"As Close to What I Look Like As Possible": Student Online Self-Representations Using Voki Avatars

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Part One: Introduction

In the public spaces of MMPORGs[1] or online chat rooms, people may easily assume personae that differ greatly from their "actual" selves. However, in the more private spaces of online and hybrid classrooms, what happens to those online identities? I had my online and hybrid composition and American Literature courses from 2008-2010 (with 149 students total) create Voki avatars (done at www.voki.com) as a means of introducing themselves to the class. Students could make the avatars look however they wanted and use backgrounds and colors of their choice. Since I was curious as to how my students decided to represent themselves in online spaces with the use of avatars, I decided to conduct some informal qualitative research of my own to learn about their online identity construction. During the Fall 2010 semester, I decided to look for patterns in terms of how the students represented themselves and their worlds; to do so, I examined the avatar creation of each individual student out of the 149 mentioned above. The students' choices revealed that most students chose to represent themselves as real, non-famous people in either natural or city settings; it was rare for them to choose interior spaces as backgrounds for their avatars. The students also indicated that they wanted to create avatars that resembled their own appearance, personality, values, and lives. Joy's[2] opinion was quite typical: she insisted that she wanted her avatar to look "as close to what I look like as possible. No BS." It was important to her to use her avatar to represent her real, true self.

My work also resulted in several other noteworthy findings. Female students, in particular, were four times as likely as male students to claim that they wanted their Vokis to resemble them physically. Also, a disproportionate number of hybrid students had trouble posting the Voki avatars as well as problems explaining their reasons for their appearance.

Overall, my research findings contradict the pervading belief that online spaces are public spaces for "play" where identities shift easily through a "carnivalesque discourse" (Rouzie 251-99); it shows that in the more private environment of a classroom management system (such as Desire2Learn, used here), students may focus more on larger rhetorical purposes, such as on "accurately" introducing themselves to their peers online. Ironically, the students in this study seem to regard their online classroom environment as a place for the performance and/or representation of reality as they know it rather than a place for identity play.

Part Two: Literature Review

Thus far, most discussions in peer-reviewed journals of the use of avatars in writing or composition come in the context of discussions about "gaming" or "games" in composition. Moberly focuses on the "highly symbolic constructs" of which games are composed and stresses how gaming has elements of composition within it. Colby and Colby celebrate the use of "game play" in the writing classroom, showing how students may use the game World of Warcraft to compose "self-determined, rhetorically focused" writing projects. Some online articles mention Vokis more specifically. For example, Helen Otway points out these advantages of using Vokis in the classroom:

1. Students can create avatars that are similar in looks or personalities and record a message that tells about themselves.
2. Students can exchange these avatars with e-pals either within their own setting or anywhere in the world.
3. Students can generate questions to ask their avatar e-pals.
4. ESL (English as a Second Language) students can use the speaking avatars to practice and listen to their speech. They may use the computerised <*sic*> voice first then record their own voice when they feel more comfortable. Writing, reading and pronunciation are all practiced <*sic*>.
5. Students can create an avatar that resembles a character from a story, add a setting and give it speech. The speech could be from the story or a creative point of view (POV) from the character on an event.

According to other teachers, Vokis allow shy students to speak up (Picardo), and they "create a whole range of new opportunities for language teachers wanting to extending their pupils' speaking skills in a fun and engaging way" (Dale).

So, to summarize, most discussions of avatars and/or Vokis discussed them in the context of either (1) games/gaming theory in composition or (2) what Vokis can do for language arts students. However, none of the studies that I found examined Vokis as tools for student introductions. My research, on the other hand, suggests that Vokis can be used as a means for students to present their "real selves" to their online or hybrid courses. By "real selves," I refer here to how students authentically view their own individual personae as students: their outward appearances, their likes and dislikes, their values, their careers, their majors, and even their favorite pastimes.

Part Three: Methodology

Between the Fall 2008 and Summer 2010 semesters at Century College, 149 students from my Composition 1, Composition 2, and American Literature: Colonial to Civil War classes posted (or tried to post) avatars to the Discussion Board in order to complete an introduction exercise that I gave them. About half of these students were completely new to online coursework, and several expressed anxiety (through e-mails sent to me) about problems they had with the assignment. To assuage their difficulties, I gave them very specific instructions about how to complete this task by essentially walking them through the avatar-creation process available at the voki.com website. I told the students that the avatars could look *any way they wanted*, and I pointed out the option that they could include their own voice with the avatar or else select a voice from the options given by the Voki software. I stressed that the message delivered by the Voki should be short and simple, just a greeting such as "Hello."

