"Blacks Deserve Bodies Too!" Design and Discussion about Diversity and Race in a Tween Online 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 ages 8-16. One unique feature of Whyville is the players' 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 will address 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.

Author Keywords

Avatars, identity, race, participatory culture, adolescent development

INTRODUCTION

Hello I'm Kerri_87 reporting live at Whyville. Over 1/2 of the Whyville avatar population is white faced, but 1/3 of the population have a black face. But what's interesting is that most 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 should [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 1st, 2000, in a newspaper article within Whyville.net, a multi-user virtual environment (MUVE) with over 1.5 million registered players between the ages of 8-16. Its author, 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" [8] 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 [16]. In fact, Kerri_87's observation captures both aspects: not only is there a limited number of players, "1/3 of the population," representing themselves as black within Whyville.net but, more importantly, 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 impact your representation of who you are or desire to be, but also influence your participation in the community, as those without matching bodies stand out among other players.

In this paper, 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 online games that rely on player-generated content. A small number of previous studies have documented racial stereotyping found in the available avatar choices in offered within commercial games [12; 25]. 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 [37]. In online worlds like Whyville and *Teen Second Life*, where players themselves 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 [23; 33]. For this reason, the representation of self with textual and/or graphical resources has significance for their identity formation [e.g., 14; 40]. But in the world of video and role-playing games, where so much tween networking and communication takes place, we know little if anything, about race impacts the participation and experiences of minorities. The focus of our paper is to cast a more systematic look at racial diversity in the design of and discussions about avatars within the MUVE 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, and observed a 2006 community event related to racial representations within Whyville.net.

BACKGROUND

Early debates about the Internet promoted a vision of an online world where class, race, and gender would not matter [e.g., 36], 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 [6; 19], the issue of race is only now beginning to attract attention. Nakamura [30] 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 chatrooms found that teens weave racial references, slurs, and identifiers in their online conversations [42].

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 [12] 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 [26] provided a similar analysis for the popular game *GTA3*. Our investigation taps into a new area of online MUVEs such as *Teen Second Life*, which are driven by player-generated content and therefore unlike the more commonly-studied game worlds such as *Worlds 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 like *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 [44].

One of the reasons why player-generated avatars might lend themselves to meaningful considerations of race is because, as Beth Kolko [21] 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". Such about 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 [13, 14]. 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 offline 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 [1] 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.

For our research, we wanted to examine the ways in which issues of race and diversity were articulated in Whyville, focusing on two aspects: avatar designs and public postings. We know from prior research [18] that these two aspects of life in Whyville, appearance and communication, are central activities for Whyville players. Our interest in avatar designs was based on Whyville players' nearly unlimited freedom to customize and change their online appearance to their liking, which provides a very unfettered arena in which to create virtual and projective identities. Avatars and avatar parts designed by players offer a particularly

promising window into understanding how participants in online worlds deal with representing themselves racially as they create virtual identities. The number and variety of face parts available to create your avatar provide a good indicator of the expressive resources at hand for players to create virtual identities in Whyville.

In addition to analyzing the expressive resources for virtual identity construction, we can observe some aspects of projective identity, or how real and virtual identities interact as a player embodies the avatar they have created for themselves, from the first-hand accounts of players who have publicly shared experiences related to creating and embodying avatars of one race or another. For that reason, we focused on public postings as represented in *The Whyville Times* because this allowed us to see whether and how issues of race in avatar design were brought to a larger audience in Whyville. Our investigation addresses the following questions: To what extent is race discussed in Whyville public postings? What do Whyvillians have to say about race in avatar design? What color diversity (and inequity) is there in face parts currently for sale in Whyville?

CONTEXT AND APPROACH

Whyville.net is a multi-user virtual environment (MUVE) with over 1.5 million registered players that encourages youth ages 8-16 to play casual science games in order 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 users, 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 [17]. 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 users 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). Since user-created faces are the primary representation of one's presence on Whyville, looks are very important! Looks also and 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.

