Games and Culture

''Blacks Deserve Bodies Too!'': Design and Discussion About Diversity and Race in a Tween Virtual World

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Abstract

In this paper, we investigate racial diversity in avatar design and public discussions about race within a large-scale tween virtual world called Whyville.net, with more than 1.5 million registered players of ages 8–16. One unique feature of Whyville is the player's ability to customize their avatars with various face parts and accessories, all designed and sold by other players in Whyville. Our findings report on the racial diversity of available resources for avatar construction and online postings about the role of race in avatar design and social interactions in the community. With the growing interest in player-generated content for online worlds such as *Teen Second Life*, our discussion addresses the role of avatars in teen/tween identity development and self-representation, and the role of virtual entrepreneurs and community activists in increasing the diversity of avatar parts available.

Keywords

race, avatar, virtual world, identity, participatory culture, tweens, adolescent development

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Introduction

> Hello I'm Kerri_87 reporting live at Whyville .... (M)ost black faces don't have
> bodies or if they do have bodies, they are white. Now I'm not saying that anyone in
> Whyville is exactly racist, but we do have the tendency to only make bodies for white
> faced avatars. What I'm saying is that there are faces other than white ones and we
> shound (sic) remember that. I am trying to produce a whole line of products for black
> avatars and I would appreciate it if some of you out there would help. I already have
> some people working on designs but we need more! If anyone could possibly spare
> some clams to give to this project or make a piece yourself, please contact me about
> it through Y-Mail. So if you are donating clams or making a piece I can record it so
> people will get the proper credit. Please Please Please think about this cause and see
> if you can support it!

This message was posted on June 1, 2000, in a newspaper article within Whyville.net,
a virtual world with over 1.5 million registered players between the ages of 8–16.
Kerri_87 echoes an all too familiar criticism of the Internet in her complaint about the
disparity between White and Black faces in Whyville. The absence of minorities in the
Internet was originally framed as a "digital divide" (Curlew, 2005) between those
with access to computers and the Internet and those without access. More recently, this
difference has been recast as a "participation gap" between those that know how to
produce and contribute to online content and activities and those who just browse and
surf along (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2006). In fact,
Kerri_87's observation captures both aspects: not only are there a limited number
of players representing themselves as Black within Whyville.net but, more impor-
tantly, there is an inconsistency in that "most black faces don't have bodies or if they
do have bodies, they are white." Not having access to matching body parts for your
avatar face is no small matter because limited choices in how to create your virtual
self not only affect your representation of who you are or desire to be but also influ-
ence your participation in the community, as those without matching bodies stand out
among other players.

In this article, we will address issues of race, identity, and virtual representation of
self by examining avatar designs and public postings in Whyville.net. Whyville offers
a particularly promising context in which to examine racial self-representation because
it is part of a new genre of virtual worlds that rely heavily on player-generated content.
A small number of previous studies have documented racial stereotyping found in the
available avatar choices offered within commercial games (Everett, 2005; Leonard,
2003). Because these studies were set in games that had very limited design choices,
their focus was not on player agency in self-representation but on the gender and racial
stereotypes embedded by professional game designers (Taylor, 2003).

In online worlds such as Whyville and *Teen Second Life*, where players them-
selves are responsible for designing all the avatar parts, a critique of available
parts goes beyond leveling charges of stereotyping in the game industry and

instead can be a critique or call to action for the player community itself, as in Kerri_87's article. In addition, tweens have a public forum in *The Whyville Times*, Whyville's online weekly newspaper, to present their positions about race in avatar design and their experiences with others while playing as White and non-White avatars. These discussions come for tweens at a particularly critical time period for exploring and trying to define their own sexual and racial identity (Kroger, 2000; Phinney, 1989). For this reason, the representation of self with textual and/or graphical resources has significance for their identity formation (e.g., Gee, 2003; Turkle, 1984, 1996).

However in the world of massively multiplayer online games and virtual worlds, where so much tween networking and communication takes place, we know little whether anything about race affects the participation and experiences of players. The focus of our article is to cast a more systematic look at racial diversity in the design of and discussions about avatars within Whyville.net. We investigated public postings in *The Whyville Times* between 1999 (when the site was launched) and 2006, analyzed a sample of all available avatar parts in 2006, observed a 2006 community event related to racial representations within Whyville.net, and studied comments about race in an after-school club that played on Whyville.

Background

Early debates about the Internet promoted a vision of an online world where class, race, and gender would not matter (e.g., Tapscott, 1998), but recent discussions have become more attentive to the many different ways these issues do, in fact, often come into play in a way that affects player's experiences and participation. The research literature on race in cyberspace, however, is surprisingly limited. Unlike gender issues, which have received a more extensive treatment (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Kafai, Heeter, Denner, & Sun, 2008), the issue of race is only now beginning to attract attention. Nakamura (2001, 2007) and others have argued that the Internet and games, like all other media, mirror the racial stereotyping found in society. Comparisons of monitored and unmonitored chat rooms found that teens weave racial references, slurs, and identifiers in their online conversations (Tynes, 2004).