In addition to the Voki they had to create, students in these classes needed to answer a series of questions about themselves and their lives. These questions included the following:

- What's your name?
- What's your major?
- For how long have you been at Century?
- What are your hobbies?
- Have you taken courses online before?

I told the students that they did not have to answer all the questions, but enough to meet the required word count for the introductory assignment. Students also had to reply to the Vokis and messages of at least five other students in the class. And I did require that they address the issue of WHY they created their Voki the way they did. As an option to completing the Voki, I also mentioned that students could post a video of themselves answering the questions, and that I would give them extra credit for doing so (oddly enough, only a couple students opted for this option).

On the whole, though, in order to earn the four points for the assignments, students had one week to (1) create the Voki; (2) answer the questions in writing; (3) reply to at least five other students; and (4) meet the required word count with relevant content.

Part Four: Results

"Real People"

An overwhelming number of students chose to represent themselves as "real" individuals. While the students could have chosen to represent themselves as monsters, cartoon characters, animals, fairies, or even famous people, an overwhelming 88 out of 149 students (59%) chose to represent themselves as "real," non-famous human beings, with clearly defined facial features. Even though some of these features that they created were a bit cartoonish in nature, such as eyes that resembled anime characters or overly long swan-like necks, most of the "humans" looked like people we'd see every day walking down the street. By contrast, only 6 out of 149 students represented themselves as famous people (4%), and only 13 out of 149 decided to represent themselves as cartoon people (8%). Only 6% of the students (9 out of 149) chose an animal Voki to manifest themselves to their classmates and teacher. 20% of the students (30 out of 149) had no Voki avatar posted at all (even though not responding was not a given option!). So even though students had the opportunity here to play with their identities and make amusing choices about how to represent themselves online, they tended to play the situation safe and be more concerned with representing their own individual realities.

Exterior Settings

A majority of the students in this study also chose outside settings for their Voki avatars. In fact, 80 out of 149 (54% of the students) chose to place their avatars in an outdoor setting. 58 of the 80 chose some sort of nature or natural background (such as falling leaves, rain, snow, or sunshine), and the other 22 chose to show a city or urban background (such as skyscrapers, buildings, shops, big cities). By contrast, only 11 out of 149 (7%) represented their avatars in an interior space, such as a bedroom, a classroom, or a dance club--and 10 of the 11 students who placed themselves in an interior space were female. Only one male student out of 149 represented himself as being in an interior space.

"She Looks Like Me"

The students' responses further indicated that female students were over four times as likely as male students to cite similarity in appearance as a reason for representing their avatar the way they did. Only 12 male students made a remark about having a need to make their avatar look like them, whereas 51 female students made a similar remark. The female students often wrote things such as "I made my avatar as similar to me as I could," "My avatar does actually look like me," "I chose my avatar because she looks sassy and I generally look sassy

myself," or "My Voki is the closest representation of myself I could find." In contrast to these remarks about the need to represent themselves *as they are* physically, the males in this study tended to make more remarks about *what they do or value*. One male student wrote that he chose to make an Uncle Sam avatar because he is "very patriotic and . . . love<s> this wonderful country we live in." Even when they did make conscious attempts to create avatars that represented themselves, the male students in this study tended to make more comments about the avatars fitting with their personal interests rather than how they appeared physically. One student wrote: "I chose a martial arts uniform for clothing to represent taekwondo"; another explained that he chose a wizard because he loves "fantasy books and games."

Problems from the Hybrid Students

I also noticed that the students who were taking the class on a hybrid[3] basis (partly face-to-face, partly online) struggled with successful completion of this introductory assignment. Many of the hybrid students either had problems posting their Voki avatars to the "Discussions" board in Desire2Learn or gave very strange reasons for why they created their avatars. Out of the 30 students who failed to post an avatar, 12 of them were hybrid students. Thus the percentage of hybrid students who did not post (12 out of 40, or 30%) was almost twice as high as the percentage of totally online students who did not post (18 out of 109, or 16%). One female Comp 2 hybrid student wrote, "I tried to do the Voki thing but it didn't want to work with me so ~ no Voki <*sic*>." In addition, 20 of the 40 hybrid students (50%) seemed to skirt the question involving the reason for the representation of the Voki avatar. These 20 students either claimed they had no reason for representing the Voki as they did, provided a silly reason, said that they did it just to be funny, or provided no explanation whatsoever. For example, one male Comp 2 hybrid student created an avatar of an Alec Baldwin-like figure with sunglasses and stated as follows: "I was just having fun with the avatar—no real reason for making him that way."

