

Monster High as a Virtual Dollhouse: Tracking Play Practices across Converging
Transmedia and Social Media
Karen E. Wohlwend
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Abstract

Background: Today, children play in transmedia franchises that bring together media characters, toys and everyday consumer goods, games, apps, and websites in complex mergers of childhood cultures, digital literacies, consumer practices, and corporate agendas. Recent research on youth videogames and virtual worlds suggests the productive possibilities and tensions in children's imaginative engagements on these commercial playgrounds.

Purpose: Transmedia websites are conceptualized and analyzed as *virtual dollhouses*, or assemblages of toys, stories, and imagination that converges digital media, popular media, and social media. In this framing, transmedia websites are not texts to be read but contexts to inhabit. Are virtual dollhouses safe places where children can reimagine the worlds they know and play the worlds they imagine? Are girls doing more than playing simple repetitive games, dressing up avatars, caring for pets and decorating rooms in virtual dollhouses?

Research Design: Nexus analysis tracks the histories and social functions of traditional dollhouses, then examines the monsterhigh.com website for these functions and converging practices. In nexus analysis, when practices repeat or support one another across imaginaries, shared normative expectations for ideal players and performances are thickened and amplified. Similarly, conflicting practices create ruptures that disrupt expected trajectories and usual ways of doing things. Nexus analysis of website and game designs and children's YouTube videos identifies repetitions of social practices with the dolls in the commercial website and in child-made films on YouTube social media, making visible the resonances across converging cultural imaginaries as well as ruptures that open opportunities for player agency and redesign.

Conclusions: As children engage the pretense of virtual dollhouses, they play out blended activities that are at once both simulated and real: dressing their avatars, creating imagined profiles, shopping, playing games, purchasing in-app goods, watching and "liking" videos, recruiting followers/friends, and affiliating with the brand and other fans. These lived-in practices align with particular visions of girlhood that circulate naturalized and normalizing expectations for girls that also converge in in these concentrations of media. However, examination of the

digital dress-up and online doll play that children produce and share on social media shows that players also make use of the complexity that convergence produces to remake imaginaries for their own purposes in ways that both reproduce and rupture these expectations. The analysis points up the need for 1) nuanced and expanded research on children's transmedia engagements, 2) productive play and digital literacies, and 3) critical media literacy in schools.

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Executive Summary

What happens when doll play turns digital and why does it matter? Children's play is moving online, from classrooms and playrooms to phones, tablets, and laptops that converge favorite toys and games with social media, consumer practices, and corporate agendas. In other words, children are playing in heavy traffic – in dense flows of media and merchandise, licensed and linked through massive franchises on digital networks. In this article, one popular doll franchise is analyzed as a *virtual dollhouse*, a children's imaginary that is a complex assemblage of toys, characters, media worlds, consumer products, cultural practices, digital literacies, and social networks. In this framing, children's toy and game websites are not just screen texts to navigate and read with digital literacies but interactive contexts to inhabit with projected selves. In virtual dollhouses where children gather and play, players enter spaces of imagination, product consumption, digital media production, and fan affiliation with popular transmedia. *Transmedia* refers to a multi-platform line of licensed toys, multimedia, and consumer goods based on popular characters and fantasy narratives in films, video games, and virtual worlds. On transmedia websites, children dress up avatars, play videogames as their favorite characters, watch videos, view countless advertising messages, and purchase products. It is also important to understand how children take up, reproduce, and make use of messages in commercial content in their own *fanvid*, fan-produced multimedia (video blog posts, animation, or live-action videos shared on social media). Fanvid is framed here as a new form of doll play and dress-up where children can explore and respond to popular transmedia and cultural expectations, in ways that are both agentic and problematic.

Monster High as a Multi-Sited Dollhouse

What are children learning to do and produce in the convergences of popular transmedia and social media? To understand virtual dollhouses as converged spaces where children imaginatively explore and traverse multi-sited play worlds, I analyzed *Monster High* (MH), a doll-based retail franchise highly popular with pre-adolescent girls. MH exemplifies transmedia retail sites for children that merge toys, commerce, and peer cultures. Nexus analysis, a form of mediated discourse analysis, mapped the places where familiar play practices-- dress-up, toy collecting, and doll play – moved across official MH commercial sites and tweens' fanvid social media sites. These multiple sites of engagement thickened and complicated play, producing a mesh of interactions among players, materials, actions, and practices across transmedia. Nexus analysis first traced histories of cultural production with traditional dollhouses and then

linked these historical practices to digital literacy practices in 1) the MH franchise website and its linked external websites and 2) the social media sites where fans post MH fanvid productions. The official website designed and maintained by the manufacturer connects directly to websites of online retailers, video games, app stores, and official feeds on the MH YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram social media sites. In this article, I track the transmedia flows that converge imaginative play with collaboration and commerce, consumption and production, and material and digital spaces. Instead of moving furniture and dolls from room to room, the dollhouse itself moves across platforms, converging and transforming practices across material and digital contexts as it travels across and beyond the franchised websites. To track transformation of content and participation, I documented whether players could change the given content on the MH website, create durable and/or original content, or play and collaborate with other players. Tweens' dress-up and doll play fanvid were identified for analysis using YouTube search engine metrics, filtering for videos and sorting to find the top returns with highest view counts that clearly featured tween girls onscreen and/or narrating or describing dolls.

