

# Children's Culture and The Environment in the Digital Age

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*The article argues that within our digitized era we have altered the ways in which our culture represents the planet to ourselves, and thereby are further accentuating the perception of humans as separate from the natural world. These altered stories that we tell ourselves, as they relate to our relationships to nature, are explored with a particular emphasis on young children's culture. The discourses of specific children's television programming is analyzed as an example of the reinforcement of a troubling disconnect between humans and nature. As well, the online game Webkinz is assessed as a potentially problematic introduction for young children into the digital world for a variety of reasons, including those related to understandings of our place within nature. These examples from the world of children's culture are considered as part of the ongoing obfuscation of the implications of our social practices for the natural environment.*

We live together with nature—inside nature. We are part of its energy, its force, and we need to invoke its spirit. We can't live fighting nature. (Menchú, 2005, 32)

The above quote, drawn from a children's book authored by Nobel Peace Prize winner and Mayan activist Rigoberta Menchú, presents a stark contrast to the dominant Western view of the human relationship with nature. Indeed, if the above perspective on the relationship between human society and nature was the dominant view, the state of the planet might be quite different. Deconstructing the relationships between nature and culture provides important insights into the environmental challenges we currently face. Moreover, discourse is one of the sites upon which we must focus. The disconnect between our *understanding* of the urgency of the environmental crisis and our relatively limited success in changing our *behaviors* in favor of environmental sustainability can be, in part, understood through the lens of discourse (Bryant, 2007) -- what might also be called the 'stories' that we tell ourselves (see Kline, 1993; Jhally, 2000). An analysis of the ways in which meaning is produced and reproduced (after du Gay, 1997, and Williams, 1976) at several levels within contemporary, Western culture reveals a set of dominant understandings that reinforce complex social practices related to poor environmental choices. This is particularly the case in the digital age, and these tendencies begin with childhood culture in North America.

Many of the discourses of the digital age tell us repeatedly that the world is shrinking, that we live on a “small planet” or in a “small world,” echoing Marshall McLuhan’s (1965) notion of a “global village,” and that of others who focused on the notion of a shrinking planet (such as Schumacher, 1973 and 1979; see Bryant, 2007). David Harvey (1989) has argued that time-space compression is an important element of our digital age in terms of both the reorganization of global flows of production and capital accumulation, as well as the related globalization of distribution and consumption. He has also argued that this time-space compression has resulted in an acceleration of a process which has involved the shrinking of our perspectives with respect to the physical planet. Harvey argues that this process began at least as early as the advent of perspectivism in mapping and that time-space compression involves “...processes that so revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, *how we represent the world to ourselves*” (Harvey, 1989, 240, italics added). This analysis is complementary to the seminal work of Harold Innis (1951) in which he highlights the distinction between time-binding and space-binding media. For Innis, space-binding media brought with them very different configurations of knowledge and power, as well as a changed experience of place and community -- one that is oriented to the expansion of control over space rather than to a rootedness in place and its related history (Innis, 1951; see also Crowley and Heyer, in Innis, 1991). The ability of contemporary electronic media to overcome the obstacles of space brings with it what Shaun Moores (2004) has referred to (following Scanell, 1996) as “...the experience of simultaneity, liveness, and 'immediacy' in what have been termed 'non-localized'...spaces and encounters” (p. 21).

As I will argue, many domains within the discourses or stories of contemporary children’s culture constitute important examples of ways in which our “re-presentation” of the world to ourselves as smaller, more connected, seemingly more immediate, actually present challenges to a more holistic understanding of our place within nature -- one that might help foster creative environmental problem-solving. A key point is that, the stories found within the texts are inherently problematic, particularly since these begin within childhood texts. The intention of the research is to initiate increased discussion about children’s culture generally, and more particularly, its relationship to environmental practices.

