



## “Kids Don’t Make Money, and That is a Kids Game”: Children’s Critical Actions against the Commercial Design of Club Penguin

## “Çocuklar Para Kazanmazlar ve O Bir Çocuk Oyunu”: Çocukların Club Penguin’in Ticari Tasarımına karşı Eleştirel Eylemleri”

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### Abstract

This study is the last phase of a four-year ethnographic study, within which I examined children’s collaborative play and digital literacy practices in commercially designed virtual play worlds. In the last phase of this study, I specifically focused on the critical engagements of the study participants against the commercial design of Club Penguin virtual world. The participants of my study consisted of groups of five- to eight-year- old children in an afterschool setting in a university town in the Midwestern United States. It was revealed in this study that the children found Club Penguin’s two-tiered membership model unfair, and they took a critical stance. Under my guidance, the children, by using critical literacy approach, wrote letters to Club Penguin, made comments on the official Club Penguin blog posts, and created YouTube videos in effort to affect change regarding this design feature.

*Keywords:* Critical literacy, digital literacy, virtual worlds, young children, social inequality, commercialism.

### Öz

Bu çalışma dört yıllık etnografik bir çalışmanın son aşamasıdır. Bu çalışmada, çocukların ticari amaçla tasarlanmış sanal oyun dünyalarındaki işbirlikçi oyun ve dijital okuryazarlık uygulamaları araştırılmıştır. Araştırmada özellikle katılımcıların ticari amaçla tasarlanmış Club Penguin oyununa karşı eleştirel davranışlarına odaklanılmıştır. Çalışmanın katılımcıları Orta-Batı Amerika Birleşik Devletleri’nde bir üniversite şehrindeki okulsonrası eğitim merkezinde yer alan ve yaşları 5 ve 8 arasında değişen çocuklardan oluşmaktadır. Sonuçlara göre çocuklar Club Penguin’in iki aşamalı üyelikli adaletsiz buldukları ve buna karşı eleştirel tutum geliştirdikleri görülmektedir. Bu tasarım özelliğinin değiştirilmesine katkı sağlamak amacıyla çocuklar benim rehberliğimde eleştirel okuryazarlık yaklaşımını kullanarak Club Penguin’e mektuplar yazdılar, Club Penguin’in resmî blog sayfasındaki paylaşımlara yorumlar yaptılar ve YouTube videoları oluşturdular.

*Anahtar Kelimeler:* Eleştirel okur-yazarlık, dijital okur-yazarlık, sanal dünyalar, küçük çocuklar, sosyal eşitsizlik, ticari anlayış.

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## 1. Introduction

Today over 320 million young children prefer to play in commercially designed virtual play worlds (KZero, 2011). It is known that most of these virtual worlds are designed to serve the commercial interests of the producing companies. Therefore, it is critical to conduct research to understand what kind of activities our young children engage in or are exposed to in these relatively new playgrounds. In this study, I observed five-to eight-year-old children’s interactions in Disney’s Club Penguin virtual world, and by adopting the critical literacy approach, I helped my study participants to see the underlying purposes of the producing company and take social actions to change the design features that they were unhappy with.

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In this study, critical literacy can be defined as the practices that "encourage students to use language to question the everyday world, to interrogate the relationship between language and power, to analyze popular culture and media, to understand how power relationships are socially constructed, and to consider actions that can be taken to promote social justice" (Lewison et al., 2014: 3). Before conducting this research, when I was reading on how to deal with the social injustice by using critical literacy, I came across with Freire's (1970) famous book about poor communities in South America, which was mostly about raising critical consciousness of people. Even though Freire's critical literacy approach is very well known in the literature, since this work is mostly for adult learners and not specifically written for educational settings, I did not find it practical to use in this study.

Luke and Freebody's (1999) *Four Resources Model*, which was designed to deal with social injustice in educational settings looked more applicable to this study. In their work, Luke and Freebody defined four different roles for readers: code breaker, meaning maker, text user and text critic. They defined reading as a social practice and changed the meaning of reading from simply decoding a text to analyzing a text in a sociocultural context with a critical lens. However, Luke and Freebody's *Four Resources Model* and the associated reader roles are more related to print centric reading. Therefore, Serafini (2012) developed Luke and Freebody's *Four Resources Model* by considering visual and multimodal texts and redefined the reader roles as *reader as navigator*, *reader as interpreter*, *reader as designer*, and *reader as interrogator*.