Play Practices in a Virtual Dollhouse

Doll play and dollhouses provide a window into the cultural worlds adults design for children and the ways children inhabit these worlds. In the MH virtual dollhouse, children play out blended activities that are simultaneously simulated and real, playful and commercial: dressing their avatars, creating imagined profiles, shopping for toys, playing games, purchasing in-app goods, watching and "liking" videos, which are all ways of affiliating with the brand and other MH fans. Nexus analysis of MH official websites and fan videos revealed dollhouse play practices with anticipated identities for children as collectors, homemakers, fans, and media producers.

Design and Display Taste and Wealth

Attention to fashion and makeup, repeated across the franchise's games, clothing, and commercial media, is also repeated in child-made fanvid. As the fans describe their MH collections, they take up the identity *discerning collector* through the earliest function of dollhouses: a display of taste and wealth. Cameras in such videos often pan bedroom shelves packed with dolls and packages, to show the scope of a collection.

Imagine and Prepare for Possible Futures

The videos also demonstrate tweens' cultural capital as MH *fashionistas* with the media knowledge and material capital to stay at the forefront of fashion by purchasing the most recent version of each doll. Through their play and participation in virtual dollhouses, tweens are immersed in incessant commercial inducements to consume within the sites. Disclaimers about advertising are less

pervasive, popping up in warnings when viewers leave an official site. However, a few fans are also learning to take up entrepreneurial dispositions and skills in advertising, public relations, and brand promotion.

Consume and Affiliate with Toy Transmedia

The product reviews and unboxing videos' focus on acquiring the most recent MH products and dolls suggests the primacy of consumerist dispositions and practices in fanvid. Furthermore, the monetization of amateur video raises serious concerns about potential child exploitation, particularly in videos starring children that go viral and attract millions of viewers. This contributes to the trend of child *YouTube celebrities*, albeit for very few individuals. Monthly earnings estimates for YouTube celebrities with subscriptions the size of those in the product review and unboxing videos range from \$1000 to \$200,000, an income stream that moves fanvid from child's play to child labor.

Share and Collaborate to Participate in Peer Cultures

The connections between fans in virtual dollhouses are direct and dense. The livestream interview publicizes the product reviewers' channel to the radio DJ's larger fan base, then travels back to the radio DJ and out again in the unboxing video through thank you gift packed with MH transmedia: a sticker and marker set, a set of hair streaking glitter pens, and jewelry. The videos close with recruitment appeals reminding viewers to subscribe to the channel. Of course, most fans do not achieve viral popularity, produce weekly Internet programs, or conduct streaming interviews but participate indirectly by subscribing, viewing, liking, and commenting on other fans' videos.

Produce and Animate Imaginary Worlds

There is sociodramatic play in projecting public personae as product experts, media critics, or talk show hosts as well as fantasy play in short bursts of MH pretense: striking a pose and then whispering to the camera "Oh, I'm just being Drac [nickname for the MH daughter of Dracula character]." The casual familiarity in the reviews contributes to the fanvid's appeal as the tweens gaze directly into the camera and address viewers with exaggerated friendliness, whispering self-deprecating asides to the camera, or perched on a bed and squealing with delight when the package is unboxed. There is also imaginative labor for viewers to envision themselves as future YouTube celebrities or media producers who make and distribute their own fanvid. This work generates real capital with economic and cultural impact as subscriptions, likes, and comments turn into cash, followers, and celebrity reputations.

Conclusion

While the MH website activities and games structure children's engagement with media, they do not contain it. This analysis of child-produced digital dress-up

and online doll play on social media shows that players remake commercial imaginaries for their own purposes in ways that converge corporate expectations and peer culture popularity. For example, when children play in virtual worlds, they can take up the valued ways of participating in peer play cultures that uphold or conflict with the official rules and interaction orders established by the commercial website. Similarly, the networked MH media converge peer cultures of fans who engage the franchise through social media and consumer cultures of collectors who engage through purchases and reviews on the retail sites. These ways of participating blur across media cultures so that players learn that collecting dolls, friends, and consumer goods or developing reputations as YouTube celebrities, expert makeup artists, and knowledgeable consumers allows them to acquire and display material and cultural capital that enhances their status in peer networks in ways that also drive consumption and increase the strength of the MH brand. In this way, doll-based transmedia fanvid is a new form of doll play and dress-up where children can both agentically and problematically respond to popular media.

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What happens when doll play turns digital and why does it matter? Children's play is moving online, from classrooms and playrooms to phones, tablets, and laptops that converge favorite toys and games with social media, consumer practices, and corporate agendas on digital networks (Carrington, 2013). In other words, children are playing in heavy traffic – in dense flows of media and merchandise, licensed and linked through massive franchises. The growing research on youth and online play suggests an urgent need for a better understanding of the possibilities and tensions in children's imaginative play in commercial play spaces designed to meet corporate goals (Black & Reich, 2012; Burnett & Merchant, 2014; Fields & Kafai, 2012; Grimes, 2010; 2015a; 2015b; Hafner, 2015; Marsh, 2010, 2011, 2015a, 2015b; Wohlwend & Kargin, 2013).