Most discussions about race have been in the area of player representation. Several researchers have studied how player figures provided in commercial video games embody racial stereotypes. For instance, Everett (2005) investigated the play qualities that were associated with particular game protagonists in *Ready to Rumble Boxing*, a console game for Sega and Playstation, and pointed out how these matched prevalent racial stereotypes. Leonard (2006) provided a similar analysis for the popular game *Grand Theft Auto III*. Our investigation taps into a new area of virtual worlds such as *Teen Second Life*, which are driven by player-generated content and therefore unlike the more commonly studied game worlds such as *World of Warcraft* (WoW), where the company's designers provide avatars imbued with different powers whose looks can be customized within a few set parameters. Race has rarely been discussed in the context of games such as WoW; in fact, if and when it comes up, it is

typically a reference to the fact that many of these game worlds are populated by "fantasy races" such as elves, orks, and healers (Yee, 2006).

One of the reasons why player-generated avatars might lend themselves to meaningful considerations of race is because, as Kolko (1998) proposed, "virtual identity creation and its interactions in games can be considered a form of autoethnography in which the player explores both real and imaginary relations of power and culture" (p. 255). Such a view of the potential significance of avatars is in line with theories about the role of identity in online game play developed by Gee (2004). Gee suggests that we need to distinguish between real, virtual, and projective identities when discussing the role of online worlds in identity construction. Gee describes the "real" identity as who you are as a person off-line and the "virtual" identity as the avatar figure that you select or create online. The "projective" identity is produced in the interaction between your "real" and "virtual" identities and reflects what you become in your avatar interactions. For instance, even if two players choose the same avatar offered from a set in a game, chances are that during customization, they would select different powers and properties for their characters, creating different virtual identities. And even in the unlikely event that two people do create similar avatars, invested players will embody their avatars differently as they develop connections to their characters, thereby creating unique projective identities.

In recognizing these distinctions, it becomes clear that what we see players do and say online is a complex interplay reflective of past experiences, current interactions, and projected desires. The best example of this interplay can be found in an autobiographical essay written by always_black (2005) that reported on his interactions with another player in a dueling game *Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast*. His opponent understood his screen name always_black as a marker of race, and after insulting him in chat mode with slurs, asked him to "bow, nigger, bow," suggesting a racial stereotype of subservient blacks. While the British writer and game journalist who shared these experiences in his essay chose the name always_black for reasons not related to his race, his experience demonstrates how people read a variety of information presented in online avatars as racial markers and act accordingly.

We know from prior research (Kafai, 2008) that appearance and communication are central activities for Whyville players. In this study, we wanted to examine the ways in which issues of race and diversity were articulated through appearance and communication in Whyville, focusing on three distinct lines of investigation: public postings, available avatar parts, and player experiences. These three interests allowed us to pursue the possibilities and limitations in racial representation based on available face parts; how race was discussed in the public forum of Whyville; and what kinds of issues of race affected players on a day-to-day basis.

Context and Approach

Whyville.net is a virtual world with over 1.5 million registered players that encourages youth ages 8–16 (tweens and teens, with an average age of 12) to play

Figure 1. Beach in Whyville. ©Numedeon, Inc.

casual science games to earn a virtual salary (in "clams"), which youth can then spend on buying and designing parts for their avatars (virtual characters), projectiles to throw at other players, and other goods such as cars and plots of land. The general consensus among Whyvillians (the citizens of Whyville.net) is that earning a good salary and thus procuring a large number of clams to spend on face parts or other goods is essential for fully participating in Whyville (Kafai & Giang, 2008). Social interactions with others are the highlight of life in Whyville for most players and consist primarily of ymailing (the Whyville version of email) and chatting on the site. Chat takes place in many dozen public and private locations in the virtual world of Whyville, where players are visible to each other on the screen as floating faces, typically with shoulders and chests (see the picture of the Beach in Figure 1). Because player-created faces are the primary representation of one's presence on Whyville, looks are very important. Looks also demonstrate a player's tenure on Whyville and relative experience level; new players stand out as smiley faces, and one of the first tasks newcomers take on is creating a personalized face like those worn by more experienced players.

We used the following data sources to examine the role of race in avatar construction in Whyville: a content analysis of articles published in *The Whyville Times* on the topic of race in avatar creation; an assessment of the face parts created by Whyvillians; participant observation and document analysis related to a recent Whyville community event; and videos of an after-school club that played on Whyville in 2005.