### **'Meaning-Making' in the Digital Age**

At a general level, Ursula Franklin argues compellingly that our overall understandings of time are centered in nature, and furthermore that “time is at the centre of people’s personal and collective sense of identity” (1999, 148). She proposes that this “natural” sense of time gives us a connection to other people and to shared physical spaces and therefore provides us with our shared histories, our common knowledges. She refers to face-to-face and other “real time” communication as “synchronous” communication. Franklin argues that with the increasing popularity of what she terms “asynchronous” communication within the digital age, meaning and a sense of connection may be lost, destroyed (1999). Franklin is not op-

posed to using asynchronous interactions (such as e-mail, texting, and social networking) to *supplement* face-to-face communication. However, she argues that it is the *dominance* of asynchronous over synchronous interactions that is likely to lead to fundamental disconnections between individuals. She makes the point that when we experience so many of our human interactions in a manner unrelated to natural rhythms and time, we risk losing a sense of our community, culture, and history – and with them, our sense of connection to the living earth. And, she asks the following: “sequence and consequence are intimately connected in the human mind; can one let go of sequence and maintain the notion of consequence, let alone accountability?” (Franklin, 1999, 154). In other words, although we gain flexibility and convenience with the use of contemporary communication technologies, it may be the case that these tools are part of a set of cultural practices that may further disconnect us from a sense of responsibility towards each other, our communities, and even the planet (Bryant, 2007). This argument is relevant to the ideas with respect to children's culture that I set out below.

I should note that at the time that Franklin made these arguments, she was referring primarily to email technologies in her analysis of what she calls asynchronous communication. We now have communication technologies such as texting, and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, which may be used in a synchronous or "real-time" manner. However, psychologist Sherry Turkle (2010) has more recently argued very compellingly that texting and social networking have extended the very disconnection that Franklin describes. Turkle's research shows that contemporary communication practices do not live up to the promise of connection, and actually give users the impression of being "together" while actually leaving them profoundly alone and disconnected (2010). Therefore, I would argue that whether the communication practices are actually asynchronous or not, it is the nature of how we communicate today within the overall context of the digital era that leaves us at risk for the types of *fragmentation* and *disconnection* that blur our perceptions of human-nature relationships. This fragmentation and disconnection, that seem to be characteristic of the digital age, are reflected in the discourses with which I am concerned.

As I have discussed elsewhere (Bryant, 2007), another author who presents a complementary argument to those of Franklin and Turkle is Heather Menzies (1999). Menzies distinguishes between what she calls embodied forms of nature-centred time, social time, and technological time -- with embodied/nature-centred time being experienced as cyclical. She goes on to argue that even though the advent of historical/social time, primarily related to the introduction of the Julian calendar and linear time, brought with it changes to our experiences, a considerable connection between time and nature remained. With respect to the clock, Menzies argues that its use until recently tended to still remain “anchored in the rhythms of everyday life; synchronized still to bodily time” (Menzies, 1999, 70; see also Menzies, 2005).

We in the digital age now live in “technological time,” Menzies asserts – what she refers to as a “new context of time which is entirely named and engineered outside the frame of living tissue, in the physics of the microprocessors” (Menzies, 1999, 71). She concludes that “satellite communication cinches the globe into a single present moment and we're all sub-

tly hectored by its fast-forward pace of instant global connectivity.... Indeed, with global digital networks, the clock is no longer outside us.... We live in the clock" (Menziés, 1999, 71). Similarly, Stine Gotved (2006) reminds us that, "the dynamic time of the digital watch, forever oriented toward the new second, symbolically dominates the round-faced clock with its circular repetition of time" (p. 473). And, philosopher Stephen Bertman argues that, "today's electronic culture ... paradoxically returns its members to an even more primitive state by isolating them in the present. Even as it cuts humanity off from the age-old rhythms of nature, it erodes a cultural consciousness of both future and past" (1998, 178).

Reknowned Canadian environmentalist David Suzuki makes an argument that seems to tie together many of the ideas presented thus far. Suzuki purports that the fragmentation of our experiences within our highly-mediated contemporary society makes it difficult for us to make sense of our relationships to the natural world. In addition to the ways in which the mainstream media presents us with fragments of information about world events, and the ways in which digital communication proceeds in an often fragmented way, we are disconnected from nature through the urban nature of the experiences of most residents of the developed world (Suzuki, 2003). These highly mediated experiences erode our sense of place within history and thereby leave us with an absence of stories to reinforce our sense of place within the natural world more broadly. In other words, a key part of the technological trajectory of the past several hundred years has been the increasing capacity for humanity to separate itself from nature, to rely less and less upon natural rhythms. If we are indeed 'isolated in the present', as Bertman (1998) puts it, and living a highly present-oriented and mediated set of experiences, the possibility for an increased sense of responsibility toward nature seems less likely (Bryant, 2007).

