Virtual Literacies: Interactive Spaces for Children and Young People, edited by Guy Merchant et al. London: Routledge, 2014, 272 pp., ISBN 978-1-138-81059-4. (Reviewed by Zawan Al Bulushi).

Children and young people's participation in virtual online spaces has become a concern for educators and literacy researchers. Whether to consider these technologies as treasured elements in promoting literacy and to what extent they can be incorporated in school curricula is debatable in educational circles. It is this area that this book is dealing with. By drawing findings from a number of empirical studies conducted by the authors, the value of teaching and learning that takes place in these digital environments has been evaluated. It is possible to say that the book is distinguished by the positive tone that it advocates with regard to integrating virtual spaces in classroom practices, "It is now time for educators to harness such technology in meaningful ways before the *awesome disconnect* between home and school widens further" (p. 139). The editors: Guy Merchant, Julia Gillen, Jackie Marsh and Julia Davies are scholars in the field who themselves wrote extensively in the area of digital and virtual literacies. They, through the voices of multiple authors, collaborated in designing a body of work that explores and analyzes in-depth a number of widely used virtual spaces along with their implications in teaching learning settings. The content of this volume covers a wide range of new literacies that arise from children's engagement and interaction in everyday web 2.0 technologies.

The thematic division of the book takes the reader in a gradual exploration of meaning-making practices in virtual spaces starting with how online communities have developed through time (Part 1), then having these spaces being excessively used by young children outside school (Part 2), followed by perpetual inclusion in formal schooling (Part 3), and ending with the potential of these spaces to open gates for learning in this new media era (Part 4). It is no wonder then, given that these are social spaces, that the basic concepts of interaction, engagement, motivation and identity that are associated with these technologies have been examined from different perspectives. Based on these aspects, the contributors discuss and suggest means to cope with the challenges arise from diverse practices in virtual worlds.

The essence of the terms virtuality or virtual spaces is fundamentally driven from sociability-particularly presence in a social space. It is possible to say that in these spaces new forms of literacies evolve as a combination of communication and interaction. Pertaining this, Gillen and Merchant (Chapter 1) state issues related to the perceptions of differences between real and virtual and argue that these space are "an extension of the real world" (p. 10). Interesting is that the authors seem to be reasonable in making the connection when they claim that virtual worlds are rather genuine because children live in them as they are immensely engaged in activities in these worlds, hence, learning takes place. In a detailed analysis of this learning, the authors of chapters 2 and 3 remark on the knowledge that children acquire when engaged in social sites by looking at it from two different perspectives.

In the view of a sociocultural theory, Black and Reich (Chapter 2) offer helpful insights on how children learn in virtual worlds. By applying an educational lens, most games reinforce children's learning by offering a blend of instructions, texts, icons and video tutorials as well as providing feedback and scaffolding that contribute to users' cognitive development. Not all learning that happens in virtual playgrounds is constructive, Carrington (Chapter 3) moves beyond multimodality and sheds light on the kind of values and messages sent through some sites that shape identities and have a great influence on the childhood model that children adopt.

To explore the nature of literacy practices involved in virtual worlds outside educational settings, Beavis (chapter 4) designed a reliable model for video gaming literacy practices that serves two functions: (a) to show how players engage in the activities and what they do and (b) to be a source helping in curriculum planning and design. According to the author, a number of school-based projects that integrated online learning spaces in classrooms presented productive kinds of learning. In the same sense, Marsh (Chapter 5) reports on how her study of countering chaos in online games for children aged 5-11 revealed that children created a social order in a chaotic and complex game like Club Penguin. Another study that brought to light the productive nature of online literacies was the one conducted by McDougall and Kendall (Chapter 6) who analyzed Facebook posts of eight young people while playing a popular videogame, Grand Theft Auto IV, and provided insights on the interrelationship of progression through textual practices and agency.