Content Analysis of Newspaper Articles

Public postings allowed us to study how issues of race in avatar design were brought up for discussion in the broad audience of Whyville. Using *The Whyville Times*' search tool, we searched for articles that included any of the words "race, ethnicity, Black, White, African-American, Caucasian, Latino, Latina, Asian, and Asian-American." After a closer examination of the content returned by these searches, we identified 16 articles that discussed race in avatar design, which divided into three major themes: postings about the limited number of non-peach face parts available, experimentation with avatars of different races, and comments on the practice of assigning blank peach faces to newcomers.

It is important to clarify that these 16 articles were not the only Times' articles to deal with race in a general sense. Like most other weekly newspapers, reporting in *The Whyville Times* tends to focus on to real-world events in the United States and around the world, so only a small subset of articles report directly on events and issues within Whyville itself. Our search returned more than 100 articles that dealt with race in real-world contexts, such as poems praising diversity or articles about the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In keeping with our focus on virtual and projective identity construction within a virtual world, only articles about race and representations of race within Whyville.net were part of this analysis.

Assessing Race in Avatar Parts

The number and variety of face parts available to create avatars provide a good indicator of the expressive resources at hand for players to create virtual identities in Whyville. Akbar's, the online face parts mall in Whyville, offers the option for face part buyers to shop by category. We used this embedded category structure to organize our search for heads and bodies in different colors. In September 2006, Akbar's offered 137 blank heads designed to serve as a backdrop for putting together your own unique Whyville face and 743 bodies (torsos complete with clothing) to complete the look. All these parts were created by Whyvillians. Looking only at skin colors that were available naturally (i.e., we did not count or study fantasy skin colors such as blue, white, or bright orange), we divided available blank heads into 4 color categories. To confirm that our visual judgments of peach, brown, olive, and yellow colors did not have overlapping boundaries or inconsistencies, we used Adobe Photoshop to assess the red, green, blue (RGB) value for each shade of head and checked that the numerical parameters for what we had labeled peach, brown, olive, and yellow face parts did not overlap. We then captured screenshots of all the non-peach heads and bodies and collected information on the name and manufacturer of each face part.

Observing Community Events in Whyville

What came to be known as the "bluebie invasion" of May 2006 was the culmination of an ongoing debate about the skin color choices offered to brand new members of

Whyville. We present results from participant observation and document analysis of this community event sparked by debate over the face parts assigned to new members before they were able to customize their look.

Observations of an After-School Gaming Club

To look at how discussion of race and racial self-representation emerged as tweens interacted with each other in the context of building their avatars and doing other activities in Whyville, we examined videotapes of an after-school gaming club where 20 tweens ages 9–12 came to play on Whyville for an hour most days after-school. Roughly equal numbers of boys and girls from African American, Asian, Latino, and mixed ethnic backgrounds, most of whom were new to Whyville, participated in the club. They distributed themselves among 10 computers, often sharing computers or wandering around the room talking to others. The club quickly became loud and lively as participants began to shout advice to each other, arrange parties on Whyville, and critique each other's avatars (Kafai, 2008). We collected two videos per day of the club, focusing on two or three members sitting next to each other at computers. Videos were logged, noting activities about once per minute, and all conversations about race or ethnicity were transcribed. We analyzed videotaped conversations about race in the gaming club along the following dimensions: (a) occurrence of race-related talk; (b) the topic and context of such talk, and (c) linkages between online and off-line contexts for discussing race.

Findings

Public Comments About Race

Since the opening of Whyville.net in 1999, Whyvillians have posted over 9,000 articles in *The Whyville Times*. Although the 16 articles about race in avatar design which we identified represent a very small subset of the public discourse within Whyville, they are important because some of them culminated in a significant community event—the bluebie invasion—which will be discussed shortly. Articles for *The Whyville Times* are submitted by Whyvillians and then selected for publication by the paper's editor, an employee of the company that owns Whyville. So although, as the discussion below will demonstrate, published articles represent a wide variety of opinions on most subjects, we cannot assume that the articles selected for publication are perfectly representative of Whyvillians' views because we do not know all the selection criteria that influence what is published in *The Whyville Times*.

Discussion of head and body colors available. Kerri_87's complaint about the lack of body parts available to coordinate with the limited supply of brown and tan heads was not an isolated sentiment. In all, six articles addressed this concern during 2000 and 2002. Several authors echoed Kerri_87's call for community action,

including Liss22, who wrote the following in her 2002 article, Racism, Clothes, and City Workers:

What you need to realize is that it's not the Workers, but the citizens who have taken the most active role in the DESIGNING of face parts . . . . Complaining and blaming the general public because of the lack of dark skinned outfits isn't helping anything; you can't order people to make parts for you, and they have no obligation to do so. The logical thing, obviously, is design it for yourself. Instead of telling us we could get rich off of making dark skinned clothes, take advantage of your own advice—YOU could.

