

# Minority gamers don't feel right in white skin; avatar options are woefully limited

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** As a youngster some 50 years ago, I watched *The Twilight Zone* regularly, but I remember only a few episodes vividly. In one of those, a man and his wife lived in an old west cabin in the desert hills. Hmm, this one is a western, I remember thinking, but I soon discovered that this idyllic scene was not the American west, but a small planet somewhere in space, and the man wasn't a rancher, but a prisoner and this planet was his prison. A space craft came to evacuate him one day because the planet was on a collision course with an asteroid. The prisoner and I were stunned to learn that the vessel did not have room for the wife. He refused to leave without her.

Here is the plot twist so typical of *The Twilight Zone*. The man charged with evacuating the prisoner said, "But she's only a robot." The prisoner had an emotional connection with a thing, lovely though she/it was. She had become so real to him that he was willing to stay with her and die.

And now, I have on my desk a short research paper that suggests similar human responses to avatars in digital games. Written by EdTech student Robin Armstead, the paper was the basis for her presentation at the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) conference in October. The following is an abridgement.

**By Robin Armstead**

Over the past five years, education has begun repurposing many online games and virtual world environments to actively engage students in a new delivery method for teaching and learning. Unequal representation of ethnicity in avatars puts minority players at a disadvantage in terms of making a psychological connection with their virtual self, thereby greatly diminishing game play.

The purpose of this research is to explore the options available to users to represent themselves in terms of skin, eye, and hair color. The default options one chooses in an attempt to get as close as possible to one's own representation will also be investigated. If a bias does exist in gaming platforms used by educators, then it is important that the gaming community is made aware of the impact it has on minority users and their gaming



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experience, and that reasonable solutions are offered.

The use of avatars in games moves the player from spectator to participant immersed in a realistic world. When one sees himself or herself as a character interacting with other characters and with the environment, the experience becomes much more personal. A psychological relationship

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## The avatar becomes a virtual extension of the user.

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develops between user and avatar (McCreery, Kathleen, Schrader, & Boone, 2012). The player uses this virtual identity for months or years and the avatar becomes a virtual extension of the user.

The foundation of this relationship begins

with choosing characteristics, such as name and physical features, such as skin, hair, and eye color. Options to change the mouth, nose, and body shape may also be available. The characteristics that one chooses becomes a digital rendering of himself in the virtual world (McCreery, Kathleen, Schrader, & Boone, 2012). The visual image not only defines a part of the character but also how others view and interact with her.

Research on minority representation in gaming is scarce. Williams, Martins, Consalvo, and Ivory, (2009) found “a systematic over-representation of males, whites, and adults” (p. 815). Tanner (2009) concluded that online games such as World of Warcraft

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### **In MapleStory, users actually have to pay to change skin color.**

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and EverQuest default to White ethnic representation, with alternative “exotic deviation” (p. 3) in skin color. In MapleStory, users actually have to pay to change their skin color.

Studying interactive role playing in a virtual world called Whyville, Kafai, Cook, and Fields (2010) found a dearth of dark skin selections. When players attempted to change their face to a darker color, they could not find matching body parts when changing other things about themselves like their clothing that only came with light skin features for the attached arms or legs. These “two toned” players were made fun of and some were subjected to racial jokes

and slurs. Because avatars—as representation-of self—have a psychological connection to how players identify with themselves in the game, the availability of an adequate selection of skin coloration is essential to the game’s immersive experience.

Online gaming is a valuable tool for educators and instructional designers to actively engage students. When applied in a meaningful way, it can harness the power and creativity of students’ minds, increase knowledge transfer, and cement the learning objectives because students live in the virtual environment where the learning experience is a lived experience.

The social and psychological aspects of this environment cannot be ignored by educators and game manufacturers because K-12 students go through periods of identity searching, and sometimes even crises, which can adversely affect learning. Without proper minority avatar choices, the gaming community is forced to ask itself what it is saying about the importance of different population groups and of minority players’ gaming/learning experience.

The internet provides a space for Earth’s ethnically rich and diverse users to connect across the barriers of geography, language, and culture to meet in online games and classes. When asking someone to represent him or herself in a game, it is an attempt to make a connection with the user and create an enhanced gaming experience. Maximizing this connection by having authentic characters or traits supports the goals of using avatars and creates the best possible experience for users.