The arguments of the above-cited authors are not meant to point to an ideal past era in which some perfect harmony existed between humanity and the natural world. For a number of centuries now, we have seen the human-nature relationship shift steadily toward the state that Menziés, Bertman, Turkle, Moores, and others describe. Much of this has had to do with our developments in and applications of technology. What we should note about our contemporary place on this trajectory is the ways in which individuals are at once experiencing an "overlying" of physical locations in terms of certain mediated experiences so that we may feel we are experiencing another location or event without being physically present (Moores, 2004), while nonetheless becoming increasingly atomized, with more and more fragmented experiences (Franklin, 1999). If Franklin (1999) is correct in her analysis of the relationship between sequence and humans' sense of consequence, and therefore responsibility, then we ought to be concerned about the ways we employ digital technologies and about what these practices might mean for environmental awareness and choices. Indeed, if our most fundamental sense of our place within nature and our relationship to natural rhythms are disrupted or diminished by the foregrounding of our asynchronous and/or mediated experiences, our sense of responsibility to the natural environment is very likely placed at risk (Bryant, 2007).

Thus, our dominant ways of "making meaning" complement complex social practices and result in humans finding it more and more difficult to assume responsibility for our im-

pacts upon the natural world. Assuming responsibility does not mean only making good individual choices, but also, and perhaps more importantly, being willing and able to apply appropriate pressure on policy-makers and corporate entities to bring about meaningful environmental progress (see Wall, 2000). The dominant discourses related to technological change found in advertising and popular culture more broadly, and the meanings produced, make it very difficult for us to ascertain the implications of our choices and actions. Many of the discourses related to technology and globalization tell us over and over that the world is shrinking, the world is at our fingertips, that it has become a small world or small planet. It can be argued that this type of discourse obfuscates the fact that the planet has not indeed shrunk and that what has shrunk is only, as David Harvey (1989) puts it, "how we represent the world to ourselves." In other words, if we understand the planet to be a smaller place, we, at an individual level, often behave as if it has. It is possible for us to establish both business and personal relationships in any location, and this leads to increased travel around the globe -- something we are able to do more and more easily. Moreover, particularly for the urban residents who make up by far the majority of the North American population, it is often extremely difficult to take responsibility for the environmental implications of our choices and actions. That is, within such a highly complex system, the impacts of our choices are highly obfuscated much of the time and therefore the disconnect between humans and nature is accentuated. We cannot understand our place within nature because we often cannot *see* it. And, this sense of disconnect threatens to erode any resolve to defend nature (Bryant, 2007).

In addition to studying adult news and advertising text, as others have done (see Babe, 2005; Jhally, 2010), analyzing children's discourses and related practices -- the ways in which North American children are introduced to our culture's environmental discourses -- provides insight into our overall cultural practices. While children learn about nature both at school and elsewhere, they are by and large exposed to a set of discourses or "stories" that contain both presences *and* absences that reflect the dominant discourses of the adult realm, as discussed below. What children are, and are not, learning reveals a considerable amount about our culture and its values.

### **Research Approach**

I have employed aspects of the method known as Critical Discourse Analysis to analyze various types of texts (including television programs and online video games) with which North American children commonly interact. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) allows the researcher to do a context-sensitive analysis, that takes into account the ways in which the discourse being considered is likely to be read by individuals, given their overall cultural context (Hocking, 1997). In addition to considering the texts as a whole first, I have focused specifically on the concepts of *framing*, *foregrounding*, *backgrounding/omission*, *connotation*, and *metaphor* from the analytical tools offered by CDA (Huckin, 1997; see also van Dijk, 1993, and Wodak, 2004). As a mean of analyzing the ways in which children's

discourses operate with respect to making sense of our relationships to the natural world, these particular concepts from CDA have proven very concise; I use the terms identified above in the following discussion to make clear how this method has under-pinned my overall analysis.