In this article, a popular doll franchise is analyzed as a *virtual dollhouse*, a children's imaginary that is a complex assemblage of toys, characters, media worlds, consumer products, cultural practices, and social networks. In this framing, children's toy and game websites are not just screen texts to navigate and read with digital literacies but interactive contexts to inhabit with projected selves. In the virtual dollhouses where children gather and play, players enter spaces of imagination, product consumption, digital media production, and fan affiliation with popular transmedia (Burke & Marsh, 2013). On transmedia websites, children dress up avatars, play videogames as their favorite characters, watch videos, view countless advertising messages, and purchase products. *Monster High* refers to a multi-platform line of licensed toys, multimedia, and consumer goods based on popular characters and fantasy narratives in films, videogames, and virtual worlds (Jenkins et al., 2006; Kinder, 1991). It is also important to understand how children take up, reproduce, and make use of messages in commercial content in their own *fanvid*, fan-produced multimedia (video blog posts, animation, or live-action videos shared on social media). *Fanvid* is framed here as a new form of doll play and dress-up where children can explore and respond to popular transmedia and cultural expectations, in ways that are both agentic and problematic.

What are children learning to do and produce in the convergences of popular transmedia and social media? To understand virtual dollhouses as converged spaces where children imaginatively explore and traverse multi-sited play worlds, I analyzed digital play opportunities in *Monster High* (MH), a doll-based retail website highly popular with pre-adolescent girls. MH exemplifies transmedia retail sites for children that merge toys, commerce, and peer cultures. Nexus analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) mapped the places where familiar play practices--dress-up, toy collecting, and doll play – moved across official MH commercial sites and tweens' MH *fanvid* social media sites. These multiple sites

of engagement thickened and complicated play, producing a mesh of interactions among players, materials, actions, and practices across transmedia.

Examining Transmedia as a Multi-Sited Dollhouse

Mediated discourse theory provides action-oriented analytic tools for examining children's doll play practices as cultural production situated in histories and global trajectories (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014; Scollon, 2001). In this perspective, children's popular media toys are semiotic aggregates that enable pivots among pretend identities and contexts in the fluid, inventive, and collaborative contexts that play produces. Transmedia contexts are made up of multiple sites, both brick-and-mortar and digital, that provide multiple platforms and pathways for play. "The textual and media landscapes in which young people now travel are themselves assembled and polycentric, operating in parallel and often independently" (Carrington, 2012, p. 38).

Doll play and dollhouses provide a window into the cultural worlds adults design for children and the ways children inhabit these worlds. Dollhouses - like all toys - are invitations to play, designed to clearly communicate and elicit particular uses for particular kinds of users. In this way, toys act as scripts for actions situated in the histories of play practices (Brougère, 2006). For example, dollhouses invite mediated actions such as arranging furniture and bouncing small dolls from room to room while toy cars invite pushing, rolling, and crashing. These mediated actions are interpreted as practices with cultural meanings and social intentions when situated within a material's histories of use. Furthermore, practices layered into transmedia toys during their production and through their histories of use become sedimented identities (Rowse & Pahl, 2007) that make particular future users and uses more likely. Dolls and transmedia evoke anticipated identities for target consumers, forecast by toymakers and sedimented into their products through design, manufacture, and marketing practices (Wohlwend, 2009). In this framing, as a virtual dollhouse transmediates across connected platforms, it concentrates anticipated identities and play practices, producing dense interwoven connections with implications for greater participation in digital cultures.

To understand children's cultural production with virtual dollhouses and commercial transmedia, I used nexus analysis (Jones, 2015; Scollon & Scollon, 2004) to make visible the social, material, and ideological effects of media convergence in children's play. Nexus analysis tracks the mergers of materials, bodies, social groupings, and discourses that make up the nexus of expected, almost automatic practices mobilized across space and time that cluster in a particular site or phenomenon, in this case, a transmedia franchise's official website. Nexus analysis critically examines clustered naturalized practices, whether in peer cultures, consumer cultures, or digital cultures, that tend to normalize particular ways of "doing and being" (Gee, 1999) and uphold dominant discourses that justify these practices. For example, practices that

repeat across doll transmedia platforms cluster expectations for (female) users who avidly shop, collect dolls, desire the newest fashions, craft jewelry and accessories, take photos of their dolls and crafts, and share these on social media. Performances in online posts and videos that align with this nexus of practice signal shared fan affiliation and mutual recognition among players, shoppers, or fans as accomplished performance of YouTube celebrity discourse in social media peer cultures. Nexus analysis of dollhouse histories and global circulations of products and websites requires a macro or expansive view of social practices in

the circumference around moments of human action to begin to see the lines, sometimes visible and sometimes obscured of historical and social process by which discourses come together at particular moments of human action as well as to make visible the ways in which outcomes such as transformations in those discourses, social actors, and mediational means emanate from those moments of action. (Scollon & Scollon, 2002)

In this article, nexus analysis is informed by complementary elements of actor network theory (Latour, 2005). Actor network theory traces the movements of human/material assemblages that circulate across networks. Webs of connections and relations are co-constituted by human and material actants as they move across network, in a state of constant and mutual transformation:

... what circulates and what makes the circulation is both co-determined and transformed...[and] should be thought of as a moving actant that transforms those that do the moving because they transform the moving object. When the token remains stable or when the movers are kept intact, these are exceptional circumstances, which have to be accounted for. (Latour, 1996, p. 379)

Actor-network theory reveals transformations that rupture expectations for particular play practices and player/doll/material assemblages, in ways that resonate with emanations and histories in a nexus analysis. However, just as crucial are the repetitions that retrace familiar circulations in a nexus of practice and hold trajectories in place within a network. Using these tools, I examine children's engagement with virtual dollhouses as transmediating assemblages of:

1. dollhouse play practices, material actants, and human actants
2. transmedia websites as sites of engagement that move across digital platforms and networks
3. trajectories of histories and emanations of the player/doll/website, with particular attention to the repetitions required to keep a nexus in place.

Macroanalysis first traced the histories of practices with traditional dollhouses and then tracked the trajectories of dollhouse practices in 1) the MH franchise website and its linked external websites and 2) the social media sites where fans posted their MH fanvid productions. The official website, designed and maintained by the manufacturer connected directly to linked websites, including online retailers, videogames, app stores, as well as to official posts on the MH YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram social media sites. The franchise web pages were examined using the following questions:

- What actions and cultural practices are enabled in the designed screen spaces of virtual dollhouse websites?
- What convergences (nexus) of these practices enable transformation of content? Which convergences are repeated to anchor and keep nexus static?
- To what extent does the nexus of practice enable children's production of original content and transmediation across platforms?

To track transformation of content and participation, I documented whether players could change the given content on the MH website, create durable and/or original content, or play and collaborate with other players. Tweens' dress-up and doll play fanvid were identified for analysis using YouTube search engine metrics, filtering for videos and sorting to find the top returns with highest view counts (at least 1 million, typically 15-20 million), in searches that paired the term *Monster High* with each of the following terms: *makeup tutorial*, *doll collection review*, *unboxing*, *drama*, *dress up*, *doll videos*, and *stop motion*. The analyzed videos were those with the highest view counts, clearly featuring tween girls onscreen and/or narrating or describing dolls, with original content apparently created independently by the children based on the internal and external cues in the video (Chin, 2015). The data sources also included high view count videos that immediately followed the target videos on the same YouTube channel, as well as MH-related high view count videos in the sidebar generated by YouTube metrics. No players were directly observed or interviewed, and data were limited to dolls and products in local stores, commercial and child-made digital media on transmedia and social media websites.

Dollhouses, Children, and Cultural Production

Anthropological perspectives on children's doll play and production make a distinction between artifacts made by adults for children and artifacts that children produce themselves.

The 'material culture of children' should be applied to those items that children make themselves or adapt into their own culture from the adult world that have a different use to that intended by the adult manufacturer. The 'material culture of childhood', on the other hand, should refer only to those items made for children by adults, as such objects reflect adult attitudes towards children and not the child's world in itself. (Brookshaw, 2009)

Accordingly, the next sections present an historical overview of social practices that adults have intended for dollhouses, followed by a review of research on digital literacies in videogames, virtual worlds, and fanvid that reveals how virtual dollhouses are engaged and remade in the material culture that children produce themselves.

Design and Display Taste and Wealth

Not all dollhouses are toys for children. Instead, early dollhouses were objects of display, designed by adults in largely in middle- and upper-class households to demonstrate its owner's decorating taste and wealth through a display of expensive miniaturized decor (Chen, 2015).

Imagine and Prepare for Possible Futures

In the nineteenth century, dollhouses gained a pedagogical function as “baby houses” to teach girls housekeeping skills, to encourage moral values such as tidiness, and to repress undesirable behaviors such as selfishness or envy (Chen, 2015). Later, Barbie's various career playsets suggest society's changing visions of appropriate training for girls' futures (Forman-Brunell, 2009). These imagined futures were aspirational rather than vocational, evident in the glamour in the various iterations ski chalet versions of the doll's Dreamhouse. From the 1960's, careers in Barbie playsets evolved through 150 careers from flight attendant and ballerina to computer engineer, fashion designer, and presidential candidate in this decade (Grinberg, 2014).

Consume and Affiliate with Toy Transmedia

In general, “...fashion dolls emphasize girls' future roles as consumers of the various products and services required to produce normative femininity: hairstyle, makeup, clothes, and accessories – ranging from jewelry to flashy cars – are critically important” (Hains, 2012, pp. 123). However, children are already consumers, born into regimes of consumption, developing affiliations with brands and mass merchandising entangled with their passionate attachments to characters (Marsh, 2005) and patterns of belonging in children's cultures (Pugh, 2009). By the 1950s, the young consumer had gained prominence and advertising and marketing strategies targeted children as an important demographic (Buckingham, 2011). New versions of toys incent consumers to expand their collections through specialized playsets and to deepen their investment in multi-billion dollar brands.