According to the expanded version of *Four Resources Model* (Serafini, 2012), first, readers have to be navigators, which means while reading multimodal texts, the readers have to understand the role, structure and design of multimodal texts with its all components (i.e., written text, images, other visuals) and know how to navigate these texts based on their purposes for reading. Second, readers have to be interpreters, which means while reading multimodal texts, by using their prior knowledge and experiences, readers have to construct and generate meaning and give responses to multimodal texts. Third, readers have to be designers, which means "readers of multi-modal texts not only construct meaning from what is depicted or represented, but also design the way the text is read, its reading path, what is attended to and, in the process, construct a unique experience during their transaction with a text" (p. 157). In this process, readers construct frames while deciding on what aspects of the multimodal text to be read to construct meaning. Finally, readers have to be interrogators, which means readers have to think about by whom this multimodal text was created for what purposes, and what social, political, historical and cultural dynamics played a role in the creation of this text. By being navigator, interpreter, designer and interrogator, children not only decode the text, but construct meaning and responses to the text in a sociocultural context by considering their prior knowledge and own experiences, the design features of the text and the authors' explicit and/or implicit purposes.

The original *Four Resources Model* (Luke and Freebody, 1999) and its expanded version (Serafini, 2012) describe the four roles of the reader, so they are more about the reading part of critical literacy, but critical writing is also as important. However, critical writing does not have to be a written text. Critical writing means delivering a message through a product created with a critical approach. While defining critical literacy, Lewison, et al. (2002) describe "taking action and promoting social justice" as an important dimension of critical literacy, within which the practices of privilege and injustice are questioned and actions are taken to transform the existing social injustice. Therefore in addition to engage in all four roles of the reader defined by Serafini, it is important to take a critical stance and engage in activities to transform the social injustice in the society.

The use of critical literacy in early grades remains a relatively new phenomenon: only a limited number of studies exist in the literature within which young children use critical literacy methods. In a study conducted in Southeastern United States, Flint and Laman (2012) studied with first, second, third and fifth graders in two elementary schools. The study took place while teachers taught writing workshop units that integrated poetry with issues related to social justice. Flint and Laman's analysis revealed that after the teachers used critical literacy methods in their classrooms to promote social justice, the children wrote poems on several social issues that are present in life, including immigration, divorce, bullying, homelessness, war and natural disasters. In these poems, with a critical lens, the children spoke out about the concerns they had regarding the world they live in.

In another study, Silverset al. (2010) studied with 25 first graders. In this study, while investigating Hurricane Katrina by taking a critical stance under their teacher's guidance, the students found out that most of the people affected by the disaster were poor African American people living in New Orleans. This prompted the students to critically think about how those suffering people could have been better helped both during and after the incident. At the end of the year, the students sent books to a school in New Orleans. Focusing on a real social issue and talking about poverty and a recent natural disaster encouraged these first graders to engage in a social action to make a difference for those suffering people.

In another study, Vasquez (2004) used the Happy Meal menu of the burger chain McDonald's as the text in her junior kindergarten class while discussing with three- to five-year-old children how the Happy Meal serves McDonald's' commercial interests. With some prompting and help from Vasquez, the children criticized McDonald's use of toys to manipulate child costumers, the unfairness associated with poor children's lack of access to Happy Meal toys, and the promotional strategies McDonald's follows to make children continuous consumers. In this study,

Vasquez demonstrated that even children in this age group are able to discuss the taken-for-granted issues we encounter in everyday life from a critical perspective, and in the end, they are able to take action in order to change the issues they find problematic.

Considering Club Penguin as a text, and adopting Serafini's (2012) expanded version of Luke and Freebody's (1999) *Four Resources Model*, I would argue that beyond being a *navigator*, an *interpreter* and a *designer*, the children should be *interrogators* who understand the intentional design of the text, the designers' purposes, and their positioning of children within the text. This study aims to answer the following research question: How do the young children, who use critical literacy methods, take action to cause a change when they encounter a social injustice in their everyday environments? Acquiring the skills of an interrogator, the study participants developed the potential to read Club Penguin and understood the designers' intentions. Then, they took actions to promote social justice (Lewison, et al., 2002) by criticizing the design features of Club Penguin in different digital platforms. Just like in the above studies, the study participants' feelings and their reactions to the social injustice they experienced—producing companies' commercial implementations in children's virtual play worlds—will be discussed in detail later in this article.

## 2. Commercial Design of Virtual Play Worlds

In the growing body of research on virtual worlds, some studies analyze the commercial design of virtual worlds, the rules of game associated with the virtual worlds, and the virtual worlds' adherence to legal requirements pertaining to children and children's rights (Grimes, 2010; 2013). Others analyze children's virtual worlds as social platforms in order to examine how the children's engagement in these virtual worlds affects their identity constructions (Burke, 2013; Connelly, 2013) and how children's virtual world engagements foster their social relationships with friends (Marsh, 2013a) and with other family members (Reichet et al., 2013). And still other studies focus on children's literacy engagements in virtual worlds (Author and Colleague, 2013; Black, 2010; Marsh, 2010; 2011; 2013b; 2014; Wohlwend et al., 2011).

