Playing with pixels

C. Etengoff

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Childhood in the Digital Age

Playing with Pixels: Youth, Identity, and Virtual Play Spaces (extract)

C. Etengoff

Creating the virtual self

In addition to having the opportunity to construct their virtual play spaces, Teen Second Life users can design their virtual alter ego, commonly referred to as the avatar. The avatar body can be customized in a practically infinite number of phenotypic permutations ranging from height, weight, frame and figure, skin color, eye color, facial structure, gender, to fantasy animal avatar (Image 1: Avatar Skins in Second Life). Moreover, users often design or purchase unique clothing for their avatar that allows for the further individuation of their online persona (Etengoff, In Press).

Through the symbolic activities of graphic design and role-play, a Teen Second Life user can create an avatar that is seemingly identical to their physical world persona or one that represents a radically different or impossible alter ego. A clear illustration of the range of creative possibilities is provided by IslamOnline.net and Second Life's first Arab and Muslim virtual fashion show held on 21 September 2008. For example, the Second Life and IslamOnline.net fashion designers unconventionally modified the traditional women's chador to appear translucent, thereby revealing the female avatars' shapely legs beneath (Etengoff, In Press). Although garment, event, and religious identity were possibilities in Second Life, all would most probably have been strongly regarded as religiously taboo and boycotted by many traditional Muslims in the physical world. Such events clearly illustrate the mediational role of Second Life in the process of constructing an alternative socio-religious identity and community.

Identity exploration and social interactions in Teen Second Life

Image 1: Avatar Skins in Second Life © Max Burns
http://www.pixelsandpolicy.com/pixels_and_policy/2009/10/race-case.html

Teen Second Life users are able to use the virtual environment as a tool to facilitate a unique process of identity exploration and construction. Identity exploration within virtual space is particularly attractive as it is an anonymous process with limited physical world consequences and constraints (Suler, 2004). Indeed, the broad range of possible avatar designs and personas begs the question as to whether it is the virtual or physical world persona of youth that is their true self. In fact, the term avatar is derived from the worldly incarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu (Hemp, 2006); hinting at the question as to whether the physical construction of the self is only a modified incarnation of youth's authentic virtual identity (Etengoff, In Press).

While Internet users of all ages can engage in this process of identity exploration and experimentation via a variety of MUVE and MMORPG options, this process may be uniquely beneficial for the Teen Second Life users as a primary task of adolescence is the achievement of a distinct and unitary sense of self via identity experimentation (Erikson, 1963; Strasburg et al., 2009; Subrahmanyam et al. 2001; Valkenburg and Peter, 2008). Moreover, developmental psychologists have suggested that adolescence is a period in which multiple identities and selves naturally emerge due to increased participation in a variety of socio-relational contexts (see, for example, Harter, 1999). In addition, within the framework of Cultural Historical Activity Theory, the construction the self is operationalized as an agentive activity-based process that is subject to change in association with the demands of varying socio-relational contexts. This is of particular importance to Teen Second Life participants as the virtual environment offers an endless range of socio-relational contexts to explore.

In addition, it has been hypothesized that because adolescents have a greater control over their media choices than other socializing agents, their chosen media can become particularly powerful tools in their process of identity construction (Arnett, 1995). As such, online virtual play spaces can serve as both a forum to confront new identity possibilities as well as an opportunity to become comfortable with various aspects of one's chosen and actual offline identity. In light of this, educators have taken advantage of the unique properties of Teen Second Life to promote this process of identity construction and successfully encourage the development of a positive body image in adolescents via a series of workshops in which the adolescents created and discussed both their fantasy and actual body types via their avatar design (for example, Boss, 2009).

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Furthermore, psychologists studying the social interactions of MMORPGs [massively-multiplayer online role-playing games] have found that some players reported feeling 'more themselves' during virtual play as they were not judged by their appearance, gender, age, or other personal information (Cole and Griffiths, 2007). In addition, social and educational scholars have found that young women are able to explore different femininities and gender identities within MMORPGs than they would be able to comfortably experiment with in their offline worlds (for example, Kelly et al., 2006; Valkenburg et al., 2005). Similar results concerning identity exploration have been found for MUVEs [multi-user virtual environments]. For example, the psychologist Cabiria (2008) found that after adult lesbian and gay Second Life users engaged in online virtual world activities they reported an increased sense of belongingness, connectedness, improved well being, higher self-esteem, and optimism. Cabiria (2008) hypothesized that these positive outcomes resulted from an increased sense of authenticity related to the lived virtual experience. That is to say, the authentic self was able to safely emerge within the virtual space. Thus, the real world anonymity of the virtual self positions the avatar as the most obvious 'online manifestation of people's desire to try out alternative identities' (Hemp, 2006: 50), a developmental process that is particularly relevant to adolescents.

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