Like Kerri_87, Liss22 is very clear in locating the responsibility for the lack of diversity in face part colors in the hands of Whyvillians themselves. The role of player-generated content in Whyville certainly opens up a unique role for citizens to change what tools are available to them for crafting an online identity, and Liss22 and others like her played a vocal role in convincing citizens to design face parts in more colors.

In 2003, the tone of the public discussion of head and body colors shifted when one of the original six critics of the lack of variety in part colors, Tike, published a new article (2003) proclaiming that the situation had improved, thanks to entrepreneurial trendsetting citizens:

To be direct about it, citizens believed that there was a limited amount of clothing made especially for ethnic groups. Most clothes were directed towards Caucasian individuals. . . . I am here to report that things have changed, thanks to those designers who took a chance and began creating face parts with different skin tones. Some even began the trend by wearing their parts so that others would catch on and purchase them. Even those who do not necessarily have darker skin outside of Whyville choose to wear items of this sort.

It is possible that Whyvillians as a whole agreed with Tike's satisfaction in the improved variety of available non-peach parts, because no further complaints about face part color were aired in *The Whyville Times* for a few years. However, as the next section of findings will show, there continues to be a relatively short supply of non-peach bodies to choose from. So although the current situation may be an improvement from 2000–2002 conditions, it is still not as easy to assembly a brown, olive, or yellow look as it is to assemble a peach one, as one citizen recently noted in the only Whyville times article to address the subject since 2002, ''I went to Akbar's and typed in Latino. I bought a head, ears and a shirt—but I was appalled at how few Latino parts there actually were. Eventually, I put together a fairly decent Latino face, even finding a Latino girly arm'' (Artista, 2005). The presence of accessories like the ''Latino girly arm'' probably represents an improvement over the past, but at least some players still do not find it as easy to complete a non-White look.

Personal accounts of racism and diversity. Public discussion of race in *The Whyville Times* was not limited to discussions of available face parts. Three authors wrote

articles sharing their experiences of life in Whyville playing brown or olive avatars. These authors describe their interactions with other Whyvillians while they embodied their new, racialized avatars. Because they deal with interactions between "real" and "virtual" identities in Gee's sense (2004), they are a potential place to observe their authors' struggles with or reflections on the projective identities they formed while embodying particular virtual identities. Two authors who described themselves as White "in real life," Samgirl21 and Artista, decided to "experiment" by "going as" a Black person and a Latina, respectively. Samgirl described her first day playing as her new Black avatar in her article Black Like Me (2003):

Surprisingly, a girl that I vaguely knew was there and immediately approached me. "SamGirl!" she exclaimed. "What happened?" She went on, "You look like a freak!" I was cautious and went on to ask why. She explained that being black on Whyville looks just wrong. I was appalled! I couldn't believe that this happened on my first day, my first hour of being a black Whyvillian.

Samgirl was surprised and upset by several negative experiences she had while sporting her black avatar. Early in her article, she suggested that most people, including herself, do not expect racism to be a part of the Whyville experience, writing, "You might be thinking, who's racist anymore? The Civil War is over, Martin Luther King has spoken, we're all good." However, by the end of her article, she felt she had learned something more about herself and other Whyvillians. She ended her article by encouraging other White people on Whyville to try her experiment, "Put yourself in that position. Be a minority in Whyville for a day. Be black like me." (It is notable that this suggestion demonstrates that Samgirl is writing to an assumed White audience.)

Bluegirl7 (2002) wrote a similar article describing the experience of switching from "that one fashion in Whyville where all the girls had blonde hair with little extensions and white skin" to a look that was more like her own physical appearance as a self-described Latina. Her motivation to create a Latina look stemmed from imagining the intersection of her Whyville fashion habits and her "real-life" looks: "One day, I imagined if I dyed my hair blond and changed my hair color in real life just for that silly reason (fitting in) and I realized how stupid I was to change my appearance." Bluegirl7 reported feeling proud and positive after changing her looks. She did not report any of the problems that Samgirl21 and Artista reported in their "experiments" with being minority, and she does not seem to look upon her new look as temporary. Her article was praised in an editor's note, which the creators of Whyville occasionally use to respond to issues raised by Times authors.