Three texts from within children's culture were analyzed in order to assess the types of popular content with which young children are engaging and to illustrate the types of "stories" young children are encountering. As Mira Moshe argues, technological innovations in television have made possible what she calls "time squeezing"; she explains that viewers are able to "zap" between channels and to accelerate the pace of their consumption, giving them a new type of control over their viewing (2012). Indeed, the control afforded in contemporary television viewing makes it akin to internet use in many respects. Similarly, Katharine Heintz argues that, "...digital convergence essentially removes the distinction between different media as content created for television can be viewed on a TV, a computer, an iPod, or a cell phone" (in Thorn, 2008, 21).

I have therefore chosen to analyze both television programming and online activities, since previous divisions between these media have indeed merged to a great extent. In the case of all three selected texts, their availability online has been the common thread. I have analyzed two television programs available on the American Public Broadcasting System (PBS); these were chosen for their focus on the animal world and for the fact that their target audiences are young children (under 10 years of age). The first, *Zoboomafoo*, was analyzed using program episodes available online (again, underlining the convergence referenced above). Sixty-five episodes of the show were created over two seasons. I chose ten episodes (five from each of the two seasons), and made the selections primarily based on what was available online at the time of the data collection. A number of episodes focused exclusively on domestic animals (and one on dinosaurs), and these were not considered relevant to the research since it would be less likely that these would, or could, make connections to nature. The second text, *Brilliant Creatures*, was analyzed based on seven of its facts sheets and episode summaries available on its website. More detail on the selection is provided below. I have also chosen the immensely popular online game, *Webkinz*, for the fact that it also targets pre-school and young school-aged children. Part of my interest in this research is in exploring just how deeply the discourses of time-space compression have permeated our culture -- that is, possibly right down to the very young child's early experiences with media.

While television viewing may not be by any means the dominant mode of entertainment for children in the contemporary online age, it remains one of the important forms of entertainment, particularly for very young children (Thorn, 2008). The types of television programming I have analyzed form part of the overall culture with which young children engage, and I have found that the "stories" found therein produce and reproduce the sense of time-space compression and related fragmentation found in the digital age. Moreover, most programs, including *Zoboomafoo* and *Brilliant Creatures*, have websites to complement and augment their on-air segments. Children are encouraged to visit these sites to play games, watch segments of the shows again, and/or print out episode summaries. Additionally,

many episodes of the programs can be accessed on-line (on sites such as YouTube), and this means that children engaged in the online world will continue to encounter these discourses in multiple ways overall (see Montgomery, 2007).

### ***Zoboosmafoo*: Time-Space Compression and Decontextualization**

One American children's program I have examined using Critical Discourse Analysis is called *Zoboosmafoo*, starring (adult) brothers Chris and Martin Kratt. Its website states that it is intended for pre-schoolers and young school-agers. Sixty-five episodes were made between 1999 and 2001 and the show remains in syndication on PBS Kids to the present, airing every day on most PBS stations. The venue for the show is a place called Animal Junction where the two hosts and a talking lemur puppet introduce viewers to a wide variety of wild and domestic animals who come into the Junction to meet them. They also take "instant" trips to distant venues to view animals in the wild.

I should note that this show is often described as educational programming and, overall, this type of programming is generally considered to be of good quality by many parents. Indeed, it does have important educational value – there are discussions of particular animals' specialized chewing abilities (in the case of llamas), or of the uniqueness of particular markings on individual animals (in their discussion of tigers), or the importance of night vision to some creatures (in an episode featuring jaguars and lions). Children are introduced to some of the wonders of the animal world through the various episodes, and this presents them with exposure to nature that they might not otherwise have, depending on their circumstances.