Share and Collaborate to Participate in Peer Cultures

The combination of miniature toys operated by multiple players in the small physical space of a dollhouse creates a need to share materials, take turns, and collaborate on improvised meanings. Children's pretense requires players to negotiate shared meanings to sustain a play frame (Bateson, 1955/1972) so that in order to maintain their roles, players must check in with one another and agree to the pretend meanings of real people and things in a shared play scenario, while managing friendships and turn-taking to keep play going (Corsaro, 2003; Sawyer, 1997).

Produce and Animate Imaginary Worlds

When children play together to dramatize and project themselves into the imagined miniature worlds of their favorite toys, they bring their individual understandings of scripts and actions, including what is expected for each character to say or do and what is authorized by cultural scripts. Play is a literacy that produces action texts, enabling players to improvise and imagine otherwise, transforming the immediate reality to fit players' interpretations and desired outcomes (Wohlwend, 2009; Medina & Wohlwend, 2014).

Virtual Dollhouses and Digital Literacies

With the arrival of videogame simulations and virtual worlds came expanded possibilities for productive and transformative play as dollhouses moved from physical wooden or plastic structures to computer screens where children could easily construct their own avatars, dollhouses, and even entire neighborhoods. Just as important, these players learned to wield digital literacies for playing and collaborating in online participatory cultures (Jenkins et al., 2006).

Digital Literacy in a Dollhouse Videogame

When *The Sims* videogame launched, it was celebrated as a “new dollhouse” that offered unique appeal for girls and women (Schiesel, 2006). Game researchers noted that *The Sims* involved much more than furnishing digital rooms and playing house with avatar dolls. Researchers found *Sims* players engaged in digital literacies, computing practices for navigating, interacting with, and creating screen content, from reading icons to writing code to produce software. The game also opened “opportunities for participation in global modding communities, with distinctive forms of collective knowledge-building, apprenticeships, and opportunities for social recognition” (Hayes & King, 2009, p. 61). Players with this virtual dollhouse connected across

a widespread network of online fan sites, where gamers upload and download content, discuss their game play, issue challenges, share cheat codes, publish stories, and much more. Within this network, players have access to millions of custom content objects, thousands of *Sims* fan-fiction texts, and millions of fans from across the globe. (Lammers, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2012, p. 46)

“Literacy-Lite” in a Virtual World

By contrast, the virtual worlds designed for children such as the doll-based *BarbieGirls* offered digital literacies with limited productive and collaborative potential, or “literacy-lite...a literacy that is static and controlled; a literacy that takes place online but does not reflect any of the powerful identity and community practices with texts made possible via Web 2.0” (Carrington & Hodgetts, 2010, p. 681). The design of this virtual dollhouse featured mall locations that allowed players to create, shop for, and dress avatars but in ways

that restricted “player control and sense of accomplishment” as players experienced “difficulty playing the games in BarbieGirls and were unable to achieve any sort of resolution in many of the games even after hours of play (Black, Korobkova, & Epler, 2013, p. 277). However, BarbieGirls players developed their own workaround literacies in fan peer cultures, creating systems of codes for meanings of particular color schemes to create distinctive avatars with original designs or insider conversational phrases to circumvent chat safety controls (Grimes, 2010).

Fanvid on Social Media

Fanvid is an emerging digital literacy that children use to create and share original content on networks outside the official transmedia websites. On social media channels, fans can connect with other fans, and a few achieve celebrity status within peer cultures and fan affinity groups (Marsh, 2015a, 2015b). Social media allows children to attract and develop a following, generating social capital in affinity groups and fan cultures (Ito et al., 2009; Jenkins et al., 2006). Increasingly, fanvid generates material capital as well as social capital, through advertisements that precede the video or banner advertisements that run along the bottom. Revenues paid to video publishers in Google’s YouTube Partners advertising program can range from \$0.30 and \$2.50 per 1,000 views for a single YouTube clip (Johnston, 2014).

Transmedia flows converge imaginative play with collaboration and commerce, consumption and production, and physical and digital spaces. Instead of moving furniture and dolls from room to room, the dollhouse itself moves across platforms, converging and transforming practices across material and digital contexts as it travels across and beyond the franchised webpages. The next section provides an overview of the characters, products, and websites in Monster High.

Converging Transmedia and Social Media in Monster High

MH Dolls, a Transmedia Franchise

MH is a fashion doll franchise, produced by Mattel and marketed to tweens (8-to 12-year-old) girls (Zimmerman, 2010). Launched in 2010, the franchise catapulted to top the charts as the company’s number two doll brand and number three toy property, earning \$1.5 billion retail by early 2014 (Mattel, 2014). MH dolls appeal to older girls who have outgrown the massive Disney Princess franchise (formerly manufactured by Mattel but recently transferred to Hasbro). MH dolls are an edgier version of Barbie, high school students with Goth overtones. The characters are a troupe of teenage fashionistas, like MGA’s Bratz-- “girls with a passion for fashion” but with a gloss of horror. Each doll is the offspring of classic cinematic monsters, as in the six core characters:

- Cleo DeNile (“queen bee” character, daughter of the Mummy)

- Ghoulia Yelps (“smart girl” character, daughter of zombies)
- Draculaura (a vegan vampire, daughter of Dracula)
- Clawdeen Wolf (daughter of the Werewolf)
- Frankie Stein (daughter of Frankenstein)
- Lagoona Blue (daughter of a sea monster)