Grimes (2010) conducted a unique study within six popular virtual worlds for children (i.e., Club Penguin, Barbiegirls, Toontown, GalaXseeds, Nicktropolis, and Magi-Nation), in which she analyzed the design features of these virtual worlds. Grimes concluded her study by highlighting the importance of addressing children's cultural rights with regard to authorship, intellectual property, participation and fair use under the law. She also argued that children who play in the virtual worlds become targets of the commercial interests of corporations.

In a follow-up study, Grimes (2013) focused specifically on the relationship between the "commercial priorities" of the producing companies and the "technological design" of the same six virtual worlds she had studied previously. Of these virtual worlds, three (i.e., Toontown, Club Penguin and Barbiegirls) provided both free and paid membership options; three (i.e., Barbiegirls, Club Penguin and Magi-Nation) offered in-game items that could be purchased online or toys and collectable items that could be purchased in stores; and two (i.e., Nicktropolis and GalaXseeds) included advertisements from third-party companies. Grimes argued that, in addition to "cross-promotion and branding" and "third-party advertising", the commercial design of the virtual worlds serves the commercial interests of the producing companies. The producing companies can effectively turn its users (i.e., the children who wear fancy outfits and decorate their igloos with nice furniture or themed items) into brand ambassadors that target the non-paying members who want all that comes with a paid account.

The virtual world that was used in this study, Club Penguin by Disney, is a very popular two-dimensional virtual world designed for children (KZero, 2011). With their penguin avatars, players visit different places, play online games with other online children, adopt pet puffles, and design their own igloos in Club Penguin. However, some game features are not open to all players. Club Penguin has two-tiered membership policy. The basic (non-paid) account holders, who create an account just by providing a valid email address, can visit different places, play games and collect coins in the virtual world, but they cannot use those coins to purchase virtual goods. On the other hand, the paid account holders, who regularly pay monthly subscription fee of \$7.95, benefit from additional opportunities. They can purchase fancy clothes and accessories for their avatars, design their igloos more freely using several kinds of furniture, and unlock upper levels of some games in the virtual world. If the paid membership expires, then it turns into a basic account, and all the collected or purchased virtual goods become inaccessible to the player until after the subscription is renewed.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Research Setting

As a part of a larger four-year ethnographic study, 14 five to eight-year-old children were observed for 12 weeks in a non-profit afterschool program in a university town in Midwestern United States, while they were playing Club

Penguin in the computer lab. In the first four weeks, the children played with basic accounts, between week four and week seven I offered them paid accounts, and between week seven and week 12 all of them played with their paid accounts. While analyzing children's practices, it was found that the study participants internalized the commercial design of Club Penguin after they were offered paid memberships and had access to all virtual goods in the virtual world. Without any complaint about the commercial design of Club Penguin, the study participants with paid memberships engaged in several practices in the virtual world.

This study was originally supposed to end after week 12, right after all of the study participants had the opportunity to play with their paid accounts for five weeks. After week 12, their paid membership funding automatically ended, and their accounts turned into basic accounts. When this happened, the children lost paid member privileges, their status in the virtual world, and most of the virtual goods they collected via long hours spent playing games. Then, it became apparent that this transformation of membership type presented an opportunity to see how children felt about the commercial design features of Club Penguin. Therefore, I decided to extend this study and visit the study participants in the afterschool program for a few more times. These visits would also present an opportunity to help the children read the Club Penguin virtual world through a critical lens, realize its intended commercial design, and take social actions to change the parts of the design with which they were unhappy. This article discusses the children's critical literacy engagements at the very end of the study after the regular 12 weeks sessions ended (see the last part of the timeline below).

