FEATURE

"The Me I Want You to See"

The Use of Video Game Avatars to Explore Identity in Gifted Adolescents

Susannah M. Wood, PhD[1] and Antonia Szymanski, PhD[2]

Abstract: Gifted adolescents may identify as "gamers" who create avatars to navigate video games and cell phone apps. Avatars provide a unique venue through which gifted teens can explore the issues of self and identity in a critical time of their development. The purpose of this article is to (a) provide an overview of what avatars are, (b) explain how avatars can be a venue to explore concepts of identity for gifted students, and (c) suggest how educators can utilize the concept of avatars in their classroom activities. We provide questions that educators can use to facilitate dialogue with their gifted adolescents about avatars and identity.

Keywords: avatar, gifted, adolescent, teen, video game, virtual world, possible selves

According to Neilsen's 2018 Games 360 U.S. Report, 66% of the U.S. population (aged 13 and older) identified as gamers, and 48% reported owning at least one gaming platform. Gamers spent approximately 11% of their week playing video games, and 69% of gamers watched game-related content through online media such as YouTube. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019) reported teens and young adults, ages 15 to 24, spent on average 1 hr a day playing games or using a computer for leisure. In addition, a 2018 Pew research survey reported 90% of teens reported playing video games on a variety of different mechanisms (e.g., personal computer, console such as Xbox or Playstation, or cell phone apps; Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Little research has investigated if gifted students are playing video games or their experiences in doing so. However, if 66% of the population is playing video games, it is reasonable to assume gifted students are doing so as well at a critical point in their development—adolescence.

> "The use of avatars in games provides a venue for the discussion of adolescent identity, perspective-taking, problem-solving, and communication skills."

At the heart of most video games and some apps is the concept of the avatar. The simplest definition of an avatar is that of the gamer's in-game or virtual persona. It is the visual digital representation of the gamer (Jin, 2012; Mancini & Sibilla, 2017). Bailenson and Blascovich (2004) define avatars as "perceptible digital representation whose behaviors reflect those executed, typically in real time, by a specific human being" (p. 65). Research has suggested that avatars can be viewed in very different ways by the gamers who use them. Avatars can be seen as dolls and tools at a very basic level (Mancini & Sibilla, 2017). Avatars can also be the reflection, extension, and simulation of the individual player inside the game (Mancini & Sibilla, 2017). Through the avatar, the gamer can represent a different version of themselves inside the game that can act, react, look, and have experiences that can be very similar to or different from his or her real-life persona (Mancini & Sibilla, 2017).

Whether a gifted adolescent plays *Minecraft, Elder Scrolls Online* (*ESO*), or a Facebook-supported game such as *Farmville*, they are engaging in virtual worlds. These worlds "are considered complex as they offer numerous activities for users (e.g., socializing, gaming, exploring, role-playing etc.) and/or require consideration of several attributes (e.g., avatar appearance, character skills, navigating in the environment, enemies, etc.) with regard to user experience" (Turkay & Adinolf, 2015, p. 1). To engage in these communities (whether they are solely

DOI: 10.1177/1076217519898217. From [1]The University of Iowa, and [2]Western Kentucky University. Address correspondence to: Susannah M. Wood, PhD, Rehabilitation and Counselor Education, College of Education, The University of Iowa, N354 Lindquist Center, Iowa City, IA 52242-1002, USA; email: Susannah-wood@uiowa.edu.

computer generated or supported by social networking platforms), most games and apps require players to develop their player persona—their avatar. The avatar becomes, to a greater or lesser extent, an extension of the gamer's identity, and for gifted adolescents, a key to exploring issues pertaining to identity development.

Educators who engage in dialogue with individual gifted students or with their classrooms may find that they discover more about how their students engage in creating different avatar personas, their decision-making with regard to gameplay, and avatar design, and how their students communicate with each other about the games they play and the avatars they use. The purpose of this article is to (a) provide an overview of what avatars are, (b) explain how avatars can be a venue to explore concepts of identity for gifted students, and (c) suggest how educators can utilize the concept of avatars in their classroom activities.

Avatars

Characteristics and Customization of Avatars

Adolescents can create and operate avatars for a variety of reasons that are only starting to be investigated in the research. Avatars allow gifted adolescents to play games with different virtual personas. These personas can be closely aligned with themselves or very different from themselves, enabling the adolescent gamer to make different choices than would be possible in real life (IRL; Hooi & Cho, 2014; Jin, 2012; Kim et al., 2012; Mancini & Sibilla, 2017; Sibilla & Mancini, 2018). Through avatars, gamers

> live out their multiple virtual lives . . . just as they play different roles in real life. These virtual lives could vary in terms of appearance, behavior and values from one another and even from one's real life, making it possible to evaluate the differences and similarities between them. (Hooi & Cho, 2014, p.21)

To create their avatars with varying degrees of similarity or differences from themselves, gamers tend to spend a great deal of time in the process of customization (Kafai et al., 2010; Yee, 2006).