Part Five: Discussion

My research here contradicts the common belief that online spaces are spaces for "play," where members of those online spaces will do their best to mask their identities at all costs. While this may be true when playing online role-playing games such as World of Warcraft (WoW), or chat rooms where people assume particular names indicating their interests or proclivities, my research here indicates that when people—students—are assuming an academic role, they may be more concerned with accomplishing the particular rhetorical task assigned (in this case, introducing themselves to the class) then on playing with or hiding their "real" identities. In fact, in these online/hybrid situations, students have an added impetus to make themselves as "well-known" as possible to their peers: this exercise represents one of the few times during the semester in which they have the opportunity to connect personally with their peers online. It therefore stands to reason that they would want their peers to know what they look like and activities that they enjoy.

Part of this desire for authenticity comes in the form of students placing themselves in outdoor settings rather than interior spaces. As active young people, they likely desired to show themselves in the worlds they love best: urban spaces, beaches, parks, or nature settings. They were showing their classmates that they do have identities beyond the (often stifling) spaces in their world, such as classrooms or libraries. They wanted to show themselves as fun, interesting individuals. It is noteworthy that only one male student represented himself as being in an

interior space; this suggests to me that the young males in my class see themselves as living their lives outside, beyond the classroom walls, or even the walls of their home. They are clearly buying into the American ideology of men as conquerors, as go-getters, as doers.

Another gender difference in this study is also noteworthy. As stated earlier, the female students were over four times more likely than the male students to want to create a Voki that resembled them in appearance in some way. The male students, on the other hand, tended to identify with their Vokis through what the Voki avatars were *doing*, rather than what they were *showing* through appearance. This finding certainly reflects a pervading social ideology that stresses women should care more about their appearance than men do; we find this ideology reflected in our daily media, particularly the incessant television advertisements about dieting, which focus on women. From a standpoint of performative theory, performing "female" means performing a beautiful outer appearance; it therefore stands to reason that women in our culture are more appearance-centered than their male counterparts. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*, "one is not born, but, rather becomes a woman" (301). Part of this "becoming" involves a performing of the characteristics that a culture considers female or feminine, including thin, beautiful looks, as shown to us by the visual media. Men, on the other hand, are more often judged for what they accomplish, not how they look: they have long been expected to be the breadwinners of their families, and they also define themselves through the activities that they perform.

It also stands to reason that the hybrid students would have more difficulties with the assignment than the totally online students would. As hybrid students, they likely have not spent much time negotiating online discourse as totally online students have. In fact, at my college, many hybrid students often sign up for these classes not even knowing that the class met in this format: I have seen this many times in my own classes. On the other hand, with almost no face-to-face time with their instructor, online students have a better sense of what to expect when they are signing up for their classes. They seem to understand that they need to be highly motivated, organized, and independent in order to succeed. Hybrid students, though, tend to be confused about how to define their "hybrid" class and also tend to need much more guidance within it.

Most of the hybrid/blended students in this study were ostensibly the most advanced (Comp 2) students, who, unlike the literature students, are required to take Composition 1 as a prerequisite to the course; these are the students who should have had, ideally, the most experience with writing and/or with computers. However, the level of student turned out not to be a major factor in this study; instead, the type of class (online or hybrid) the student took part in mattered much more. Totally online students tended to have a much better grasp of what they were doing.

Part Six: Conclusion

My research indicates that, when given a specific rhetorical task to complete in an online assignment, students will focus more on representing themselves authentically than on using the online world as a world for "play." Other findings of the study included a desire for students to represent themselves in exterior setting, female focus on outward appearance, and difficulties from the hybrid students in completing the assignment successfully. This study contradicts the pervading ideology that the online world is a place for freeplay and role experimentation. Since these students were told "to introduce themselves," they wanted to show other students what they were really like: their appearance, their values, and their likes and dislikes. Some of aspects of this authenticity included women's desire to focus on their

appearance and an overall desire from the students to show themselves in settings that they like best: outdoor settings. Furthermore, perhaps we should not be surprised with the difficulties of the hybrid students; since they spent less time negotiating online spaces in my course than my fully online students did, they were likely less familiar with online literacies. Perhaps as we move further and further into the twenty-first century, we will see more collapsing of boundaries between online worlds and non-online worlds, and therefore we should not expect different identities to be performed in these two distinct discourse communities as much or for students to struggle as much with online discourse as the hybrid students did in my classes. Due to the increasing ubiquity of online learning, differences in face-to-face and online identities in the classroom may abate, and all students may become more familiar with online literacy tasks.

Notes

1. An acronym for "Multi-media online role-playing games."
2. Joy is not the student's real name.
3. These are often referred to as "blended" courses, too. In fact, MnSCU refers to them this way instead of "hybrid" courses, but I have seen them most often referred to as "hybrid" in online learning scholarship, so I am trying to be consistent with that terminology.

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