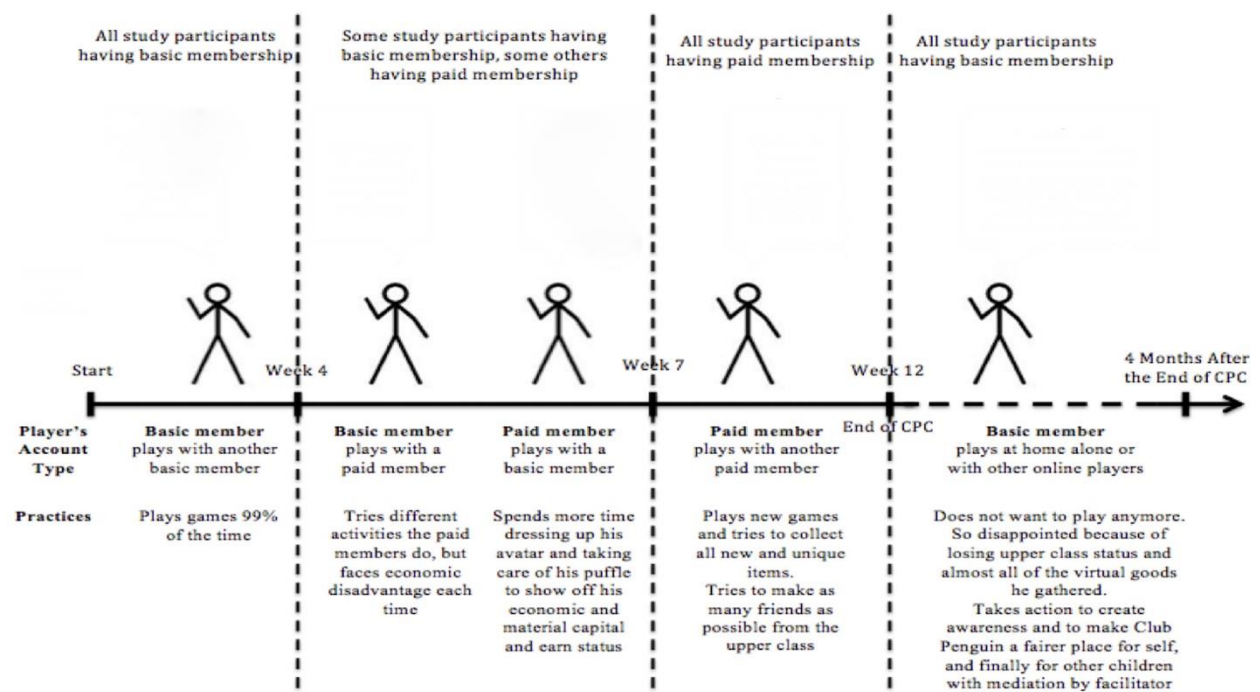


Figure 1. Timeline of the study

### 3.2. Data Collection and Data Analysis

As is mentioned before, Disney's Club Penguin virtual world is pretty popular all around the world among young children. Before I started the study, so many children in the afterschool program were already playing Club Penguin either at home or in the computer lab of the afterschool program. Therefore, as a researcher interested in young children's digital engagements, I wanted to observe what was happening in this virtual world that became the children's new playground. Before the 12 weeks Club Penguin club session started in the afterschool program, each student consented at the registration desk, and the children and their families were verbally notified about the details of the study. After week 12, I waited for four months to revisit the research setting since I had to amend the IRB protocol for children's critical literacy engagements in the digital platforms and notify the parents and children about the amendment.

At the end of Spring, I visited the study participants in the afterschool program and conducted one-on-one unstructured interviews while they played Club Penguin on my laptop and showed me what they had lost with the expiration of their paid memberships. In my visits to the afterschool program, I met a total of six participants out of the original 14; these six participants included Rick, Aaron, Joe, William, Eric, and Nick (all the names are changed with

synonyms). Some of the other participants had already left the afterschool program, some were registered to participate in other club activities, and others were absent during the times I visited the afterschool program. Since the afterschool program was pretty busy with other club activities, there were time and space limitations. Therefore, I met with the children individually and got their reactions regarding the commercial implementations of the Club Penguin virtual world.

By considering the four roles of the reader defined by Luke and Freebody (1999) and expanded by Serafini (2012) for multimodal texts, I shaped my interview questions to help my study participants to become *interrogators*, and read the Club Penguin and its intentional design features with a critical lens. Then, they began to give critical reactions in the digital platforms by writing letters to the editor-in-chief of Club Penguin Times newspaper, commenting on the official Club Penguin blog posts, and creating YouTube videos. The children engaged in all of these critical literacy practices using my laptop, so their entire engagements were screen recorded. These screen records served as data as well as the video records of the semi-structured interviews.

The video records of semi-structured interviews conducted with children and the screen records of children's reactions to the commercial design of Club Penguin in the digital platforms were analyzed by using Studiocode video analysis software. The interview data were coded with emerging codes and sub-codes to reveal how the children read the commercial design of Club Penguin while answering my questions. The screen records were also coded with emerging codes to analyze the children's critical stance (Lewison, et al., 2002), and how the children gave their reactions to a social injustice they experienced in a virtual world designed for children.