At approximately twenty dollars, MH fashion dolls are more expensive than Barbie dolls and designed to maximize their value as collectables: rather than manufacturing a single doll with interchangeable clothing and accessories packs, Mattel produced multiple themed versions of each MH character. For example, there are at least six versions of the six original dolls: each version has a different costume and hairstyle themed to fit a film, videogame, or special event. One version of the dolls is dressed for a Parisian fashion spree in “Scarier, City of Fright” while the Dead Tired Ghoulia version is dressed in pajamas for a slumber party, a “creepover”. (Relentless punning provides the nominal horror throughout the franchise.) The line of dolls has over 100 characters in 2015 and continues to grow with new dolls regularly added in new videogames or DVD releases. Regular arrivals of “new ghouls” at school introduce new characters, expanding the franchise and the possibilities for narratives.

The 12-inch fashion dolls refer to their monster status through distinguishing hair colors, skin colors, brain, clothing and accessories with motifs that suggest cobwebs, bat wings, and so on. The dolls’ bodies are identical with a pear-shaped torso and impossibly thin and elongated legs and arms, with clothing that exposes the midriffs, shoulders, or thighs, topped by a very large head with heavily-mascaraed eyes, full and unsmiling lips, and colorful highlighted hair. The outfits juxtapose fishnet, plaids, sequins, fur, and lace, with accessories and patterns stylized from monster features: stitched flesh, claws, fangs, unraveled bandages, dripping blood, exposed brains, and so on. Regardless of the gruesome overtones, the characters’ activities focus on innocuous problems around friendships, shopping parties, and sleepovers, and special events at school. The MH storylines replicate the trite challenges of Saturday morning cartoons: a lost assignment, a misunderstanding, or planning a party. In most webisodes, a small group of the characters work together at school to manage their friendships and boyfriends. Horror is diluted and simply fodder for puns (e.g. shopping at the “maul”) or fashion (e.g., the zombie character does not eat brains but wears a pale pink skirt with red squiggles that faintly resemble the coloring and creviced patterns of a brain).

Virtual Dollhouse Practices in MH Website

On the MH website www.monsterhigh.com, registered users on computers or mobile devices can play games, shop, or learn more about the dolls. Not all website features are either enabled or fully functional on mobile devices, and freeze-ups and bugs are recurring problems in Mattel’s digital games and activities. However, with a computer, users can engage the MH full site as well

as linked retail websites. Looking across these linked websites, it's possible to quickly identify website activities as dollhouse play practices. Table 1 shows how the MH linked websites operate as virtual dollhouse, fulfilling many traditional dollhouse play practices:

Table 1. Dollhouse Practices across the official MH websites

Design and Display Taste and Wealth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design, shop for, and dress an avatar at the "Maul"
Imagine and Prepare for Possible Cultural Futures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play games, watch videos and learn about character storylines.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read blog posts on the MH blog written by various characters, print blog activity pages: MH-themed party ideas, craft projects, recipes, and paper dolls
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch character "marathon" videos constituted by pasting together commercially-produced two-three minute webisodes that have been posted on the YouTube MH channel
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow links to the Apple App Store and download iOS games: <i>Ghouls and Jewels</i>, <i>Apptivity Finders Creepers</i>, and <i>Sweet 1600</i>.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take quizzes that test players' knowledge of MH trivia or that survey player's favorite activities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play 16 arcade-style games
Share and Collaborate to Participate in Peer Cultures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create, print, or send a greeting card in Monster Mail
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow links to Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram and share photos of the doll characters and add comments on social media.
Consume and Affiliate with Toy Transmedia
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch commercials for new products such as a Lego-like building set or watch trailers for feature-length animated films: <i>Frights, Camera, Action</i>; <i>13 Wishes</i>; <i>Scaris, City of Frights</i>; <i>New Ghouls @ School</i>; <i>Haunted</i>; <i>Boo York, Boo York</i>.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shop by browsing merchandise, creating a personalized wish list, and purchasing products through links to Mattel's online store and other retailers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch MH video game trailers, browse collector card videos of each character's powers, download game-themed wallpapers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow links to retail sites to purchase console (Nintendo DS, Wii) video games: <i>13 Wishes</i>, <i>Skultimate Roller maze</i>, and <i>Ghoul Spirit</i>
Produce and Animate Imaginary Worlds
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create and dress an avatar, make a student profile for the Fearbook, and create a student ID
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upload, edit, print, save, or send a photo in the Haunted Photo Booo-th
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Travel to the MH channel on YouTube (or another site for 13 additional countries) and watch videos, including a commercially-produced music video, <i>We are MH</i> (11,079,085 views)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remix MH songs <i>We Are Monster High</i>, <i>Freaky Fusion</i>, or <i>Witching Hour</i> and manipulate sound mix, add sound effects, save and email it to a friend