However, not all members of the Whyville.net responded positively to articles such as "Black Like Me" and "In a Latina's Shoes." An anonymous author (Anonymous, 2003) responded doubtfully to Black Like Me, saying:

I thought that what this girl was saying can't be true. I have a couple of friends who are black on Whyville and are very popular, one of them a very good friend of mine. I felt

Table 1. Frequency of Different Colors of Heads and Bodies

Color	RGB Value	Head Frequency (%)	Body Frequency (%)
Brown	000.000.000	1 (0.01)	0 (0)
	051.000.000	1 (0.01)	1 (0)
	102.000.000	1 (0.01)	1 (0)
	102.051.000	5 (0.04)	0 (0)
	153.102.000	12 (0.09)	58 (0.08)
	153.102.001	1 (0.01)	0 (0)
	153.102.051	3 (0.02)	2 (0)
	204.102.000	1 (0.01)	2 (0)
Total		**25 (0.18)**	**64 (0.09)**
Olive	204.153.051	4 (0.03)	1 (0)
	204.153.102	11 (0.08)	54 (0.07)
Total		**15 (0.11)**	**55 (0.07)**
Yellow	255.204.000	4 (0.03)	0 (0)
	255.204.102	0 (0)	1 (0)
	255.255.153	1 (0.01)	0 (0)
Total		**5 (0.04)**	**1 (0)**
Peach	Multiple	**92 (0.67)**	**624 (0.84)**

> that Samgirl21 failed to research a bit, actually. I mean, plenty of people on Whyville
> who have been "black" since they started haven't gone through so many racist acts.

This argument that racism cannot be widespread because the author, a White person, has not experienced it firsthand or secondhand recapitulates many of the discussions on racism in the United States that have taken place among adults in nonvirtual settings. Taken together, these four articles paint a picture of the kind of experimentation with avatar race that can go on in Whyville and the community reaction to postings about them.

Diversity and Race in Avatar Designs

The postings about race in *The Whyville Times* need to be seen in relation to the face parts available to Whyville citizens. Whyvillians spend clams to design face parts that they can then sell for profit. The cost of designing and producing a face part depends on its size. Using the face part design tool (similar to a simple paint program) to create a sophisticated part displays an impressive level of skill. Table 1 summarizes frequency counts for all available colors of heads and body parts in September of 2006. In all, 67% of the blank heads for sale in Akbar's were peachy tones best for representing White avatars. Eighteen percent of skin-tone blank heads for
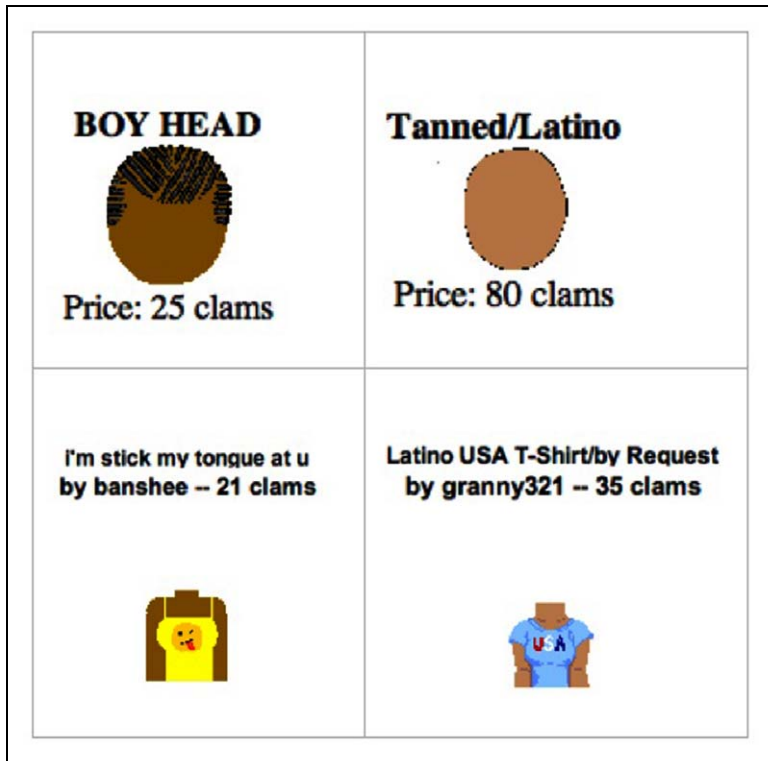
Figure 2. Examples of non-peach faces and bodies.

sale were brown, including 8 separate brown tones. Only 11% were olive or tan tones useful for creating a Latino/a avatar, and very few were yellow (see Figure 2 for examples of non-peach colored heads and bodies). Consistent with citizens' complaints, the selection of bodies for sale on Akbar's is dominated by peach-toned parts, which account for 84% of the bodies available (an even greater disparity than available heads). While heads came in 12 separate non-peach RGB values, there were only 8 non-peach RGB values of bodies available. There were only two head colors, 153.102.000 and 204.153.102, for which the buyer would have had a sizable selection of matching bodies. Because bodies come complete with clothes, only having one body for your head means wearing the same clothes all the time, so most players would prefer to have a wide selection of bodies to match their chosen head.