Customization typically refers to the degree to which the player can create, recreate, or change the various features of their avatar. The degree to which a player can customize their avatar is dependent on the game or app. Avatars can be simple or complex. In cell phone applications such as Bitmoji or online games like *Whyville*, individuals can create an animated or cartooned "self." Bitmoji calls these emojis and *Whyville* avatars, but their purpose is the same—to allow individuals to represent themselves virtually. Individuals can choose from a variety of physical attributes from skin tone and hair color, clothes, accessories, and animated actions.

Cosmetic customization

In the various worlds of video games, individuals can have a great degree of freedom in customization of their avatar, including sex, physical appearance, and voice tone. *Cosmetic customization* refers to how the avatar looks (Turkay & Adinolf, 2015). Some games provide a great degree of avatar customization (e.g., *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, World of Warcraft, Divinity: Original Sin 2*, the *Dragon Age* series), in which case the gamer can choose from a variety of categories (race, biological sex, physical attributes, moral alignment, class/skill sets). Highly customizable games generally provide gamers with series of default "faces" and "bodies" or the ability to create an avatar through very specific manipulations of physiology. Games with high levels of cosmetic customization allow players to choose their physical appearance down to the detail of the angle of an avatar's ears and inner eye color.

For example, in *The Sims 4*, avatars are highly customizable from sex and physiology to a wide range of voice tones, values, abilities, outfits, and accessories. However, because the world in *The Sims 4* is based IRL with neighborhoods, careers, and spousal options, all avatars are human (unless the player also has the optional vampire content). Gamers can even create family members such as siblings and children from their original avatar that can share similar physiological traits. Some games like the popular *Fortnite* allow players to create, exchange, and buy "skins" in game which change how their avatars look. Video games that are based on fantasy or science-fiction genres have choices for avatars that would not be found IRL such as elves, orcs, vampires, werewolves, cat-like, or lizard-like peoples (Sibilla & Mancini, 2018). While the physiology of the gamer's avatar may have no bearing on how the game unfolds, it may be of aesthetic importance to the gamer.

In other video games, avatars are assigned. Players have little or no choice in how their avatar looks or what they sound like. For example, players who begin new games in the fantasy role-playing *Witcher* series are automatically given the character of Geralt of Rivia as their avatar. Other games allow players to customize their avatar up to a point. In the science-fiction role-playing game (RPG) *Mass Effect* series, the player is assigned the avatar of Commander Shepard. At the outset of the first game in the series, the player can choose Shepard's biological sex, physiology (from a limited selection of hair and facial features), initial skill set, and first name. Although *Mass Effect* is set in a futuristic science-fiction-based virtual world, Shepard will always be a human (vs. a member of other futuristic races that are in the game). *Greedfall*, another fantasy role-playing video game just released in 2019, allows gamers to customize their avatars with regard to sex, facial features, hair style, and hair color. However, the avatar must always be human.

Functional customization

In some games, avatar customization has bearing on the actual gameplay itself. Turkay and Adinolf (2015) define functional customization as the degree to which avatar creation and design affect game dynamics and individual player gameplay. This customization can influence a wide variety of game-play decisions, especially in RPGs. For example, in *Elder Scrolls IV: Skyrim*, non-player characters (NPCs) may react

differently or provide different dialogue options based on the avatar's sex or race. Gamers in *Mass Effect* can choose one of three possible back stories for their assigned avatar of Shepard. While their choice does not drive player in-game decision-making, the avatar's back story is brought up several times by NPCs in dialogue.

Another example of functional customization is the gamer's determination of what skills or abilities their avatar should have. What the gamer chooses for their avatar's skills (e.g., Will they focus on magic or swords? stealth or combat? speech skills and charisma?) then drives how their avatar interacts with the game, including how they go about "winning" or "beating" the game. Depending on the choice the gamer makes, the avatar will rely on those skills to work through and defeat the challenges in the game. The decisions the player puts into determining their avatar's skills and abilities represent the avatar's "build." In fantasy RPGs builds often represent an archetype such as a healer, warrior, assassin, or mage. A player can also create an avatar that has combination of these skills across archetypes (e.g., an avatar whose skills are both in the areas of magic and combat is known in some games as a spellsword). In many RPGs, there is no one right way of defeating an enemy, completing a challenge, or finishing a level of a game. The way the gamer chooses to solve these problems relies solely on their decision-making and the abilities or skills of their avatar.