In the MH virtual dollhouse, these practices converge so that children play out blended activities that are simultaneously simulated and real, playful and commercial: dressing their avatars, creating imagined profiles, shopping for toys, playing games, purchasing in-app goods, watching and “liking” videos, which are all ways of affiliating with the brand and other MH fans. For example, children can post photos of their dolls to the MH official site on Instagram or Facebook as an example of the convergence among the practice of producing as children create original content and the practice of sharing to other fans in peer culture. But internet safety concerns for children as well as the manufacturer’s interest in protecting the brand weakens children’s participation. Fan postings are moderated through the corporation as an intermediary, in comparison to direct fan-to-fan posts subject to immediate comments from peers on social media. Fan response on the official sites is limited to clicking likes (a quick perusal on Facebook shows 600-700 likes per post) and adding comments to official posts. Fan posts are likely screened by the company and many comments align with sales goals, declaring love for the MH characters or pleading for re-release of discontinued products. Mattel posts and copyrights the images and text on these sites, occasionally re-posting fan posts or related content such as MH photos from ComicCon or makeup tutorial channels on YouTube. The centralized control of content intensifies the brand message through repetition and retains tight control over the brand’s image, by design. Additionally, the official MH pages on social media networks serve the practice of consuming and affiliating with the brand. The official pages provide outlets for advertising messages that announce new products and build fan excitement around the brand. They also provide marketing data as the number of views and likes on social media sites can be tracked as indicators of the success of product launches and depth of customer engagement with various products.

MH Fanvid on Social Media

In addition to the MH commercially-produced website, fans have created numerous wikis, blogs, Facebook and Instagram pages, and YouTube channels for their sharing their own produced videos, photos, and other digital texts. On these social media sites and channels, children and youth can produce and share original content – fanvid – and to moderate comments and make decisions about what to post and re-post. Some MH YouTube channels have hundreds of videos, produced by – or at least with – children.

While the MH website activities and games structure children’s engagement with media, they do not contain it. Examination of child-produced digital dress-up and online doll play on social media shows that players remake commercial imaginaries for their own purposes in ways that converge corporate expectations and peer culture popularity. For example, when children play in virtual worlds, they can take up the valued ways of participating in peer play cultures that uphold or conflict with the official rules and interaction orders established by the commercial website (Marsh, 2011). Similarly, the networked

MH media converge peer cultures of fans who engage the franchise through social media and consumer cultures of collectors who engage through purchases and reviews on the retail sites. These ways of participating blur across media cultures so that players learn that collecting dolls, friends, and consumer goods or developing reputations as YouTube celebrities, expert makeup artists, and knowledgeable consumers allows them to acquire and display material and cultural capital that enhances their status in peer networks in ways that also drive consumption and increase the strength of the MH brand. In this way, doll-based transmedia fanvid is a new form of doll play and dress-up where children can both agentically and problematically respond to popular media.

MH fanvid on YouTube includes:

- doll play: puppet show videos with MH dolls in short scenarios, players animate the dolls with their hands onscreen or through stop-motion (still shots or clips linked together to create animation effects).
- dress up: live-action videos in which players act the part of MH characters, in fan versions of official MH videos such as “We Are Monster High” music video and its fanvid copies.
- makeup tutorials: live-action videos in which a fan transforms into a favorite character by providing demonstrations of makeup application, often with shopping tips on the best places to purchase apparel, wigs, or other accessories.
- doll collection and product reviews: videos of consumer reviews with camera panning the fan’s doll collection reviews, often with owner narrating a description or inventory of her dolls, more “show and tell” than fashion editorial or product critique.
- unboxing videos: videos of a fan unwrapping a just-received package or new purchase, with description of the contents, emotional response to the surprises revealed in the unboxing, demonstration of features of the products.

Converging Fanvid

A brief example of two videos that cross genres and connect fans demonstrate how imaginative, commercial, and collaborative practices, products, and identities converge in fanvid that bridges transmedia and social media. In locating MH fanvid in each genre, one highly viewed doll collection video was automatically followed by an unboxing video, also highly viewed. Each video is an episode of regularly posted and apparently child-produced programs featured in videocasts or livestream videos, hosted on the tweens’ YouTube channels or web radio shows. In the unboxing video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSLy_FMSoEs (1,607,698 views, 450,000 subscribers), an MH fan and self-described radio DJ unboxes a package with necklace and cards, thanking her for an earlier livestream interview. The gift was sent by a pair of MH fans (also tween girls) who host a YouTube channel of weekly MH product reviews

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jp3vG4L8U0k> (1,517,545 views, 88,000 subscribers). The narratives in the two videos directly address viewers, punctuated by asides, exaggerated smiling, compliments to the audience “you’re so sweet!”, blowing kisses, and posing with products, and mugging for the camera. The unboxing video closes with the entreaty “Please subscribe!”. Analysis of these linked videos for dollhouse practices reveals a dense tangle of commerce, recruitment, production, and play.

Design and Display Taste and Wealth

Attention to fashion and makeup, repeated across the franchise’s games, clothing, and commercial media, is also repeated in these child-made productions. As the fans describe their MH collections, they take up the identity *discerning collector* through the earliest function of dollhouses: a display of taste and wealth. Cameras in such videos often pan bedroom shelves packed with dolls and packages, to show the scope of a collection.

