

Assignment #1

Title:

Create Your Character: A Study of Identity Through Online Avatars

Name: Matthew Cook
Student Number: 18352294
Unit Name: Social Media, Communities and Networks
Email Address: Matthew.j.cook@student.curtin.edu.au
Date Submitted: 3/04/22
Word Count: [2173]
URL (if applicable):

I declare that I have retained a copy of this assignment. I have read and understood Curtin University policies on Plagiarism and Copyright and declare that this assignment complies with these policies. I declare that this assignment is my own work and has not been submitted previously in any form for assessment.

_____ Matthew Cook _____

(Date/Signature)

(Typing your name in the space provided is sufficient when submitting online via FLECS-Blackboard.)

Create Your Character: A Study of Identity Through Online Avatars

Matthew Cook (18352294)

Stream: Identity and Online Advocacy

Argument: Online identities, particularly in relation to online avatars, are integral to individuals in postmodern society in constructing, maintaining, and experimenting with their identity.

Abstract:

This paper relates to the Identity and Online Advocacy stream but will be mainly focused on Identity. In this paper, it will be argued that technology, in particular the use of online video games, is paramount in the formation of a modern persons' identity as a matter of course. This paper will seek to understand the current literature and elucidate the formation and growth of identity through the use of avatars in not only a video game context, but a societal context as well. Concepts such as the idea of a 'performed self' popularised by Erving Goffman will be covered, as well as the rise of popular online content streamers known as 'Vtubers'. This information will then be used to convey the extreme importance inherent in online identities and make hypotheses about their future applications with regard to current trends. For example, how avatars will become further implemented into daily life in realms such as interpersonal relationships, entertainment, and professional development.

In the modern age, technology has been fully integrated into daily life. From smartphones in most pockets, to computers in schools, technology in all its forms lives and grows alongside us. One such area of int online video games and how they have evolved from tiny pixels blipping around a single screen, to wide-open worlds players can spend hundreds of hours in with characters of their own creation. Furthermore, the community that has sprung up around video games continues to push the boundaries of self-expression by utilising these online spaces to experiment with their identity. This can be seen through the evolution of creating avatars inside games, to using avatars in other forms, such as through "Virtual YouTubers" (VTubers). Such uses of online identities will only continue to grow as technology advances. As such, online identities have become just as important as offline identities – though likely much more.

In *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959) Erving Goffman argues that when in contact with others, all humans portray themselves in a myriad of ways like those that act upon a stage. Furthermore, Goffman states that in human interaction there is “a kind of information game – a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery” (1959, p.9). This information game takes place between an observer (or observers) and an actor aware of what their behaviours portray. As such, the actor attempts to conceal any aspects of themselves that they do not wish the audience to know while the audience attempts to discern them - all the while concealing their own aspects. This creates a kind of unbalanced equilibrium, where all parties are not necessarily being truly honest about themselves but are willing to subdue aspects of themselves to keep the peace. In terms of the offline space, we can consider this to be the “public face” of a person’s identity – inoffensive, mild, agreeable, and yet hiding deeper complexity. In terms of the online space at large, anonymity has given rise to a large level of personal freedom, where such societal niceties can be altered or forgone entirely. In the same vein, Qin and Lowe argue that “Online identities are situational selves, which are changing according to different online situations” (2021, p. 627). These situational selves allow online users to portray select features of themselves that they keep hidden in offline situations, allowing them to be more forthcoming with their deeper feelings. Considering this, online identities allow for users to express themselves in ways that they may not be able to offline for fear of social alienation. The anonymity online provides a useful resource for demonstrating and experimenting with aspects of identity. In the context of video games, this anonymity affords users the freedom to create personas or experiment with how they are perceived by others without necessarily having it reflect on their offline lives.

As video games have evolved, the ways users interact with them has changed. As such, due to the role of ‘avatars’, the impact of a video game can be much stronger due to the creation of a virtual identity. This virtual identity, created by a players’ own hand (and often to their liking), links together the identity of the player and the avatar on-screen. A player can create different avatars across many different games, each providing a slightly different experience or point of view. Creating an avatar as an idealised form of self is one way that engages players and provides them a space to experiment with their portrayal. The link between player and avatar is strengthened by what Yaman Terzioglu refers to as “immersion” (2015). In their dissertation they state: “Immersion plays an active role and is in relationship with our psyche, environment and means of interaction every time we step into an alternative, virtual reality that is crafted and embedded into different media like a book, a movie or a video game” (2015, p. 3). The role of immersion in this sense is to bring a players' online identity and their offline identity closer together, thereby blurring the lines

between the two so that various happenings in the game-world affect the player alongside the avatar. This phenomenon was predicted in 1997 by Janet Murray in her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*:

Immersion is a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water. We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus. (Murray, 1997, p. 98).