Customization and Massive Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs)

Games such as *ESO*, which is what is known as an MMOG, create more complexity when it comes to choices of avatar skill sets. Because *ESO* is supported with a social networking platform, gamers from all over the world can "meet" each other through their avatars and proceed to play the game in small groups. Functional customization here provides players with choices of skill sets that complement each other's. To complete successively more complex challenges, groups may need various skill sets that can work together. For example, an avatar with a warrior build can charge into battle while assassins can snipe enemies from the sidelines. Meanwhile, mages can heal the players' avatars, should they be wounded during gameplay. Choices as to what new skills or abilities a player's avatar needs to master can be either an individual player choice or a choice made by the entire group. This customization not only gives players multiple opportunities to experience the game in different ways but also promotes different degrees of challenge in gameplay.

Players also may be able to have more than one avatar that is linked to their game account. *ESO* provides gamers with the opportunity to have more than one avatar linked to their online account. This game allows players to have avatars that fit into one of the factions that are at war per the story arc of the game. Depending on "who" the player wants to be on any given day, the gamer could choose one avatar that is a human in the morning, and then switch to a high elf in the afternoon. The only proviso is going back to the main start "page" of the game and selecting the different avatar. Avatars that are customizable in both appearance and skills create a venue for adolescents to experiment with multiple possible selves.

Avatars and Identity Exploration

Kafai et al. (2010) suggest that "players' ability to create avatars as representations of self online is closely linked to the concept of identity" (p. 25). Adolescence is a time of self-exploration and identity creation (Erikson, 1968). During this time, children begin the process of separating from the family both physically and psychologically to begin the quest for their own identity. This developmental period is marked by rapid transitions in physiology, cognition, emotion, socialization, and morality. In essence, all teens, including gifted teens, must answer the question "who am I?" The Marcia model of identity development suggests that individuals adopt a particular identity based on the relationship between identity exploration and commitment to that identity (Marcia, 2009). The degree to which an individual has high or low exploration or commitment determines where they are in forming the identity. Exploration is considered a healthy part of identity development as it provides individuals information by which they can make decisions. Exploration can come in many forms such as personal experiences, witnessing the experiences of others, or doing research. While past research on avatars and video games has conceptualized the avatar as the gamer's *second self* (Turkle, 1995), Kafai et al. (2010) suggest that "players are no in search of *the* second self but are experimenting *with* second selves (p. 25).

Possible Selves

The concept of *possible selves* (Markus & Nurius, 1986) refers to a person's imagination of their future identity (hopes, dreams, and fears) or who they might become. The idea of possible selves may motivate certain behaviors, which support working toward or avoiding a potential outcome. Using avatars in video games to test out a possible self allows adolescents to explore who they could be and how they relate to others in social network games (who may also be experimenting with possible selves). "An exploration of possible selves can help adolescents understand how perceptions of the self and others are socially determined and constrained" (Lee & Hoadley, 2007, p. 5). Assuming different genders, races, and physical and moral attributes allows adolescent players to imagine themselves in different identities. "Virtual possible selves include the good selves, the bad selves, the hoped-for selves, the feared selves, the true selves, the not-me selves, the ideal selves, the ought selves, the individual selves, and the relationship selves manifested in virtual communication" (Jin, 2012, p. 2161).

Avatar Identification

Similar to the degree to which readers identify with characters in a text, gamers' identification and affiliation with

their avatar can vary. Gamers can engage in *similarity identification* with an avatar that they perceive most closely resembles their real-life identity (Kim et al., 2012). However, similarity identity is not solely based on visual similarities between the gamer and the gamer's avatar. Identifiability can be based on personal characteristics, beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes that reflect the gamer (Hooi & Cho, 2014). Hooi and Cho (2014) suggest because avatars can be created and customized to resemble the gamer, that the avatar becomes a type of mirror. If the degree of identification is high, then theoretically the avatar's choices, emotions, and value systems would reflect those of the gamer's (Hooi & Cho, 2014). However, depending on the degree of possible avatar customization, avatar creation is only limited by the gamer's imagination. The avatar can be, act, and look like anything the gamer wishes. *Wishful identification* describes the relationships between gamer and avatar in which the gamer desires "to emulate the character either in general terms (employing the character as role model for future action or identity development) or in specific terms . . ." (Kim et al., 2012, p. 1664). Through the use of an avatar, the adolescent gamer becomes the hero of a game, which facilitates feelings of mastery and competency (Hefner et al., 2007; Przybylski et al., 2012; Turkay & Adinolf, 2015).

Educators who want to know more about how their gifted gamers are creating and using avatars can ask questions about cosmetic and functional customization, the student's degree of identification with the avatar, and the choices the student makes in their avatar's "build." Discussion questions like the following can be used to better understand a student through their avatar:

- How did you choose (race, biological sex, physical attributes)? What influenced your decision? What feelings does your avatar evoke in yourself based solely on how your avatar looks?
- What were the limitations on your customization? What would you change? Why?
- What role does race or ethnicity play in this game? Gender identity? How this is similar or different from real life?