### 3.3. Study Participants

Some of the study participants were aware of the expiration of their paid memberships and others who were no longer playing Club Penguin were unaware of the fact that their accounts had turned into basic accounts; these children did not have access to computers at home. Brothers Rick and Aaron mentioned that they would like to play Club Penguin, but their parents did not let them use the computer at home anymore. Another participant, Joe, also mentioned that he did not have a computer or a tablet at home, so he could not play Club Penguin after the last session of the Club Penguin club.

Since Joe, Aaron and Rick have stopped playing Club Penguin after their paid membership expired, they were unaware of what they had lost from their outfits inventories and their igloos, and they had not experienced the disadvantage of having basic accounts after playing with paid accounts for a time. Therefore, their answers were based on their experiences from the last program cycle with their paid accounts. Aaron, for instance, mentioned that he likes Club Penguin and its paid member-basic member differences. He stated that the paid account is "way better" than the basic account because he could adopt the puffles he wanted, and because he was able to purchase items for his avatar, but having basic account was also good as, according to Aaron, it was at least better than not having any account at all. Ryan agreed with his brother and said that he found the paid member-basic member differences fair, and continued, "Because, I mean, any other good video games should be like that [pause] which they mostly are." These children, who live in a consumerist society in their real lives, already recognized that companies that produce good quality stuff work for their consumerist interests, and it was fair, they thought, to expect producing companies to charge those people who wanted to benefit from additional opportunities or features.

The other three participants, Nick, Eric, and William had no problems accessing computers and the Internet at home. They were aware that their accounts had turned into basic accounts, and they now had limited opportunities to access some places and virtual goods in Club Penguin. They stated several times that they were so disappointed when they recognized that their memberships had expired. When I asked Nick about what he thinks about Club Penguin's paid member implementation, he said, "I don't know why you would need to pay money for [pause] every single year?" He continued, "If [the designers] make it free, I'll be glad they are not greedy anymore. Cause I think the only reason is that they wanna, well [pause] just get money from parents." William and Eric mirrored Nick, as they mentioned, during our one-on-one conversations, that it is unfair to ask people to pay money for children's games. In the following section, Nick, William and Eric's critical literacy practices will be discussed in detail.

## 4. Findings

In these final revisits, early on in my conversation with William, I, as a researcher, asked him some basic questions (e.g., Do you still play Club Penguin?, What do you feel about its two-tiered membership policy?) aimed at getting him to start thinking about the commercial design of Club Penguin. William claimed that he was "disappointed" about losing his paid account and all of his items. He stated that, "It would mean a lot to me if [the expiration of paid membership] did not happen. Because [pause] really [pause] I find it disappointing that people always have to

constantly pay to do something that probably should be free.” It was clearly understood from this statement that this eight-year-old boy had already started reading the commercial design of Club Penguin.

To take him to the level of reader as an *interrogator* (Serafini, 2012), who asks questions about by whom this virtual world was designed and for what purposes, I continued talking with him. My conversation with William continued as follows:

**William:** I am lucky that I keep my golden sweatshirt, I am not gonna change that, cause I like it.

**Tolga:** So, if you change that, you will not be able to get it back anymore?

**William:** I [pause] I probably wouldn’t get it back.

**Tolga:** Oww, okay. What do you think about Club Penguin’s paid member, basic member kind of stuff?

**William:** I find it upsetting because, you know, like, kids that do not have enough money don’t get to play this game to its full potential, because they do not have the money to pay for a membership. And, it’s not really fair because, like, I don’t have the money to set aside to constantly renew my membership.

**Tolga:** Yeah.

**William:** And, I will kind of like it if they would change this policy, so the kids like me can actually play.

**Tolga:** Yeah.

**William:** And, not have to wait until you have bunches of money to set aside to get it. Because, then it’s just not fair.

**Tolga:** Yes. I understand.

William did not change his penguin’s outfits for four months because he was afraid that he would not be able to use it since it is no longer accessible in his outfit inventory. Showing the inaccessible clothes and accessories in the inventories, but not letting players gain access to them until making payments was a commercial strategy Club Penguin used to continue selling paid membership to children whose memberships had expired. After a while, our conversation became more involved, and William started thinking more critically and began offering suggestions regarding how Club Penguin’s policy could be reasonably changed:

**William:** Once you pay once for Minecraft, you don’t ever have to pay again. You already have that account for life.

**Tolga:** I see.

**William:** And, it doesn’t really take that much to get a Minecraft account, all you need is \$25 once, and then you have it forever.

**Tolga:** Okay.

**William:** That’s just something that never expires.

**Tolga:** Okay. So, what you mean is Club Penguin can be something like Minecraft, and people pay just once and it never expires?

