

Life in the Times of Whypox: A Virtual Epidemic as a Community Event

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Abstract.

Virtual communities have become a central part of children's social landscape. Some of them, called multi-player online games, invite thousands of children to join and play together. Their online interactions are structured around socializing, shopping, and e-mailings. At occasion, particular events such as player revolts, virus outbreaks, or organized ostracism bring together the geographically dispersed players of such online communities and constitute what we call community events. As a case in point, we focus on Whypox, a virtual epidemic that took place in Whyville.net, a teen online community with over 1.5 million registered players ages 8-16. To understand how events such as Whypox impact life in online communities, we analyze tracking data, chat content, newspaper postings, survey and interview descriptions and play interactions. We discuss implications of our findings in relation to Gee's (2003) notion of affinity groups, propose design parameters for designing community events, and outline educational applications.