Using Avatars in the Classroom: Ideas for Educators

Online learning communities and the use of technology have dramatically changed the ways in which K-12 students interact academically and socially. Tan et al. (2008) noted that virtual learning can provide choice and may go beyond what can be accomplished in a face-to-face setting such as the classroom. Simpson (2005) noted, "videogames cross all cultural and ethnic boundaries. Not recognizing that these shared spaces exist, public education has failed to provide for the impact of that experience on students' learning . . ." (p. 17). Integrating students' use of avatars in games may unlock new ideas for teachers in the classroom.

Findings from recent research (Gentile, et al., 2009) suggest that video games can enhance prosocial skills such as altruism, cooperation, and perspective-taking (Vieira, 2012); empathy, cultural awareness, and gender identity exploration (Lee & Hoadley, 2006, 2007); problem-solving (Adachi & Willoughby, 2013); and decision-making and ethics (Schrier, 2016). Academic core content, such as literature and civics, addresses prosocial skills indirectly. For example, reading literature passages requires students to explore issues tied to identity and engage in perspective-taking of the author or characters in the text. History and civics address morality and ethics pertaining to people groups, governments, policy, and law. Literature, civics, and science explore problem identification, problem-solving, and hypothesis testing. Both single-player and multiplayer games that utilize avatars provide venues through which students can practice (a) the "trying on" of identities and engagement in perspective-taking, (b) decision-making and problem-solving, and (c) communication skills and social interactions. Each section suggests several conversation starters that can also be found in Table 1.

Exploring Adolescent Identity and Perspective-Taking

By creating different avatars that vary by gender, race, and personality characteristics, adolescents audition different aspects of identity or possible selves in the low-risk environment of the game. Hussain and Griffiths (2008) noted that 57% of the participants in their study played avatars of different gender than that of the participant IRL. For participants in Ratan and Sah's (2015) study, avatar customization and embodiment influenced the players' behavior. Schrier (2016) found that by using scenarios from the game *Fable III*, participants could use the perspective of their avatar to determine actions, which were then analyzed to determine ethical thinking skills. Likewise, Lee and Hoadley (2006, 2007) found that when students used avatars of multiple genders and ethnicities in an online game, they developed an awareness of discrimination. Students also showed significant increases in sensitivity to diversity in multiple forms and emphasized the importance of firsthand experience in developing that sensitivity. These authors (Lee & Hoadley, 2007) found that students who experimented with possible selves not only were more engaged in learning, but they also learned to view situations from multiple perspectives and increased their abilities to come up with creative solutions.

Using actual in-game scenarios can provide a common experience for students, and the students' avatars' interaction can then be used as the object of discussion. For example, a teacher could deliberately assign an avatar of a different gender in a virtual situation that evokes exploration of stereotypes and provide a de-briefing afterward to help students process their virtual experience and how that experience may translate, directly or indirectly, to their experiences with others IRL. Having "walked a mile in someone's shoes" may make issues of discrimination and privilege more salient than simply reading about and imagining the experiences—thus improving the understanding of what others may be experiencing. Talking about what an *avatar*

Table 1. Topics Pertaining to the Use of Avatars and Corresponding Conversation Starters

Concept/aspect of avatar	Classroom/individual dialogue starters
Identity	• How did you choose (race, biological sex, and physical attributes)? What influenced your decision? What feelings does your avatar evoke in yourself based solely on how your avatar looks? • Are there any "shoulds" or "musts" that you considered when you customized your avatar? Any "shoulds" or "must nots?" • What were the limitations on your customization? What would you change? Why? • What role does race or ethnicity play in this game? • How do you think your choices about what your avatar looks like will influence your game? Your interactions with NPCs? With other players if you are in an MMOG? • What role does physical attractiveness play in this game? How this is similar or different from real life? • What issues do you think game designers should consider when offering the ranges of customization for your avatar? What are they doing right? What are they missing? • How similar is this avatar to your real-life identity? Different? Why is this important? • What influenced your choices on designing your avatar? To what extent does an avatar allow you to take risks in the game that you might not IRL? • Does your degree of familiarity with the game influence your choice? • To what extent do you want to be more like your avatar? Less? • What does your avatar allow you to do in the game that you cannot IRL?
Empathy and perspective-taking	• What would the [people in the student's life] think of your avatar? Upon what evidence do you base this on? • What do you think about how other gamers create their avatars? What would you guess they are thinking when they do so? • To what extent do you believe another person's avatar reflects them IRL? What assumptions do you make about another person based on their avatar? How do you know if you are correct? • To what extent do other people's opinions influence your choice of avatar? • To what extent do other players (if MMOG) influence what you do or say in the game? Why is that? • To what extent do you feel safe being yourself (or your avatar) in the game? • Based on your avatar what do you want others to know about you or what messages are you sending? What assumptions will others make about you based on your avatar? • How well do you think you can get to know another person via their avatar? • What would happen someone met the "real you" behind your avatar? What feelings does that evoke?
Problem-solving and decision-making	• How easily does your avatar solve problems? Interact with others in game? How is this similar or different from you IRL? • What happens in the game that makes you feel heroic? In control? How is this similar or different from you IRL? • How do you know if your avatar has made a "good" decision or a "bad" one? What do those decisions look like? How do the decisions affect other NPCs in the game? How do they affect other players around you (if in an MMOG)? • What have you learned thus far based on the decisions that your avatar made? Would you go back and change any? Why or why not? How would you make that change? • What consequences has your avatar encountered as a result of what they have chosen? How are these consequences different from those IRL? • To what extent does your race, gender, creed, religion, culture, and language influence your gameplay, and the decisions you make in the game? • What moral or ethical decisions has or will your avatar encounter(ed)? What will you do? Upon what do you base this/these decision(s)? • To what extent does your avatar make moral or ethical decisions that are similar to you IRL? Different? • What defines morality or right/wrong in this game? • How do other NPCs perceive morality? Other gamers (if MMOG)? Give an example.