**William:** Yes, and also it would be better if it wasn’t something outrageous like that. Something little like \$1 to \$10. Cause, this really isn’t something as complex as Minecraft.

William’s idea of finding someone to pay for his Club Penguin membership account turned into him finding Club Penguin’s policy that requires payment to play the game with friends unfair. He finally started giving some suggestions to make this policy fairer, and proposed that membership should not expire once a one-time payment is made, just like in Minecraft.

As Lewison et al. (2012) argued, *taking action and promoting social justice* is an important dimension of critical literacy. However, the first thing that needs to be done is reading the text with a critical lens and determining the problematic part of the text; then, a space can be created for transformation of the text (Vasquez and Felderman, 2013). During my conversation with William, he figured out that the commercial design of this virtual world offered paid members several additional opportunities and features, which resulted in inequity among the players in the virtual world. Considering Club Penguin as a text, William became aware of the problematic part of the text, so we needed to create a space for critique and transformation. Therefore, I asked William if he wanted to take action and reach out to Club Penguin to share his thoughts and suggestions with them. He replied “Yes,” and when I asked him how he thought he could reach Club Penguin, he said, “Probably a way that they would get the fastest.” Then, he logged into Club Penguin to look for what he could do to reach them.

After he spent some time in Club Penguin, searching to find someone with whom to share his feelings, I told him that his friend Nick had once sent questions to the editor-in-chief of the Club Penguin Times Newspaper. This prompted William to open the newspaper, click the “write for us” link in the upper left corner, and choose the “send questions” option from the pop-up menu bar. Then, a box appeared on the screen that William could use to share his feelings with the editor-in-chief of the newspaper (see Figure 2).

Will you please change your policy of you have to pay for a membership to play for it to full potential and change it to you only have to pay one time. So, that you can always able to get puffles that only paid members get and all the clothes that only the paid members get. I find it disappointing only the people that have a lot of money can play as a member. When the people that do not have that much money, only thing that they can do is pretty much play the games and walk around. When they could be playing with different puffles instead of only blue and red puffles, and they could be working on customizing their house, and getting golden puffle, getting rainbow puffle, it would be better and more fun. The people that do not have enough money would lose interest very fast because there is not much to do.

Figure 2. William's letter to the editor-in-chief of the Club Penguin Times newspaper

This letter sounded as though, William, who lives in a consumerist world in his real life, was aware that telling Club Penguin “do not charge money for paid memberships” would not work because of their commercial interests. As he mentioned before, similar games for children also required payments, but those other games only required one-time payments. As such, William was accepting that there would be two types of membership, one paid and one non-paid, but he recommended that there be a change to the way the paid memberships were charged; according to William, people who paid only once benefit from the unlimited opportunities offered to paid members without making additional payments. His letter also served as a warning to Club Penguin that their current policy could cause players to stop playing Club Penguin altogether because basic members are more likely to lose interest quickly since they cannot adopt the puffles they want or decorate their igloos. According to William, just playing games and walking around is not much fun.

My one-on-one conversation with another eight-year-old boy, Eric, started with my questions regarding his feelings about losing his paid member status. He explained that he found Club Penguin's policy of letting only paid members buy the items they want unfair, and he stated, “I don't think you should have to pay money just to become something in a video game.” After hearing this statement, it was evident to me that Eric had already figured out the problematic part of the virtual world, in other words, he was already reading the virtual world as an *interrogator* (Sierra, 2012), so it was time to create a space to take action (Lewison et al., 2002) for transformation (Vasquez and Felderman, 2013). I told Eric that, to try to affect change regarding Club Penguin's policy, his friend William had written a letter to share his feelings and gain the attention of the other players. Eric said that he was willing to write a letter as well. I explained that there were two ways to post letters to Club Penguin: one way is to write to the editor-in-chief of the Club Penguin Times newspaper, and the other way is to post on Club Penguin's official blog. He wanted to post his letter on the blog, which he frequently visits. He opened the official Club Penguin blog, and the first post he encountered was about the new super hero costumes that corresponded with the new theme. He, with no doubt, decided to share his letter under this post as a comment (see Figure 3).

i thoht it was fun to be a member and now im not and it wants me to pay mony to be a member and i dont think you shud have to do that in a children game. i think it shod be free and im sad and im wundering if you chud make it free.

Figure 3. Eric's comment under a blog post on Club Penguin's official blog

Eric believed that children's games should be free, so he asked Club Penguin if they could change their policy and make it free for everyone. Just like William's letter, the blog post Eric had written was not approved by the administrators or published in the blog. After our conversation, he told me that he was also willing to make a YouTube video, but his ride was ready to pick him up, so we met the next day to record his YouTube video.

