the older boys and girls expressed a wish for more fashionable clothing and hair styles for their avatars. The Muslim girls in the study wanted to be offered a range of head scarves.

### **Differences in age**

There were significant differences between the 7–9 year old and 10–11 year old players. The younger players wanted to have more orientation and help, and they were also happier to enjoy solo play. The older players needed to have social activity, more collaboration, competition, ways to express themselves and more challenges. The older boys and girls wanted to have commerce (shops and trading) and to be able to compete against each other.

### **Principles for a successful virtual world for children**

Thirteen principles to ensure a successful virtual world for children were identified by the researchers. These principles resulted from the 'geographical', social, economic, citizenship, motivational and emotional requirements expressed by the children both in the workshops with the researchers and during the time they explored Adventure Rock and other virtual worlds for children, on their own.

### **A different place for the audience**

The nature of virtual worlds means the audience ceases to be 'out there', external to the BBC. The young players create their own experiences within the world and should

be considered as co-producers. This may require a re-examination of the ethical and legal framework between the children and producers. Producers who are skilled at engaging with audiences should be perceived as having 'key roles'.

### **Partnership with parents**

Most of the large, commercial, virtual worlds for children, enlist the assistance of parents. Parents are invited to open an account with the virtual world and to set the level of interactivity their children have with others.

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The full study is available at:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/legacy/knowledgeexchange/westminsterone.pdf>