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Concept/aspect of avatar	Classroom/individual dialogue starters
Communication and player interaction	• To what extent does your race, gender, creed, religion, culture, and language influence the reactions of other NPCs or other game players (MMOG)? • Describe an "interesting" in-game discussion you had with an NPC. Why was this interesting? What did you learn? What did you say/do in the game that would do again? What would you do differently regarding interacting with that character? • Dialogue options in games frequently are driven by the avatar's rhetoric/speech skills or their degree of charisma or charm. To what degree do you think these skills or abilities influenced your avatar's in-game dialogue? To what extent did you decide to increase these skills? • To what extent does your avatar's speech skills or charisma resemble your own? Upon what do you base that conclusion? • How, if at all, did the choices you make with regard to dialogue influence the plot? Interactions with other characters? • How are your avatar's choices with regard to dialogue different from or similar to what you decide to talk about or how you talk about thing with peers? Adults? Teachers? • To what extent did you find the dialogue options open or closed? What options do you think the game should have included? Why? How would that change your avatar's choices? Their interactions with other in-game characters? The overall story arc? • What has been your experience with other players in MMOG? What do you like about interacting with other players locally or around the world via your avatar? What don't you like? • Describe an interaction you had with another player in your MMOG. Why did you choose that interaction to describe? What did you learn from this? What would you do again? Differently? • How are your avatar's interactions with other player's avatars similar or different to what you would do if you were face to face with the other player? • To what extent have you considered joining a faction or guild in an MMOG? What factors did you have to consider in this decision? How do you know what guilds or groups are "worth" investing your avatar's time in? How does your avatar help those groups in return? • If someone watched you play with a group, guild, or another player online what would they see? What would you least/most like another watch your avatar do or say to another player's avatars? Why? • What advice would you give a "newbie" who is just learning to play in an MMOG for the first time? What should they know about interacting with other players? Why would they need to know that? Would you take your own advice?

Note. NPCs = non-player characters; MMOG = massive multiplayer online game; IRL = in real life.

did (vs. the student player) is much less threatening than talking about actual real-life interactions. Thus, students may be able to develop important prosocial skills, including empathy and perspective-taking, in a less threatening environment. Questions that could facilitate classroom conversation around avatars, empathy, and perspective-taking might include the following:

- What would the [people in the student's life] think of your avatar? Upon what evidence do you base this?
- What do you think about how other gamers create their avatars? What would you guess they are thinking when they do so?
- To what extent do you believe another person's avatar reflects them IRL? What assumptions do you make about another person based on their avatar? How do you know if you are correct?
- To what extent do other people's opinions influence your choice of avatar? To what extent do other players (if in a multiplayer game) influence what you do or say in the game? Why is that?
- Based on your avatar what do you want others to know about you or what messages are you sending? What assumptions will others make about you based on your avatar?

- What would happen someone met the "real you" behind your avatar? What feelings does that evoke?

Problem-Solving and Decision-Making

Emily Kircher-Morris (n.d.), author of "Finding balance with video games" for the National Association for Gifted Children, wrote that "for gifted kids who struggle with self-regulation, gaming can provide a comfortable and structured environment with limited decision-making and executive functioning as they follow the path of the game" (p. 2). Video games, in general, encourage multiple attempts at problem-solving and decision-making by a gamer's avatar—provided the gamer saves prior to major moments in the game (e.g., boss battles, story arc turning points, or pivotal dialogue options). Depending on the nature of the game, players can receive feedback on their decision immediately through a change in plot point, or new conversations by in-game characters, or unlocking a new level of challenge. This feedback allows players to experience consequence in a lower risk environment than they would if the decision was made IRL (Simpson, 2005). If the player's avatar fails to solve a problem, does not finish a level in a video game, or decides on a risky dialogue option, another chance may be attempted by restarting the same problem, level, or character interaction.