More Whyvillians have also tried their hand at making non-peach heads than designing non-peach bodies. The 45 non-peach heads were created by more than 21 separate designers, while all 120 bodies were made by just 13 people (8 of whom had also made heads). This disparity of designers for heads versus bodies
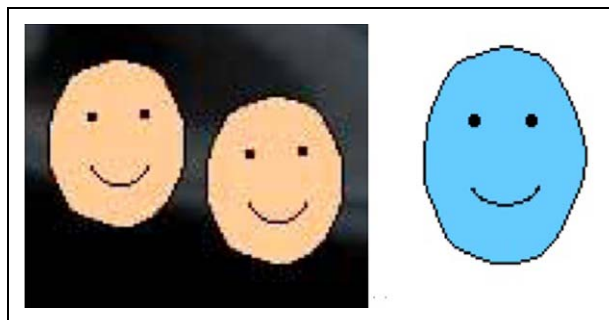
Figure 3. Newbie faces before (left) and after (right) the Bluebie discussion. ©Numedeon, Inc.

makes sense as heads are much simpler than the intricate designs of bodies (for a discussion of the design tools in Whyville see Kafai, Fields, & Cook, **IN PRESS**).

Bringing Race and Avatar Design Together: The Bluebie Invasion

Although discussion about race and discussions about avatars have always been part of Whyville, a particular event that brought these two streams of conversation together took place in May 2006 with the Bluebie Invasion. The background of the Bluebie Invasion centers on the fact that before this time, when new members joined Whyville, they were assigned generic peach smiley faces (see Figure 3, left).

These faces visually set newcomers apart from more experienced community members. The so-called "newbies" were often called the insulting nickname of "tator," probably because the faces look like oblong peach potatoes. Even after a player had developed a mature avatar with their own preferred face parts in whatever color they chose, the "tator" face could still play a role in their lives because occasional server glitches caused all players' faces to revert to the default peach smiley face. So wearing the newbie face was both a newcomer right of passage in Whyville and a recurring experience for all members.

Beginning in 2004, Whyvillians began to publicly criticize this practice of assigning peach smiley faces to newbies. In his 2004 article in *The Whyville Times*, Moocow92 observed, "Just today I realized something. The first face you get in Whyville is Caucasian." He went on to suggest that new members have the option of selecting different colored newbie faces when they initially register with Whyville, saying, "I just think it would be a good idea, so newbies who do not make much clams could get their own real skin color." The problem of "white" newbie faces was mentioned again three times in *The Whyville Times* during 2004 and 2005. It was taken up by Ninja'04 (2004) in an unsuccessful bid for senator in 2005 and was then championed in the 2006 senate race by ps2man1, who suggested the following:

> I know this has offended some of my friends who have joined Whyville in the past, they log on to their brand new account and see their skin tone color and think, "Why am I automatically peach?!" ... I think when you register for Whyville, there should be a choice at the beginning of what color you want to be or are .... I know this might 'clog' up the servers a tad bit, but I am sure it would help some. If we can't do this, maybe we could all start out as some unusual color that we ALL know most likely nobody has of skin tone, like green or blue!

Mitsuy, 2006's winning senator, had not mentioned the peach newbie face issue in her campaign, but later became a leader on this issue. In a later-published online chat with a Whyville designer, Mitsuy suggested that if randomly assigning newbie colors or allowing members to pick a newbie color was too taxing for the servers, the company should "Make them blue or something," to which the company's representative responded, "be careful what you wish for!" (2006). A few days later, Whyvilians logged on to discover that all newbies were now sporting blue smiley faces instead of the familiar peach color, instantly resulting in a new term unique to Whyville. "Bluebie" which, like the still-used "tator," refers to new members who have not managed to put together a customized look (see Figure 3, right). Overall, this change seems to have happened without much protest, evidenced by a lack of any article protesting the blue newbie faces in a community that eagerly voices opinions about many things. Since this time, Whyville has provided more diversity in avatar looks for first-time newbies. As of 2008, instead of blue smiley faces, new Whyvillians may choose from six skin colors, hair, clothing, eyes, mouths, and noses.

Race in Everyday Player Experiences

We knew that the lack of matching body parts for non-White avatar heads was discussed in the somewhat selective venue of *The Whyville Times* but did it really affect players on an everyday basis? Overall race and ethnicity in Whyville were relatively rare topics in the after-school club, but they did come up a number of times, particularly among club members of color when they were working on their avatar look. Players' talk about race and ethnicity within the after-school club fell into several categories: design comments; announcements by individual players that they were planning to create an ethnic look, such as "I'm gonna be black now"; references to ethnic areas of Whyville where certain ethnicities hang out, such as "go to the Black place" (probably referring to Geek Speak—a chat location on Whyville); aesthetic evaluations in which one player critiqued the ethnic markers in another player's character, such as "Ha ha, your face is brown and your neck is white"; and comments on availability of particular ethnic parts, such as "This shop has everything for Latina girls!!"