Imagine and Prepare for Possible Futures

Resonating with a prevalent media trope in postfeminist discourse in which women look to experts and celebrities for fashion and lifestyle advice (McRobbie, 2004), the reviews also demonstrate these tweens’ cultural capital as MH experts with the media knowledge and material capital to stay at the forefront of fashion by purchasing the most recent version of each doll. However, children are already knowledgeable cultural participants and as such are attuned to the marketing and retail practices that pervade transmedia sites. Through their play and participation in virtual dollhouses, tweens are immersed in incessant commercial inducements to consume within the sites. Disclaimers about advertising are less pervasive, popping up in warnings when viewers leave an official site. However, a few fans are also learning to take up entrepreneurial dispositions and skills in advertising, public relations, and brand promotion.

Consume and Affiliate with Toy Transmedia

The YouTube product reviews and unboxing videos focus on acquiring the most recent MH products and dolls, suggesting that consumerist dispositions and practices are circulating through fanvid. Furthermore, the monetization of amateur video raises serious concerns about potential child exploitation, particularly in videos starring children that go viral and attract millions of viewers. This contributes to the trend of YouTube child ‘celebrities’, “children and young people who have become well-known through their production and uploading of videos to YouTube”, a “potentially lucrative business” (Marsh, 2015b, pp. 8-9), albeit for very few individuals. Monthly earnings estimates for YouTube celebrities with subscriptions the size of those in the product review and unboxing videos range from \$1000 to \$200,000 (Social Blade, 2015), an income stream that moves fanvid from child’s play to child labor.

Share and Collaborate to Participate in Peer Cultures

The connections between fans in this node are direct and dense. The livestream interview publicizes the product reviewers channel to the radio DJ's larger fan base, then travels back to the radio DJ and out again in the unboxing video through thank you gift packed with MH transmedia: a sticker and marker set, a set of hair streaking glitter pens, and jewelry. The videos close with recruitment appeals reminding viewers to subscribe to the channel. Of course, most fans do not achieve viral popularity, produce weekly Internet programs, or conduct streaming interviews but participate indirectly by subscribing, viewing, liking, and commenting on other fans' videos.

Produce and Animate Imaginary Worlds

There is sociodramatic play in projecting public persona as product experts, media critics, or talk show hosts as well as fantasy play in short bursts of MH pretense: striking a pose and then whispering to the camera "Oh, I'm just being Drac [nickname for the MH daughter of Dracula character]." The casual familiarity in the reviews contributes to the fanvid's appeal as the tweens gaze directly into the camera and address viewers with exaggerated friendliness, whispering self-deprecating asides to the camera, or perched on a bed and squealing with delight when the package is unboxed. There is also imaginative labor for viewers to envision themselves as future YouTube celebrities or producers who make and distribute their own fanvid. This work generates real capital with economic and cultural impact as subscriptions, likes, and comments turn into cash, followers, and celebrity reputations.

Conclusion

Clearly, children enter virtual dollhouses as players and fans but also as active consumers, multimedia makers, cultural participants, and social media followers. All these uses converge in virtual dollhouses just as they do in traditional wooden or modern cardboard versions. However in virtual dollhouses, these practices intensify and multiply while moving across commercial sites and global networks. When fanvid extends transmedia practices, it is possible to see how these convergences transform children's participation in digital cultures and open more spaces for playing, recruiting friends and in some cases, earning revenue. The imaginative potential and extensive reach of popular transmedia, available largely in commercialized settings, requires robust research on children's play in these immersive environments.

First, more research is needed that considers how to critically engage children's engagements with popular, digital and social media, to understand their imaginative consumption and production, including ways we as researchers might rethink our own imaginings of their play trajectories (Burnett & Merchant, 2011). Methodologies are needed that are nuanced enough and extensive enough to follow children into these converging imaginaries.

Second, more opportunities are needed for collaborative play and digital literacies in schools where teachers can mediate and support children's developing participation. Dollhouses have long offered opportunities to teach children how to participate in social and cultural worlds, and now, to learn core digital literacies participate in online cultures: producing and distributing creative content, connecting with affinity groups, sharing with friends, and recruiting followers. When play is such a powerful means of learning and participating in digital cultures, how can we continue to ignore children's need for play in schools?

Digital media are part of a convergence between interactive media (most notably gaming), online networks, and existing media forms. Media literacy involves not only ways of understanding, interpreting, and critiquing media, but also the means for creative and social expression, online search and navigation, and a host of new technical skills. The potential gap in literacies and participation skills creates new challenges for educators who struggle to bridge media engagement inside and outside the classroom. (Ito et al., 2008, p. viii)

Third, the pervasive reach of transmedia points up the need for critical media literacy pedagogy that includes media production to help children understand the extent and effects of their play and media participation. When "many children learn their most potent lessons about interpretation in the branded fiction space" (Mackey & Shane, 2013, p. 22), the need for critical media literacy in school is indisputable. There will be challenges:

- How to effectively involve children and youth in critically engaging their favorite media texts that are so immersive and embodied?
- How to implement critical approaches that help children problematize stereotypes and resist consumerist messages while respecting their emotional attachments and valuing their diverse literacy resources?

To answer these questions, we urgently need insightful teaching and reflective research that enable critical engagement and productive play within the lived-in transmedia of virtual dollhouses.

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