After a couple of practice videos, he recorded his actual video. Then, we trimmed and edited his video together, and made it ready to be published on YouTube. Eric's final video, the one we uploaded on YouTube, was 11 minutes and 42 seconds in length. Throughout his video, Eric visited several places in Club Penguin and explained what he used to

do as a member and what he was not allowed to at the moment. Eric's video was unique, as it included fascinating examples from Eric's own experiences in Club Penguin. In his video, Eric stated, "I think everyone should get the privilege to be a member. I don't think, like, any kid game that you will have to pay. That is wrong. Cause, kids don't make money, and that is a kids game." While showing the inequity in the virtual world, Eric was also explaining why it was unacceptable to expect payment from children for Club Penguin memberships.

Again under my guidance, just as William had, Eric analyzed Club Penguin as a product of children's popular culture, and took actions to promote social justice (Lewison et al., 2014). He looked through Club Penguin with a critical literacy lens, found the problematic parts in the design from his perspective, and engaged in social actions via digital platforms in effort to affect change with regard to the design of the virtual world for himself as well as for other children.

I met with another eight-year-old boy, Nick, and just chatted about the expiration of his paid account and his feelings about losing his igloos, most of his outfits, and his ability to take his puffles for a walk in town. Since he had already mentioned that he found Club Penguin's implementation of paid membership unfair, I decided to ask him if he wanted to do anything to change this and told him what kind of critical actions William and Eric took. Since he had already submitted several questions to the editor-in-chief of the newspaper and was familiar with how to contact the editor, he said he could ask Aunt Arctic, the editor-in-chief of Club Penguin Times to change this policy. He opened the "write for us" page in the newspaper, and he typed his request into the box that appeared on the screen; he wrote, "Can you make it so you don't need a payed membership to buy clothing etc." His question was obviously pretty short compared to the letter William had written. In a previous conversation, Nick had mentioned that he did not believe that Aunt Arctic read every message she got because he had yet to receive a response from her. It seemed that he wanted to keep his question short this time either because he believed that he would not get a response or because he thought that keeping his question brief might increase the likelihood that he would get a response. As was the case with his previous questions, Nick did not hear from the editor-in-chief about his requests and/or suggestions regarding Club Penguin's paid membership policy.

At the end of our second meeting, I told Nick that Eric had created YouTube videos to talk about his feelings regarding Club Penguin's commercial design and to gain other people's attention. Nick got so excited and said that he could create a video as well. We decided to meet the next day to record his YouTube video. I wanted to chat about what the video should include, but Nick was pretty confident, and he told me that he knew what he would say, and he started working on it. After a bit of practice, during which Nick visited several places in Club Penguin and decided what to share in his video, he recorded a video that was 7 minutes and 40 seconds in length and needed no editing at all. It seemed that Nick knew how to express his feelings and get the attention of other people. He started his video by saying:

Hey guys, this is a guy that is using this account for Club Penguin things. And [pause], you see? You can get, this, this, this, this, this [pointing to the pictures of special items for paid members on the opening page of Club Penguin], and this with the membership. I used to have a membership, but guess what? It expired. And that is the exact reason why I am making this video.

Then he logged into Club Penguin and began visiting different places and showing viewers all of the items he had lost, one-by-one. First, he went to the Penguin Style shop, and he opened the Penguin Style catalog to show that, as a basic member who recently lost his paid membership, he was not allowed to purchase any of the items he wanted. Then, he went to his very basic igloo within which he has no furniture and only a few puffles. He clicked on his puffles and showed the membership icons that appeared on the screen, which meant that he had to have a paid membership to be able to play with those puffles. Then he shared his anxiety, "Some people say, I believe this, that if you don't care for it, [your puffles] all leave, and I believe that is what will happen which is not, not, NOT COOL [he said this with emphasis and typed it using all capital letters as well]... Okay?" Even though he was not a paid member anymore, his puffles has not been taken from him entirely. He was able to see them in his igloo or in the backyard of his igloo, but he was not allowed to take care of them or play with them, which was more painful for him. It was also painful for me as a researcher, because this meant that each time my study participants went to their igloos, they would see the puffles they adopted when they were paid members, but they would not be able to take care of their virtual pets, which caused them to worry that their puffles might eventually leave forever. This was actually another commercial strategy Club Penguin used to redirect children to purchase paid memberships. However, this reminded me that these types of commercial strategies used by the producing companies made it more clear how important it was to educate young children to engage in critical actions against the unfairness and inequity they encountered in their everyday lives.