This low-risk failure option is especially important for gifted individuals who may experience perfectionism. The ability to fail and to then start over can provide the necessary self-confidence to accept academic challenges and persist in times of failure. Oftentimes, gifted students do not experience challenge in the educational setting until late in high school or even college. The lack of challenge prevents them from developing the skills of persistence, developing resilience in the face of failure, and learning to be open to challenges. Playing an avatar who takes risks may be very different than their real-life experience and thus allow them to explore what it means to fail in a safe environment.

In some games, in-game characters may react differently to the choices made by the player's avatar. For example, in many RPGs, if the player's avatar selects a risky dialogue option, an in-game character may cry, or argue with the avatar, or even refuse to journey or converse with the avatar again for the rest of the game. The player's avatar's choice of dialogue or action, depending on the game, can be guided by their chosen moral alignment or even by ethical codes present in-game. In some circumstances in which the avatar is the same from one game to the next in the series, the game(s) may not reveal the consequences for the avatar's decisions until much further in the story line or in another game entirely. As an example, a decision made early in the game by the avatar De Sardet in *Greedfall* regarding which of the various political factions to support or sabotage may have significant implications for future plot points, character interactions, or story resolution. In the case of game series, avatars may be transferred from game to game. In the *Mass Effect* series, the avatar of Shepard (as well as their in-game choices) can be imported from the first game into the second and third. The consequences of Shepard's in-game choices also follow into each game. The *Dragon Age* series is similar insofar as gamers have access to an online site that logs the gamer's avatar creation choices and pivotal in-game choices. Although the time frame of *Dragon Age 2* and *Dragon Age 3 Inquisition* is set in the future from the first game, the consequences of choices made in game one by the gamer's avatar is echoed as far as the third. Although the avatar is acting and speaking, ultimately their choices are in the hands of the *player behind the avatar*.

IRL, students do not have many opportunities for a "do over" for choices that they have made. Discussing the reactions of in-game characters (in single-player games) can provide a chance for students to observe and evaluate the effectiveness of their communication skills within a range of in-game social interactions. Using avatars in virtual settings, student gamers can act, react, and then discuss and evaluate the consequences of those actions before going back and trying something different, having learned from the experience. Ideas for classroom discussion might include the following:

- How easily does your avatar solve problems? Interact with others in game? How is this similar or different from you IRL?
- How do you know if your avatar has made a "good" decision or a "bad" one? What do those decisions look like? How do the decisions affect other NPCs in the game? How do they affect other players around you (if in a massive multiplayer online [MMOG])?
- What have you learned thus far based on the decisions that your avatar made? Would you go back and change any? Why or why not? What would you change?
- What consequences has your avatar encountered as a result of what they have chosen? How are these consequences similar to or different from real life?
- What moral or ethical decisions has or will your avatar encounter(ed)? What will you do? Upon what do you base this/these decision(s)? To what extent does your avatar make moral or ethical decisions that are similar to you IRL? Different?

Communication Skills and Social Interactions

Avatars provide a venue for practicing communication skills in a way that can provide a degree of safety and anonymity. Some students may experience negative effects of face-to-face classroom interaction because they are different in some way from their classmates. Presenting a different identity via the avatar allows the gamer the freedom to change how others perceive them (Hussain & Griffiths, 2008; Morahan-Martin, 1999; Morahan-Martin & Schumaker, 2003). Students who are more anxious about social interactions may find a sense of safety or gain a measure of confidence by utilizing avatars to talk to other players (Falloon, 2010). The avatar becomes the student's online "face," allowing them to project the image that they choose to the rest of the world instead of being judged on their physical

appearance. That face may appear only to game or app-generated characters, or to the avatars of other players from around the world in a multiplayer game.

As Squire (2006) noted, "the most intense social learning is found in massively multiplayer games, games where players interact with thousands of players in real time" (p. 23). In the case of MMOGs, avatars are the mechanism by which players collaborate, form communities (e.g., guilds), and work together to complement their skill sets to solve problems (Falloon, 2010). Avatar interactions in MMOGs pose a higher social risk. While gifted students may have the option to find like-minded peers in such a setting, there are still social situations that require negotiation and navigation when considering players' game styles, personalities, and problem-solving skills.