The immersion of players into virtual worlds as an advanced medium of storytelling brings about new forms of expression and new ways for narratives to influence those that partake of them. In this way, a players' virtual identity can influence and change their 'real-life' identity as they become exposed to more experiences by their personal connection with their avatar. Interestingly, Bullingham and Vasconcelos found through their study of users of Second Life, a popular online game featuring customisable avatars, that some users considered their online identity more real than their offline one. They state, "It was also seen that the process can be reversed, with the 'true self' being the persona in SL when the user's offline self is subject to family or societal pressure" (p. 10). This clearly shows that online spaces and the freedom that avatars provide in demonstrating identity are so important to some users that they consider it the only place where they can be comfortable with themselves. Due to this, the use of an avatar to demonstrate identity in a virtual space greatly impacts a user and shows the important role a virtual identity can have in a persons' life.

As a natural evolution of the avatar as a representation of self, "Virtual YouTubers" (VTubers) have risen in popularity from as early as 2007 with Hatsune Miku, a virtual singer whose songs are created through a software known as Vocaloid. Though not strictly a VTuber, Hatsune Miku paved the way for digital characters to be accepted in the mainstream and thought of as having their own personalities due to her widespread reach. When considering her rise to popularity, Guga states that Hatsune Miku is:

...not only a celebrity, but a collaborative platform which brought together many professional and amateur musicians, composers, visual artists, animators, etc. Their Miku creations lay the ground for her popularity, i.e. for her transformation from a voice synthesizer software to a collaborative social phenomenon and, finally, to her fame as a singer and performance artist. (2014, p. 37).

Conversely, a VTuber is an avatar that makes use of body tracking software to portray a certain appearance for the purposes of entertainment. VTubers create content in areas such as vlogging and video game streaming for an online audience, often creating a strong community culture around themselves. Some VTubers have entire teams of people devoted to them such as designers, voice actors, artists and so on; others are real people using face and body tracking software to essentially ‘paste’ their avatars’ body over their own while on camera. These kinds of VTubers have the option of not revealing information about their offline lives, allowing them to construct an entirely new identity in the online space. One of the first VTubers is known as Kizuna Ai, a virtual YouTuber created by a company called Activ8, who began a YouTube channel in 2016 (Hirano, 2018). According to a 2018 issue of *Streaming Media Magazine*, Kizuna Ai’s YouTube channel “has more than 1.5 million subscribers and is rapidly growing.” (p. 14). As of writing this paper in 2022, Kizuna Ai has 3.09 million subscribers on YouTube. This makes clear that these online identities play a prominent role in influencing many people through the blend of online and offline identities. For example, although Kizuna Ai is the face that viewers see and interact with, her creators are also sharing in these experiences and being influenced by them, leading to opportunities to collaborate with other companies and touch the lives of fans through entertainment. Due to this, the online identity created through VTubers displays another application of avatars creating new ways to interact with others in an online space and therefore proves the legitimacy of the concept of an online self being as important as an offline self.

It is clear that as technology improves, so will humanity's interactions with it. Ishiguro argues that avatar technology will integrate into society even more by 2050, stating: “everyone, including the elderly and people with disabilities, will be able to use avatars to expand their physical, cognitive, and perceptual abilities and therefore surpass the abilities of ordinary people” (2021, p. 651). This was also predicted by Murray in 1997: “...the new technologies are extending our powers faster than we can assimilate the change.” (p. 9). Ishiguro’s statements are considered “moonshot goals” (something to aim for but not necessarily achieve), however, it indicates that avatar technology is being considered, improved upon and integrated into society at an increasing rate. Regarding Ishiguro’s moonshot goals, one user would potentially be controlling many physical avatars providing hospital care, education, and remote work. In the future, Ishiguro aims to “realise a society in which human beings can be free from the limitations of body, brain, space, and time” (2021, p. 650). This will allow users across many different walks of life, ages, and abilities to become even more closely connected to each other through the developments of technology. Furthermore, Kucirkova, echoing the concept of Papacharissi’s ‘networked self’, states that “Our

identities – and especially the identities of younger generations – are enmeshed in digitized networks. This is not a passing fad but an expanding network that keeps growing with every single individual” (2020, p. 130). This demonstrates that when it comes to identity, the online space is already being regarded as a matter of importance; that what happens in online spaces does impact our identities and should be regarded with the same scrutiny as impacts on our offline identities. Relatedly, through observing players of varying skills playing the adventure video game *Oblivion*, Waggoner notes:

To a certain degree, each participant’s real-world personalities and identities were continually present in the diegetic decisions made by their avatars (whether the users were conscious of their presence or not). These connections allowed for easy identification between the users and their avatars as the avatars were continually imbued with the real-world identities’ characteristics, values, and preferences. (Waggoner, 2009, p. 159)

This observation shows that humans are already connected to their avatars in video games, making choices and demonstrating their personalities through their use. In this light, the future applications of avatars suggested by Ishiguro are not so impossible to imagine. As humanity moves ever forward, it can be predicted that not only will technology move alongside us, it will very likely outpace us. However, what remains to be seen is whether we consider the flesh and bones we are made from as intrinsically 'us' or if we will transcend our physical limits through the integration of technology.

From this investigation, it is clear that technology influences us greatly in a myriad of ways, not least the formation and experimentation of identity. From avatars to VTubers and beyond, the importance of an online, virtual identity is ever-increasing. It is only natural then, that online identities have become paramount to the creation of a person's identity. Not only that, but the role of the online identity has grown and will continue to grow into the future. The applications of avatar technology are just one of many ways users express themselves online. However, avatars are of paramount importance to users due to their features of anonymity and as vessels of self-expression. Some even use avatars to demonstrate aspects of their identities that they may not be able to do easily in their offline lives. Therefore, the impact of avatars on the formation of identity cannot be understated or underestimated.

References:

- Alamares, M. (2018, April/May). Real-time virtual characters and idols will create new forms of streaming content. *Streaming Media Magazine*.
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2030127722/fulltextPDF/B060AF602F294B4EPQ/1?accountid=10382>
- Bullingham, L. Vasconcelos, A. (2013). 'The presentation of self in the online world': Goffman and the study of online identities. *Journal of Information Science*. 39 (1). 101-112.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0165551512470051>
- Goffman, E. (1959). The presentation of the self in everyday life. In C. Calhoun, J. Gerteis, J. Moody, S. Pfaff, I. Virk (Eds.). *Contemporary Sociological Theory*. (3rd ed., pp. 46-61).
- Guga, J. (2014). Virtual idol Hatsune Miku: New auratic experience of the performer as a collaborative platform. In A. Brooks, E. Ayiter, O. Yazicigil (Eds.). *Arts and Technology*. (pp. 36-44). Springer. 10.1007/978-3-319-18836-2
- Hirano, T. (September 2, 2018). Activ8 raises \$5.4M from Gumi, makers fund; expands 'virtual YouTuber' business. *The Bridge Magazine*. <https://thebridge.jp/en/2018/09/activ8-fundraising>
- Ishiguro, H. (2021). The realisation of an avatar-symbiotic society where everyone can perform active roles without constraint. *Advanced Robotics*, 35(11). 650-656.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01691864.2021.1928548>
- Kucirkova, N. (2020). *The future of the self: Understanding personalization in childhood and beyond*. Emerald Publishing Limited.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=nlebk&AN=2569831&site=ehost-live>
- Murray, J. (2017). *Hamlet on the holodeck, updated edition: The future of narrative in cyberspace*. MIT Press.
https://books.google.com.au/books?id=QK4yDwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false
- Qin, Y., Lowe, J. (2021). Situational selves of online identity and rationality in choosing – More examples of the college students' identity in China. *Culture and Psychology* 27 (4).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X20976514>
- Waggoner, Z. (2009). *My avatar, my self: Identity in video role-playing games*. McFarland & Company, Incorporated Publishers.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/curtin/detail.action?docID=1593628>
- Terzioglu, Y. (2015). *Immersion and identity in video games*. [Master's thesis, Purdue University]. ProQuest. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/immersion-identity-video-games/docview/1727612255/se-2?accountid=10382>