Figure 1: Chatting on the beach in Whyville

We used the following data sources to examine the role of race in Avatar construction in Whyville: (1) a content analysis of articles published in *The Whyville Times* on the topic of race in avatar creation, (2) an assessment of the face parts Whyvillians have created and (3) participant observation and document analysis related to a recent Whyville community event, the "bluebie invasion" of May 2006, which was the culmination of an ongoing debate about the race choices offered to brand new members of Whyville.net.

Content Analysis of Newspaper Articles.

Using *The Times'* search tool, we searched for articles that included 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 of 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, with only a small subset of articles reporting 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 MUVEs, only articles about race and representations of race *within* Whyville.net were part of this analysis.

Assessing race in avatar parts

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. We counted the number of peach, brown, olive, and yellow blank heads and bodies available and then captured screenshots of all the non-peach heads and bodies. In addition, we collected information on the name and manufacturer of each face part. In order to confirm that our visual judgments of brown, olive, and yellow colors did not have overlapping boundaries or inconsistencies, we used Adobe Photoshop to assess the 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 (see Table 1). This also gave us a tool for assessing whether particular faces and bodies matched precisely.

Table 1: Frequency of different colors of heads and bodies.

Color	RGB value	Heads freq. (%)		Bodies freq. (%)	
brown	000.000.000	1	(0.01)	0	(0)
brown	051.000.000	1	(0.01)	1	(0)
brown	102.000.000	1	(0.01)	1	(0)
brown	102.051.000	5	(0.04)	0	(0)
brown	153.102.000	12	(0.09)	58	(0.08)
brown	153.102.001	1	(0.01)	0	(0)
brown	153.102.051	3	(0.02)	2	(0)
brown	204.102.000	1	(0.01)	2	(0)
total	**-**	**25**	**(0.18)**	**64**	**(0.09)**
olive	204.153.051	4	(0.03)	1	(0)
olive	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)
yellow	255.204.102	0	(0)	1	(0)
yellow	255.255.153	1	(0.01)	0	(0)
total	**-**	**5**	**(0.04)**	**1**	**(0)**

Table 1 summarizes frequency counts for all non-peach RGB values. Frequencies are presented first, followed by the percentage of total parts that each frequency represents, in parentheses. While heads came in 12 separate RGB values, there were only 8 RGB values of bodies available. There were only two head colors, 153.102.000 and 204.153.102 (one brown and one olive), for which the buyer would have a sizable selection of matching bodies. Note that many players prefer to have a selection of bodies to match their head. Because bodies come complete with clothes, only having one body for your head means wearing the same clothes all the time.

Observing Community Events in Whyville.
We also present results from participant observation and document analysis of a recent community event sparked by debate over the face parts assigned to new members before they are able to customize their look.

FINDINGS
Public comments about Race
Since the founding of Whyville.net, Whyvillians have posted over 9,000 articles in *The Whyville Times* on topics as diverse as Whyville politics, "real-world" current events,

fashion trends and entertainment events within Whyville and across the world, and the various games and simulations Whyvillians play to earn clams. While the 16 articles about race in avatar design which we identified represent a very small sub-set of the public discourse within Whyville, they are important because some of them culminated in a significant community event—the blubie invasion—which will be discussed shortly. Articles for the *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 while, as the discussion below will demonstrate, published articles represent a wide variety of opinions on most subjects, we can not 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* [28]:

> 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 user-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 [39] 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 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 while 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." [3] The presence of accessories like the "Latino girly arm" probably represent 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 [14], they are a potential place to observe their authors' struggles with or reflections upon 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* [34]:

> 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, don't 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." But 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 [5] 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 like *Black Like Me* and *In a Latina's Shoes*. An anonymous author [2] 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 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 can not be widespread because the author, a white person, hasn't experienced it first or second-hand, recapitulates many of the discussions on racism in the United States that have taken place among adults in non-virtual settings. Taken together, these four articles paint a picture of the kind of experimentation with avatar race that go on in Whyville, and the community reaction to postings about them.