In MMOGs, players from all over the world interact with each other through their avatars (and through webcams or headsets depending on the gaming platform). Unlike face-to-face interactions where students have the ability to judge vocal tone and non-verbal cues that provide context for vocal communication, virtual environments may only allow for the avatar's tone or body movement. In MMOGs like *World of Warcraft, Fortnite*, and *ESO*, players must often take some risks in requesting membership into factions or guilds without knowing how that request or their avatar will be received. While guilds provide resources and support via other players' avatars who can help with difficult in-game battles or situations, they also have their own norms, cultures, and communication styles. These games come with built-in communities in which "decisions need to be made on the fly about whom to trust, whom to reject, and how to most effectively lead a group" (Granic et al., 2014, p. 73).

Like any other group IRL, not everyone in a guild gets along. For example, a group "quest" typically involves group problem-solving and tactics to either be the winning team in a battle or successfully complete an in-game assignment. In these quests, players' avatars can support each other through complimentary skill sets and players can utilize in-game chat to issue directions or encouragement. However, any quest, which involves group problem-solving, can generate group tension or player-to-player miscommunication if one player is unhappy with how another player's avatar acted, reacted, or failed to act in a situation. Through exploring the in-game social interactions of their avatars, students can learn how a positive or a careless word or action can influence relationships and outcomes. Ideas for classroom conversation could include the following:

- To what extent does your race, gender, creed, religion, culture, and language influence the reactions of other NPCs or other game players (MMOG)?
- Describe an "interesting" in-game discussion you had with an NPC. Why was this interesting? What did you learn? What did you say/do in the game that would do again? What would you do differently regarding interacting with that character?
- How are your avatar's dialogue choices different from or similar to how you talk about things with peers? Adults? Teachers?
- To what extent did you find the dialogue options open or closed? What options do you think the game should have included? Why? How would that change your avatar's choices? Their interactions with other in-game characters? The overall story arc?
- To what extent have you considered joining a faction or guild in an MMOG? Or developing your own? What factors did you have to consider in this decision? How do you know what guilds or groups are "worth" investing your avatar's time in? How does your avatar help those groups in return?
- If someone watched you play with a group, guild, or another player online what would they see? What would you most want them to observe you do with regard to interacting with other players? What would you not want them to see? Why?
- What advice would you give a "newbie" who is just learning to play in an MMO for the first time? What should they know about interacting with other players? Why would they need to know that? Would you take your own advice?

Avatars and Classroom Engagement

While games do lend themselves to learning, teachers need to consider that

> merely applying a superficial sugar coating of game-like activities to educational tasks like the repetitive math tasks . . . is not motivating or engaging in the long run, since students may quickly lose interest due to unmet relevance needs. (Lee & Hoadley, p. 17)

Instead, leveraging the concept of avatars can help teachers facilitate meaningful learning. Steinkuehler (2007) and Lee and Hoadley (2006, 2007) suggest that students engage more meaningfully in learning through their use of avatars, especially in MMOGs. Steinkuehler (2007) noted the myriad of literary opportunities that existed for teachers to use students' interest in MMOGs. Her ethnography noted how the players developed contextual literacy by "reading" and "meaning making" of unique words, symbols, and other virtual experiences that make up the game. Players "learn" the rules of the game and how to understand interactions through game-play experience. Steinkuehler (2007) suggested a connection between players' actions to the National Council of Teachers of English Standards demonstrating how players are exhibiting the learning goals of the standards. Her ideas are supported by Halverson (2005) who encouraged readers to consider video games as learning environments that allowed players to learn about themselves, experience community, and develop skills such as leadership and communication. A simple use may be to teach author point-of-view using avatar point-of-view and ask students how different avatars/characters might view an in-game scenario. Lee and Hoadley (2007) write that avatars in MMOGs

> promote learning by motivating and engaging students through the direct leverage of identity enactment and role

> play; that is, they deeply recruit an individual's identity while taking on the identity of a character in a game. This identity adoption process trains students to solve problems from the point of view of the roles they are assuming, opening them up to new perspectives and challenging them to think in new ways. (p. 17)

The 21st-century learning skills encompass core content knowledge, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and media/technology skills as being essential to prepare students to be successful in life (Soulé & Warrick, 2015). Using avatars whether in direct classroom learning or as a means to engage students in content exploration provides an opportunity to create environments in which to build these skills. As discussed previously, avatars in MMOGs must work together to accomplish missions and quests. Teachers can use this as an example when assigning roles in group work. When students can relate their classroom work to things they do for fun, such as playing a game where they embody a certain avatar, they are more likely to be engaged (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Teachers can use popular avatar archetypes to define group roles. For example, the bard may become the group scribe, the warrior may be the group's spokesperson, and the healer could serve as the person who asks questions on behalf of the group. Bringing avatars into the classroom adds a dimension of gamification that offers new avenues of communication. An example of connecting classroom processes including homework completion and classroom culture to students' virtual avatars is classcraft.com

While scarce research has been conducted focusing specifically on gifted students' video game and avatar use, Chen et al. (2013) included "online environment for cooperation and collective innovation" in the transformation component of their framework for technology use in gifted education (p. 168). Many teachers currently use blogs, websites, and apps to connect with students and their parents. The idea of creating a virtual "third space" (Oldenburg, 1997) where students and parents or even the entire school community could use avatars to communicate with each other and the teacher may be helpful. Dalisay et al. (2015) found that players who play games for the social interaction of avatars demonstrate more neighborly behavior in their real-life community. Thus, using a virtual education community with avatars may increase positive behavior in the physical geographic area.