Our observations seem to suggest that finding body parts to match a non-White head was still an everyday annoyance for players in 2005, who tried to design a

non-White look, and that "two-toned" looks were a social handicap likely to be addressed in everyday conversation. In the following excerpt Briana, a 12 year-old African American girl, criticized Paige's (a 10 year-old girl of Asian-Indian heritage) avatar that had different skin tones for the head and body. Gabe, a 12-year-old African American boy, and Cole, a 10-year-old Caucasian boy looked on:

Briana: Oops there goes a mixture of skin tone (laughs) Gabe look—she's two-toned! (laughs)

(Gabe looks at Paige's avatar).

Paige: That's not funny. It seriously isn't funny.

(Briana continues to laugh).

Paige: It's not funny!.

Cole: Your body is white and your head is brown.

Briana: Funny. Funny funny funny.

Paige: I'm so going to recycle this.

Briana: Funny funny funny, you can try the trading post. Do you see that? Oh my god.

At the time, Paige was a relative newbie to Whyville, while the others were more experienced and classified her look as "two-toned." This seems to support the idea expressed in *The Whyville Times* articles that non-peach bodies are difficult to find for those who wish to create a non-White look for themselves, like Paige.

In the next vignette, the excitement Zoe (a 12-year-old African American girl) expressed on finding a shop with many olive-toned parts further demonstrates that Whyvillians are often unable to find non-White parts.

Zoe: Whoa this girls' store has every Latino thing.

(Briana comes over to Zoe's computer to see).

Zoe: Look this girl's store has every Latino thing, for girls.

Briana: She has every what?

Zoe: Latino thing for girls.

Briana: Oh . . . .

This illustrates that the issues raised by our empirical observations of color variety in Akbar's Face Mall actually do affect player's everyday experiences and make their way into off-line talk about building non-White avatars (for an extended case study on Zoe, see Fields & Kafai, in press). A few club members apparently made extended attempts over days and weeks to create "black" or "Latino" looks for themselves. One of these was Briana, who once commented that "they need more Black people stuff."

Discussion

Previous discussions about racial stereotyping focused on the responsibility of the game industry in presenting limited choices in avatar designs and story lines for players. The criticism most certainly applies to the narrow casting of Black culture and protagonists (Everett, 2005). There is of course a distinction to be made between

fantasy-genre games such as *World of Warcraft* and games set in real-world places such as *Grand Theft Auto* in terms of how many degrees of freedom game designers have in offering choices to players while still staying within the game's narrative. Adding yet another layer of complexity are recent incidents within fantasy games such as *Lineage*, where real-word racial disparities were replicated in the virtual context when Chinese players started playing particular game avatars such as farmers to generate virtual income for monetary purposes and thus these farmer avatars became outcasts in the larger gamer community (Steinkuehler, 2008).

We focused our investigations on the avatars, the virtual representations of self created by players. Our interest in tweens' avatars in Whyville was informed by theoretical accounts that have outlined strong connections between real, virtual, and projective identities of players (Gee, 2004). The quantity and quality of avatar face parts created in Whyville provides support for our claim that Whyvillians are invested in the creation of their virtual identities. Although it was difficult within our data to assess players' perception of and attention to virtual identities, newspaper postings indicate that at least some of the Whyvillians considered race when crafting a virtual identity. Several authors described a type of Bluegirl7's article "It's the Inside that Counts" (2002) provides a thought-provoking, if isolated, example. She decided to change her virtual Whyville identity ("that one fashion in Whyville, where all the girls had blonde hair with little extensions and white skin") to be more like her real-life physical self ("Mexican-American") after considering how her Whyville identity would map on to her real-world self: "One day, I imagined if I dyed my hair blond and changed my hair color in real life just for that silly reason and I realized how stupid I was to change my appearance." It is possible that this third imagined identity, her Mexican-American self with bleached blonde hair, was a projective identity that served to illustrate the conflict between how she was representing herself in virtual and real worlds. After considering this projective identity, she reworked her virtual identity to correspond more closely with her real-world appearance. It is not clear how many Whyvillians formed these sorts of projective identities, but those who published postings in *The Whyville Times* talked about investing in the community, which is an indicator of the kind of deeper engagement with Whyville, which creates the conditions for projective identity formation. Projective identity formation in a context such as Whyville where tweens can literally play around with race is a promising direction for future research.