However, despite the presence of educational value for young children, in the episodes I have screened and analyzed,<sup>1</sup> there are also important omissions that may be considered problematic. For instance, there is a lack of substantive discussion of environmental issues that would be relevant to particular animals and regions of the planet; even if this was done in a fairly simple manner given the audience, it could add significantly to the environmental education provided to young children. Instead, the way in which many of the episodes are framed involves numerous problematic juxtapositions of unrelated ecosystems and their inhabitants, with the opening segment of every show serving as one of the best overall examples. In the introduction to each episode, while the theme song and the credits play, Chris and Martin Kratt are seen first following a ring-tailed lemur in the wild, then a herd of zebras, then black bears, as well as elephants, and an ostrich. All of these animals are confusingly juxtaposed and presented as if they might be in the same environment -- since the hosts are seen running with them, from one animal to the next.

While the type of quick editing found in the opening segment described above may be a very common style of presentation, and might be considered an appropriate way of providing an overview of the program, the types of juxtaposition seen in the opening shots are carried through all of the episodes I have analyzed -- the episodes exude a type of "child-friendly" time-space compression. This is evident in segments where a hedgehog, an armadillo, and a tiger are all in the Junction at the same time. In another episode, a domestic

dog, a family of wolves, and an elephant are all present at once. In a third, a lemur, bobcat kittens, lynx kittens, and silver fox kit all visit the Junction and are presented as content together. (I should note that this latter episode is entitled "Animal Daycare," which also seems a somewhat anthropomorphic metaphor to use.) Some might argue that this type of presentation of animals might be considered to be merely a zoo-like atmosphere in which similar juxtapositions are experienced; however, many would agree that children viewing animals in zoos also constitutes a problematic way of developing their meaning-making about the creatures of the natural world. It would certainly be possible to feature a variety of animals drawn from a common region or ecosystem in order to provide more holistic understandings of the creatures being presented. Instead, the zoo-like aspect of the presentations seems to be one of the common elements of the programming. As Huckin (1997) argues, Critical Discourse Analysis pays attention to how the text is likely to be read given the cultural context in which it circulates. Such an approach helps to problematize this type of presentation as one that might easily reinforce children's face-to-face experiences with zoos and other similar settings.

Additionally, even in segments where the two hosts cut to their "animal helpers" out in the field, the viewers are not told where they are located as they show, for example, a herd of bison they have just spotted. There is a lack of geographic and/or ecological *context* to the visuals provided; something as simple as what country the animals are found in could be made more clear to the young viewers. When the brothers go out into the field themselves to see wild animals or when they cut to a wild animal in their habitat, we are not given information about their locale or details of the state of their environment. Sustainability is never discussed, but rather backgrounded (to the point of omission in most cases). Moreover, what is foregrounded is the fact that the featured animals are interesting, intriguing, and/or fun. While, as Moshe (2012) would argue, viewers can accelerate the viewing rate and "zap" from segment to segment in any television programming, thereby bending the nature of time and space themselves, the story that is being produced and told (if viewed in its entirety) *could*, and I would argue *should*, account for issues related to time, space, and the environment.

Overall, there are three frames identified repeatedly in the analysis. These are: the irrelevance of distance in the presentation of animals and settings, the decontextualization of the various species being featured, and the lack of attention to issues of ecology and sustainability. In other words, issues related to space and time are mostly omitted in the story-telling about the various creatures. As well, the environmental implications of the travel involved in filming the animals are left unmentioned. Mirroring the "small planet" notion of adult discourses, the entire planet is made to seem just steps away. Moreover, the exotic is made familiar with little or no attention to the geographic diversity involved in the featured creatures' habitats. Furthermore, there is usually only minimal discussion of humans' responsibilities toward the creatures featured. While the programming is intended for young children, it seems inappropriate to underestimate their ability to grasp basic concepts related to the natural world and our place within it. Moreover, school-aged children also watch this programming, and could gain a considerable amount from a basic introduction to some of



the ecological issues I have highlighted. The introduction to the natural world provided by this type of programming seems problematic in terms of the meanings being produced with respect to our place within nature; as Bertman argues, the viewers are isolated in the present and cut off from the rhythms of nature (1998).