Then, Nick started showing viewers his previous igloos (his party igloo, school igloo, and normal igloo) that were taken to storage. He was able to see his previous igloos in the igloo-editing mode, but he was not able to change his basic igloo to one of those igloos because he no longer had a paid membership. He stated in the video, "I can't go to my actual igloos [pointing to his previous igloos with the mouse], only this one [showing the basic igloo], but nothing else." This is also a commercial strategy that Club Penguin uses; after the expiration of paid membership, the players



do not lose their previous items, but those items are taken to storage until the players renew their paid memberships. This strategy is aimed at convincing children to renew their paid memberships; without this strategy, the children would not be so readily reminded of all of the items they lost when their memberships reverted to basic memberships. This strategy, just like the one that limited children's abilities to play with the puffles they had previously adopted as paid members, needed to be reconsidered in order to protect children's rights against the producing company's unfair commercial-based policies.

After showing viewers what he lost with the expiration of his paid membership, just as Eric had, Nick finished his video by inviting the audience to comment on or like the video in order to get the attention of Club Penguin:

So yes, if you agree or disagree with me, just put why you agree or disagree in the comments. Or, leave a like if you agree. But, if you don't, leave a thumb down if you want. It is really up to you. Maybe if, maybe if we get enough likes, and comments that say 'oww hey, I agree with this dude, or this, or that, or that,' well maybe Club Penguin will notice us and change that rule basically.

Nick clearly explained his reason for making this video, showed viewers what items he used to have and what he had lost with the expiration of his membership, and he invited viewers who think like he does to take action and leave a comment under his video or like his video. Only then, Nick claimed, would Club Penguin take notice of the unhappy players and make changes to their policy.

Nick had more outfits and accessories, more puffles, and more furniture in his three different igloos than other players in the Club Penguin club, and he lost most of the items he had with the expiration of his paid membership. Therefore, he was more emotional in his reactions. He was actually taking critical actions against the social injustice (Lewison, et al., 2002) in a children's virtual world. His YouTube video explained what was taken from him with the expiration of his paid membership, and it served to express the unfairness of this policy. Creating this video allowed Nick the opportunity to address a real issue he had encountered in his new playground by criticizing the problematic parts of this new playground and asking other people to take similar action.

## 5. Discussion

These three children, all of whom read Club Penguin through a critical lens, were not thinking in the same way four months prior when they were paid members. After losing their virtual goods in Club Penguin, they were better able to see its commercial design as well as the inequity that existed among players in terms of offered opportunities and features. This study offered these children opportunities to take social action in order to affect change, and these three children individually engaged in critical literacy practices for this purpose.

Even though William, Eric and Nick took actions to promote social justice among the digital platforms, their individual reactions were limited to their personal experiences. These children always talked about what happened to their paid accounts, and what they felt when they lost their virtual goods; as a researcher, I found it painful to hear how upset the children were. However, in the end, at least the children had a chance to engage in critical actions against the social injustice that exists among today's new playgrounds, and this helped to change their points of view with regard to the inequity they encountered. In the last phase of the study, because of the limited time I had and the busy schedule of the afterschool program, instead of meeting with the study participants as a whole group in the computer lab, I met with the study participants individually, and I just talked about their personal experiences. Thus, the study participants did not engage in critical literacy from a social perspective or discuss the social, cultural, political and economic dimensions behind their personal experiences as a group, which may be considered a limitation of this study.

It is important to note that, even though starting with a personal experience is meaningful, it is important to move beyond that experience to understand the actual powers that are shaping our experiences (Lewison et al, 2014). If we had continued Club Penguin club for another full program cycle (12 weeks), instead of meeting individually, we could have met in regular sessions as a whole group, worked in solidarity, and focused more on the social, cultural, political and economic dimensions of the children's personal experiences. Then, the study participants might have had the opportunity to think more broadly and discuss the other similar events happening in their communities; they could have potentially evaluated the event from different perspectives such as those of the producing company, a paid member, a basic member, and a parent; they might have thought about the complex power relationships driven by economic capital in their everyday lives; and finally it might have been possible for them to plan a collective, more powerful action via social platforms.

In this study, however, even if these children's individual attempts did not result in some big social action in the world, and did not cause a change to the design of the virtual world, they changed these children's perceptions. These children addressed a real problem they encountered by creating texts in digital platforms aimed at reaching real people, sharing the problem, and getting the attention of the producing company to make design changes. This practice of creating texts for a "real-life function" helps children become "critically literate individuals." Their new critical perspectives with regard to reading texts, the virtual world in this case, and their new perceptions regarding Club

Penguin and its commercial implementations will mediate these children's future literacy, participation and consumerism practices in their new playgrounds.

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