Similarly, Colvert (Chapter 7) found that the little designers in her case study demonstrated skills, talents and knowledge particularly when asked to create rules for the game. In tracing children's activity in another project *@Classroom Tweets* (Chapter 8), it was apparent that the children acted more like contributors than consumers. In the same way, findings of projects in (Chapters 9 & 10) strengthen the contributors' arguments and reveal that children who are engaged in game designing are, in fact, putting into action decision making strategies and that literacy practices in schools should be relevant and extend students literacies outside school as well as to prepare critical thinkers to make reasonable decisions in the future.

The aspects of engagement and teamwork that are evident in the social media spaces are given a comprehensive analysis in Chapters (11-14). One key aspect is that the collaborative discussions that take place in virtual worlds are indeed authentic human interactions that should be considered as valuable literacies. From this it follows that such spaces can be used to integrate young people's interests and to bind the community through the negotiation of issues that concerns its members. The last part of the book reveals thirteen elements that were conveyed by children as important in engagement in online environments. These appear to be an appreciated resource for educationalists who are concerned with designing appealing gaming environments for children in formal settings.

Indeed, this book is a valued addition for academics, educationalists, teachers, students and researchers involved in the field of digital and virtual

literacies. It is an addition to other scholarly work in this area- including but not limited to Burnett et al (2014) and Marsh (2011)-concerning children and young adults. The authors in this book do not only report but evaluate different kinds of literacy practices in online programs and games using different methods and settings. It is clear that the book achieves its aim by providing an in-depth exploration in the current tendency of children and young people towards virtual literacies. As this book is a collection of field projects by scholars working on exploring digital practices in virtual worlds, it successfully presents readers with the learning potential of these technologies and the extent to which the virtual spaces can be included in classrooms. The diversity of methods used to explore issues in different projects makes this volume an important resource for those interested in virtual literacies. It also directs readers to new dimensions and opens up new ideas and possibilities for further research.

Given the promising quality of these virtual literacies, the authors were also concerned about the insecurities in this open world for children. Throughout the book, there exists reminders that the contributors are aware of the problems emerging as a result of children's engagement in online spaces; issues like e-safety, privacy, oversharing. It is interesting to bring to light one of the authors' views in relation to this. In chapter 8, Waller states that not via "applying blocks, filters and other controls" (p. 130) that this problem would be solved, but by "Embedding a Web 2.0 system into the everyday practices would allow pupils the opportunity to learn safe practices within online mediated spaces within a real and meaningful context" (p.130). Therefore, the best solution, which indeed backs up the authors' argument, would be to make use of the new media that offers a lot of literacy opportunities in educational settings.

The practicality of some virtual spaces, as revealed by the researchers, has enriched the volume with a wealth of suggestions for workable applications in school settings. As a central point, implications for teaching and learning is widely referred to throughout the book in almost all chapters. Given its importance, though in the concluding chapter the editors hinted in the direction, nevertheless, a more detailed section would have been worthy including. To be fair, some topics in pedagogy and methodology were tackled generally but there are far more implications that readers could infer from the projects' discussions. For example, in the final thoughts the editors place "the blurring of distinctions between reading and writing" as one of the characteristics of new literacies (p.254). Elaborating on such significant features in a separate chapter could have contributed to a great deal to the readers understanding of their applications in classrooms.

Yet, this book is informative and valuable especially for those conducting research in the area of virtual online spaces. Media researchers, teachers and students can find it very accommodating to their needs and research directions. This book is recommended to those interested to find answers to how to bridge the gap between children and young learners' continuously growing interest in virtual literacies in and out of school settings. Teachers would find innovative ways to approach their classrooms since it has practical applications of online spaces and a

wealth of methodologies. Future research in this field may explore other more current virtual spaces in different contexts and perhaps focus more on the adapted versions of these spaces in school settings that serve educational purposes.

References

Burnett, C., Davies, J., Merchant, G., & Rowsell, J. (2014) *New Literacies across the Globe.* London: Routledge.

Marsh, J. (2011. Young children's literacy practices in a virtual world: Establishing an online interaction order. *Reading Research Quarterly, 46* (2), 101-118.