Diversity and Race in Avatar Designs
All these postings about race in *The Whyville Times* need to be seen in relation to face parts available to Whyville citizens. In September of 2006, 67% of the blank heads for sale in Akbars were peachy tones best for representing white avatars. 18% of skin-tone blank heads for sale were brown, including eight separate brown tones. Only 11% were olive or tan tones useful for creating a Latino/a avatar, and very few were yellow. Consistent with citizen's complaints, the selection of bodies for sale on Akbar's is dominated by peach-toned parts, which account for 84% of the bodies available. More designers attempted non-peach heads than bodies. The 45 non-peach heads were created by

more than 21 separate designers, with 12 of these designers making just one head. All 120 bodies, in contrast, were made by just 13 people (8 of whom had also made heads).

Fig. 2: Examples of non-peach faces and bodies

Bringing race and avatar design together: The Bluebie Invasion

While 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 Blubie Invasion. The background of the Blubie Invasion centers on the fact that when new members join Whyville, they are assigned generic peach smiley faces (see Figure 3, left).

Fig. 3: Newbie faces before (left) and after (right) the Blubie discussion

These faces visually set newcomers apart from more experienced community members. 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 player's 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 articulate critique of 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. [29]" 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 in 3 times in *The Whyville Times* during 2004 and 2005. It was taken up by Ninja'04 in an unsuccessful bid for senator in 2005 [32] 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!

2006's winning senator, Mitsuy, hadn't 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!" [28]. 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.

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 [12]. 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™ and how many degrees of freedom game designers have in offering choices to players while staying within the game's narrative. But also in fantasy games like Lineage racial disparities emerge 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 [35]. This is an example of how real world racial differences can arise.

While we do not know the percentage of minorities participating in Whyville, we can assume based on general online presence that they are only present in small numbers. As our analyses of public postings and available avatar parts revealed, virtual communities mirror the racial issues present in society and cover the whole gamut from ostracism to lack of choices. But we also want to add a word of caution because the number of contributions is minimal when compared to the many hundreds of postings about other Whyville events and activities. Our longitudinal analysis revealed that the topic of race and racism pops up once in a while—but perhaps that is not surprising, given the notorious silence around race in our popular culture. For every article that brings up race, there are also those that argue that racism does not exist in Whyville or those who suggest that Whyville's designers should create specially designed rooms only for Blacks, Goths, and so on, recapitulating many of the separations found in tween life. These virtual worlds, like their video game counterparts, illustrate that even simple features such as the automatic avatar assignment to all new players are designed and therefore are malleable. The change of the default setting from a light-skinned oval to a blue-skinned oval may seem trivial at first, but leaves the player a choice of who to become.

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 like Whyville.net and *Teen Second Life*, the shift to user-generated content has resulted in a fundamental shift of power, responsibility, and opportunity [16]. At least some Whyvillians seemed to understand that both the responsibility and the opportunity for creating diversity in face parts was theirs, because

Kerri_87234's call to action was repeated intermittently for years. And in this particular MUVE, 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. Less people participated in designing bodies, and there was less diversity in part colors. This holds true despite the fact that there are about 5 times more bodies for sale than heads, so all things being equal, one would have expected to see more different colors in that category. Our analyses were a first step into articulating the presence of racial issues in this new genre of online communities, and identifying possibilities for social activism and change.

We focused our investigations on the avatars, the virtual representations of self, created by players. Our interest in tween's avatars in Whyville were informed by theoretical accounts that have outlined strong connections between real, virtual, and projective identities of players [14]. The quantity and quality of avatar face parts created in Whyville provides support for our assessment that Whyvillians are invested in the creation of their virtual identities. The newspaper postings about racial identity indicate that at least some of the Whyvillians consider race when crafting a virtual identity. Take for example Bluegal7's article "It's the Inside that Counts" [5]. 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 re-worked her virtual identity to correspond more closely with her real-world appearance. It is not clear how many Whyvillians formed these sort 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.

There is, of course, a larger issue looming behind the availability, or lack thereof, of avatar parts for the creation of virtual identities, which deals with the age of our players. While identification with racial and ethnic identity starts at a much younger age [33], our tween players 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. Since 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 [9]. These kind of conversations are important for tweens from a developmental perspective, so that they can learn about other views and to explore who they are, both off line and on line.

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