Again, I wish to stress that there certainly is value in this type of programming at some levels, but I wish to argue that the framing I have highlighted above make the overall effect of this set of discourses seem at least somewhat problematic. That is, these types of representations or "stories" must be understood within the *overall context* of fragmentation and disconnection associated with the digital age, along with the fact that these aspects of contemporary experience are being reinforced by a highly urbanized lifestyle. Given the context in which most children are being raised in North America, the framing, and in particular what is *foregrounded* and what is *omitted* from these discourses with respect to environmental issues, becomes critical.

### ***Brilliant Creatures: Nature as Dangerous***

Another relevant children's program is the British show *Brilliant Creatures*. The show's episodes were produced between 1998 and 2003 by The Foundation, and while it aired originally in the United Kingdom, it can be seen, like *Zoboomafoo*, in syndication on PBS in North America. It is aimed at slightly older children, approximately six- to ten-year-olds, and features on-set visits with a wide range of the planet's animals combined with at times sensationalized video clips of animals. While the animals are sometimes portrayed as merely interesting, in the case of segments on farm animals and domestic pets, many wild animals are more often featured as at least bizarre and often as highly dangerous. There are often repetitive close-ups of teeth (in the case of sharks and killer whales, for example), and claws (in the case of tigers and other big cats).

A review of the range of episode titles on the program's website reveals that the topics include: Fearsome Freshwater Shark, Buffalo Attack, Fear of Snakes, Close Encounters: African Elephant, and a sub-series entitled Brilliant But Deadly, which includes episodes on the Fat Tailed Scorpion, the Blue Ringed Octopus, the Stonefish, and the Indian Tiger. The *Brilliant Creatures* website features fact sheets based on their episodes that children can access and print out; seven of these summaries were selected and analyzed. These summaries of the programming provide a clear sense of how certain creatures are represented in the show; I have analyzed some of the summaries that present animals in a negative light. While certainly not all creatures are presented in this way, I have focused on these as a means of initiating discussion about aspects of children's culture that seem to set nature apart from humans. The "Brilliant but Deadly" series frames its presentation of the creatures, even within the series' very title, as fear-inspiring. Within that series, the stonefish is described as having spines so sharp "...they could even pierce a shoe" and, with respect to the sting: "People have been known to beg doctors to amputate their foot, just to ease the pain....time till death -- six hours or less." This type of portrayal is put forward in detail, despite the fact that on page four of the information sheet the reader learns that there have

only been five documented cases of death from this creature. With respect to the Indian Tiger, we learn that "in certain parts of India and Bangladesh rogue tigers actually hunt down and eat people" and that "human casualties have become a real problem." The tiger's teeth are described as "perfectly designed for ripping and tearing at flesh" and close-ups of the teeth are shown. We are told that an average of twenty people per year are killed by tigers, possibly by a very small number of tigers who are "repeat offenders." However, the omission of the multitude of ways in which humans are negatively affecting tigers' habitat and very survival as a species is noteworthy.

The Brilliant but Deadly sub-series is not the only place one can find such representations. The episode entitled "Close Encounter: African Elephant" features the story of a photographer who continued to photograph an elephant in South Africa, even after the elephant had shown displeasure with his presence. The photographer quips "I thought I'd just get a few more shots," and then found himself trampled. The segment tells us that "his bruised and battered body was lying in the bush for 90 minutes" before he got help, and photos are provided of his injuries. The elephant is portrayed as the aggressor, "one of the most formidable creatures on earth," -- omitted is the question of whether in fact the photographer should have been more respectful of the elephant's habitat.

Another segment about a bull shark attack on the Florida coast echoes the themes in the elephant story, in which the "ferocious" nature of the animal is foregrounded. We are told that "if you are swimming on the Florida coast, there's nothing to protect you from a shark attack." The feature focuses on one surfer being attacked and the "horror as she looked down to see her leg in the shark's mouth." Once again, we are provided with images of the scars on the victim's leg and we are told that "you can get some idea of how big the shark's mouth will have been to inflict that kind of damage." While sharks are responsible for only a handful of human deaths worldwide each year, humans are driving many species of sharks to the brink of extinction with estimates of between 75 and 100 million sharks being killed by humans each year (Hall, 2007; MacQuitty, 2008). It has proven very difficult to mobilize interest in the protection of sharks, perhaps in part because of the poor image they have been accorded in popular culture. This segment taken from within children's popular culture is an example of this problem; the "stories" we tell ourselves about the natural world have a tangible relationship to the actions we take or choose not to take (Bryant, 2007).