Club members' comments on the struggle to construct non-White avatars were often overheard by other members in the club, which gave rise to the beginnings of a critical dialogue about structural issues that hamper racial diversity, though these were never pursued very far. In the analysis by DeVane and Squire (2008) of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, they proposed that productive dialogue about race might develop when players from different demographic groups played games together but were not able to observe this directly. Our after-school club offered a fertile context to listen to dialogue across groups because we had mixed groups of boys and girls of different ethnicities in the same room. Although some of these

conversations about avatars may seem superficial at first glance, they touch on deeper aspects of racial identity and can connect online and off-line experiences. When players complained about the lack of choice in online matching avatar parts, this mirrors realities in the off-line marketplace where, for instance, more cosmetic products are geared toward fair-skinned people.

In her public complaint about the lack of variety in avatar part colors, Kerri_87 recognizes that changing the situation is essentially the responsibility of Whyvillians themselves. Her message, notably directed at her peers rather than Whyville's owner/designers, asks others to join in her effort because she has "already some people working on designs but we need more! If anyone could possibly spare some clams to give to this project or make a piece yourself, please contact me about it through Y-Mail." In the new generation of virtual worlds such as Whyville.net and *Teen Second Life*, the shift to player-generated content has resulted in a fundamental shift of power, responsibility, and opportunity (Jenkins, 2006). At least some Whyvillians seemed to understand that both the responsibility and the opportunity for creating diversity in face parts was theirs, because Kerri_87's call to action was repeated intermittently for years. And in this particular virtual world, user participation in content generation may have improved the diversity of parts available. More people participated in designing heads, and there was a greater diversity of part colors among heads. Fewer people participated in designing bodies, and there was less diversity in part colors. This holds true despite the fact that there are about five times more bodies for sale than heads, so all things being equal, one would have expected to see more different colors in that category. Perhaps, designing bodies is more difficult than designing blank heads, and the limited number of players participating in the design of non-peach bodies may be an indication of the kind of participation gap described by Jenkins and colleagues (2006). Our analyses were a first step into articulating the presence of racial issues in this new genre of online communities for young people and identifying possibilities for social activism and change. Whyville illustrates that in virtual worlds, changing simple features such as the default avatar assigned to all new players (i.e., the bluebies) may seem trivial but can be very significant when these design features leave the player more a choice of whom to become.

In general, our findings concerning racial representation in Whyville were similar to those of Boellstorff (2008) in his ethnography of another virtual world, *Second Life*. He found that not only was whiteness the default embodiment of new avatars (as was true in Whyville before the Bluebie invasion) but there was also a sense in that though "one chose to appear African, Asian, or any other race, whiteness acted as a kind of default" (p. 145). Similar to Whyville, he also noted that people who sought darker skins "complained of the difficulty of finding them" and that those who did wear non-White skins reported "racist responses" (p. 145). Ironically, in both Whyville and *Second Life*, where tools for avatar design provide perhaps the most extensive opportunities to create one's avatar however one desires, whiteness predominates. Still,

citizens of *Second Life* also used race and ethnicity as basis for forming ethnic-specific community groups and "an ethic of antiracism predominated" (p. 146). Although Whyville does not provide the same in-world tools for creating formal groups, there are known spaces for certain kinds of avatars such as "Black place" (Spin Geek), an anime animal place, and a Goth place. Notably, several club members starting talking about the "Black place" within the first few weeks of the club, early in their Whyville lives. Furthermore, the *Times* provides a site to begin discussion about race in Whyville, as our analyses demonstrated.

Although identification with racial and ethnic identity starts at a much younger age (Phinney, 1989), our tween players (with an average age of 12.3) are in a prime period to establish their identity and thus it might be important to ask what it means when players have limited choices in creating virtual identities, as indicated by the absence of colored body parts. Because at least some players posted about their frustrations with the lack of resources to craft non-White virtual identities, it is reasonable to surmise that these limitations may be having some meaningful effect on player interactions. Beyond having access to resources for constructing non-White virtual identities, an important milestone in ethnic identity development for adolescents of all races is to become aware of racial issues and to realize that different people are having different experiences and developing different points of view on race.

There is an educational opportunity, therefore, for designers to make space within games and virtual worlds for discussion of race in virtual contexts. These kinds of conversations are important for tweens from a developmental perspective, so that they can learn about other views and explore who they are, both off-line and online. There is plenty of space within Whyville to expand productive discussions about race, and Whyville is well suited to such an effort because it is already a place where tweens hang out and engage in chat. Whyville functions as a "vibrant public space" (Byrne, 2008), where participants can "reflect, refine, reject, and reproduce social knowledge as informed by their off-line experiences" (p. 20). Whyville and similar virtual worlds offer another important dimension for learning about race and ethnicity over and above other forums for public discussion because players are embodied in avatars that offer a nonthreatening avenue for the introduction of discussions about the body and other personal topics.

Authors' Note

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Bios

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