Use With Caution: Possible Drawbacks of Using Avatars

While games using avatars are gaining in popularity and can provide a myriad of ways for people to connect both in and out of game, there are some possible unintended consequences that should be acknowledged. In most cases, games mask the real-life identity of players (anonymity). On one hand, anonymity allows players a degree of safety in which to explore their virtual identities, take risks in games, and try out online personalities with other players. On the other hand, anonymity can open the door for students to behave in ways they would not normally IRL (e.g., flaming or trolling or online bullying). While there may be consequences for this action in-game (e.g., guild members may reject a player and their avatar based on rude behavior in an MMOG), there are no external authorities that might reprimand a student for that behavior if it were exhibited IRL. In addition, anonymity means that students may not know with whom they are interacting.

Caution also needs to be exercised with gaming in general as the use of avatars in games means that there are endless opportunities for interaction and the game need never end. The constant availability of avatars with whom to interact may result in some players spending an excessive amount of time playing video games to the detriment of other activities and relationships. Gifted students may be more sensitized to game experiences through overexcitabilities and thus may be more vulnerable to excessive involvement and even isolating themselves from the real world (Eriksson, 2010). As with any activity, the need to examine its consequences within the context of the larger life experience is important. Griffiths (2010) advises parents to limit the child's playing time and to be aware of the recommendations of game ratings. Griffiths (2010) also suggests parents consider the physical space in which students game including screen placement and lighting.

Conclusion

Gifted adolescents are in a pivotal time of their development in which they are actively "trying on" identities and possible selves and learning necessary prosocial skills. Identities can be created and reflected in student gamers' construction and use of avatars. The use of avatars in games provides a venue for the discussion of adolescent identity, perspective-taking, problem-solving, and communication skills. Kircher-Morris (n.d.) suggests that, ultimately, video games can be a vehicle through which families and gifted teens can bond. The same is true for educators. Indeed, if gifted teens are gaming, then the game becomes a window through which educators can view gifted teens create and utilize their virtual possible selves. Asking about what gifted adolescents are learning through their avatars in video games also allows them to bring in their own expertise, experiences, and stories for discussion. Listening to these stories and experiences may be helpful for gifted teens in a time when change seems to be the only constant. We would leave readers with one major consideration: *The only way to really understand an adolescent's avatar self, their in-game choices, and their social interactions in virtual worlds is to play the games themselves.*

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ORCID iD

Susannah M. Wood https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1218-2329

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Bios

Susannah M. Wood, Ph.D. is currently an associate professor in the Department of Rehabilitation and Counselor Education at the University of Iowa. She is also a faculty partner with the Connie Belin and Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talented Development, where she provides professional development opportunities for undergraduate students, graduate students, and practicing educators related to the social and emotional concerns of gifted students. Her research interests encompass preparing school counselors for practice, with a particular focus on serving the gifted population in collaboration with other educators and professionals. Dr Wood's research has been published in such peer-reviewed publications as Gifted Child Quarterly, Roeper Review, Journal of the Education of the Gifted, Journal of School Counseling, Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling, and Journal of Counselor Leadership and Advocacy. In 2015 Dr. Wood co-edited a special section in the Journal of Counseling & Development dedicated to counseling the gifted individual with Dr. Nicholas Colangelo. With Dr. Tamra Stambaugh, she co-edited the book Serving Gifted Students in Rural Settings: A Framework for Bridging Gifted Education and Rural Classrooms (Prufrock Press). In 2018 she and Dr. Jean Sunde Peterson published Counseling Gifted Students: A Guide for School Counselors with Springer Publishing Company.

Antonia Szymanski is an associate professor of Gifted Studies at Western Kentucky University. Dr. Szymanski has published several articles on the needs of gifted students and how teachers can improve the educational experience of these learners. She has done extensive work regarding advanced diverse students and the ways that schools can support them. Her work focuses on underrepresented advanced students, the psychological and social needs of these learners, creativity, and talent development. Dr. Szymanski has devoted her professional career to improving the educational experience for gifted students and supporting parents and teachers in understanding their needs.