The foregrounding of the danger and ferocity of some wild animals (complete with clips focusing on huge teeth or claws and the damage they can do to prey or even to humans) alongside the omission of meaningful discussion of their importance within the global ecosystem is problematic. Moreover, framing terms such as "bizarre," "terrifying," "ferocious," and "deadly" are used repeatedly to describe the animals, and the style and tone of the discussion is often sensational and dramatic. The ways in which humans are in fact a much greater danger to these animals than they are to us is omitted from the discussion. The viewer is left with an "us against them" impression, one that certainly contributes to a culture that does not see itself as *part* of nature.

This aspect of children's discourses seems a reflection content analyses of news done in which Robert Babe found that nature was presented as dangerous 67% of the time while

humans are portrayed as a threatening to nature only 27% of the time (2005). The presentation of nature as dangerous involved viewing nature as a force that we humans need to tame or control more fully. How we frame nature, when we represent it to ourselves, is important in shaping our sense of our place within nature. It seems that Babe's findings in the world of adult discourses is being reproduced to some extent in the world of children's culture. Moreover, as in the case of sharks mentioned above, we may be unlikely to come to the aid of species in danger when they are presented to us as a threat to our own safety.

### ***Webkinz: A Lack of Process***

In addition to television programming, and the online integration of program-related websites, another aspect of children's culture worthy of analysis is that of online games. Considerable research has been done on this topic (see Gotz, et. al., 2005; Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan, 2004; Kline, et. al., 2003), but my research has focused specifically on *Webkinz*, since it is a popular game for *young* children, and therefore potentially part of the discourses encountered by the same children who might interact with *Zoboomafoo* or *Brilliant Creatures*. The site is one that illustrates some of the issues related to time/space that may accentuate our disconnect from nature. In order to play the game, a child needs to buy or be given a Webkinz stuffed animal that comes with an access code to log into the website and get started. Once they have registered their new toy (this process is called an "Adoption" and they can choose a name for their animal), their stuffed animal then appears as the character they will use on the site -- a sort of "overlaying of two places" (Moore, 2004) with the tangible stuffed animal being represented on the screen. The site revolves around KinzCash; players are allotted a modest amount at the outset, but then they must acquire more to feed and clothe their pet, and also to buy furnishings and accessories for the pet's home.

As the child plays on the site, they have a number of options to acquire more KinzCash. One of the pages lists ways to earn cash. They can: visit the employment office and get a job (and earn \$350 KinzCash immediately); play the Wheel of Wow (a casino-style game) and win cash; play at the Wishing Well (to win cash); answer trivia questions ("one of the quickest ways to make LOADS of KinzCash" according to the site); and play games in the tournament area and arcade. As Stromer-Galley and Martey (2009) discuss, the use of metaphor in online spaces enables the users to make sense of their activities because they mimic familiar places or behaviors. In the case of Webkinz, these activities may also be especially attractive to children because most of them are drawn from the adult world, and they may feel more "grown up" as they play the game.

Further, the synergy created by time-space compression through digital experience alongside the focus on consumption as pleasure is powerful. Children often have not just one or two of these pets registered but many, and they must continue to acquire enough money to take care of them all (buy food, toys, accessories, and a wide variety of outfits, etc.) and to furnish a separate room for each one. The emphasis in the site is very much on consumption as the main object of all activity. And, the way to be able to afford the most

consumption is through game-playing, which is presented as the easiest and most popular way to make the most money (as opposed to *earning* money). Although this is all virtual, the foregrounding of continuous consumption as pleasure for very young children is highly problematic in the context of an analysis of the implications of human behaviors for the environment (see Jhally, 2000). And, this combination of consumption with the possibility for instantaneous earning (read winning) of cash to spend seems to be training children up in the world time-space compression in which any sense of time-consuming *processes* to accomplish things is potentially lost.

One of the alternative ways that children can provide food for their pets is to grow a garden; they can purchase seeds and then plant a garden for their pets. They must water the garden (and weed it), but the interesting thing is that when they pour the water on the seeds or small plants, they grow almost instantly. The produce can be harvested within a few days and then fed to their pets. While it may not be reasonable to expect a highly realistic process for this type of platform (it cannot take months to grow the food or the child would lose interest), this type of representation of natural processes omits much of the meaning related to food and our relationships to it. Like Moshe's (2012) analysis of the acceleration of television viewing through the use of the fast-forward option, there is a fast-forwarding of this online activity that alters the meanings associated with it. It turns something that is as highly process-oriented and time-bound as growing your own food into an instantaneous win that is not much different than that of spinning the wheel on one of the games in other parts of the site.

Another aspect of the site is that the children can send messages and gifts to other players (if they have the other child's ID). Their pet receives an invitation to be "friends" with another pet, and they can accept or decline (in the same manner as when using Facebook or similar sites). This introduction to the world of junior online social networking is also training them, from a very young age, to join the world of asynchronous/mediated communication, and to understand the world in a way that is disconnected from the natural rhythms of space and time.

## Conclusion

If Ursula Franklin's (1999) assessment of the importance of sequence for our sense of consequence, and therefore responsibility, is correct, then an age of time-space compression seems to pose a serious challenge for environmental understanding and commitment in particular. That is, if our sense of sequence, and therefore our most primal understandings of our relationships to nature and natural rhythms, is disrupted or destroyed by the foregrounding of mediated experiences in the digital age, our sense of responsibility to the natural environment surely risks being diminished. While the programming and gaming analyzed herein are not the type of thing Franklin was directly referring to, they seem nonetheless to present the natural world to children without a sense of time, sequence, or consequence.

The programming and gaming addressed in this research constitute part of the discourses

within which very young children are growing up. The "stories" being told involve a problematic lack of attention to context, ecology, and sustainability. The television/online programming constitutes a version of time-space compression that presents the animal world to young children without reference to natural rhythms or processes and misses the opportunity to contextualize both wild creatures and habitats, and our relationships to them. Moreover, online games such as *Webkinz* present a world that revolves around consumption as pleasure (see Jhally, 1998), as well as around the acquisition of these goods through nearly instantaneous winning. Both the major focus on consumption and the lack of sense of process in acquiring the means to consume represent for children a world completely disconnected from time, space, or the implications of our actions. Further discussion and critical thinking are needed regarding the dominant meanings about nature that are being produced/reproduced for the next generation.

The way we "represent the world to ourselves" (Harvey, 1989) has implications for our understandings of our place within nature and therefore our sense of responsibility toward the environment. The world of children's discourses mirrors that of adult discourses in many ways, and both of these serve to reinforce, or at the very least obfuscate, many forms of environmentally destructive practices. This is not a question of the direct, immediate effects of viewing or playing, but, rather, one of the long-term outcomes of children's immersion within the dominant culture with respect to "stories" about nature. It may be difficult for children growing up in the cultural context described and analyzed herein to engage with environmental issues in a meaningful manner in the future. Indeed, more critical attention needs to be paid to children's cultural practices in order to understand how we might overcome this obstacle to positive environmental change.

## Notes

1. I reviewed ten episodes drawn from the two seasons produced. These were: #1 The Nose Knows; #12 Homes; #20 Animal Daycare; #25 Great Singers; #36 Hail to the Tales; #44 Snakebellies; #47 Pop Goes the Tiger; #53 Can You Feel It?; #59 H2O; #65 Messy and Clean.
2. At the time of the data collection, the program's website ([www.foundationtv.co.uk/brilliant-creatures](http://www.foundationtv.co.uk/brilliant-creatures)) provided a series of summaries of episodes and animal fact sheets. I reviewed the descriptions of these episodes to identify examples in which animals are portrayed in a sensational or dangerous light, such as the ones I have analyzed.

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