Virtual Virtuality in the Classroom

Course/Level:
This activity can be applied to any level of course in Media, Information, and Technoculture (MIT) dealing with virtual worlds, video games, or digital representations of the self. It may also be applicable to other disciplines dealing with virtual worlds, such as Computer Science (video game design specifically), or courses in disciplines such as Anthropology, Sociology, or English that offer an interdisciplinary and technological focus.

Rationale:
In a course dealing with representations of the self in online environments – such as with virtual worlds and video games – one of the most difficult elements of working through the topic is providing students with an accessible way to have a virtual experience. The technical requirements can make going into the virtual world in a classroom setting difficult, while the time required to set up an account and create a virtual self can be prohibitive. Furthermore, once in a virtual world, the wide variety of interfaces, options, activities, and virtual goods can be overwhelming to students, causing them to lose focus on the topic at hand.1

By offering students an alternative to entering into the virtual world – virtual virtuality – it is possible to introduce these sites into the classroom in a way that is more efficient and focused than would be possible in the virtual world itself. Using pictures of virtual selves and virtual goods offers an opportunity to show students what exists within a virtual world in a way that is not dependent on technology and the time required to use it. At the same time, this approach also allows instructors to customize the “virtual” experience of the students and expose them to the elements of online life that are most relevant to the topic being covered.

Key Concepts:
- Virtual worlds rely on visual representations of the self (avatars) as well as virtual goods (clothes, accessories, vehicles, houses) that are available to users
- Participants are able to construct their avatars in different ways within a virtual world through the choices they make in terms of appearance and possessions
- The wide variety of options in terms of appearance and possessions offers users freedom and flexibility in creating their virtual self

Learning Objectives:
Through this activity, students will:
- become familiar with some of the features of and options within virtual worlds including avatars and virtual goods and the flexibility with which they can be used by making their own virtual self
- demonstrate critical thinking about the meanings and implications of selecting an avatar and acquiring possessions by explaining their choices
- through discussion, critically consider how avatar and virtual good selection could be interpreted or “read” by other participants in the virtual world

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Great Ideas in Teaching

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Materials:
For this activity, a selection of pictures of virtual avatars or other characters will be required, as well as a variety of pictures of virtual goods. These goods can be tailored to the focus of the class, and may include items to alter appearance, such as hair, armor, accessories, and clothing, items associated with a dwelling, such as homes, furniture, and artwork, or personal possessions, such as weapons, pets, or vehicles. There should be more pictures available than there are students in the class to ensure that students have a degree of choice.

Activity:
Students are asked to come to the front of the class where they will select a picture of an avatar from one table. From another, they will select a number of virtual goods that they find appealing and would be interested in having for their virtual life. Students should be given five to ten minutes to select their avatars and virtual goods.

Once seated, a class discussion will be held regarding the avatars and goods that students selected. Discussion around these issues tends to be interesting and provocative, so leaving upwards of 20 minutes is advisable. Discussion topics can include:
- What general trends are noticeable in the available pictures
- Why students selected the avatars and virtual goods that they did
- How the choice of an avatar and possessions related to their sense of self
- Whether there were any avatars or goods that students looked for but were missing
- What options are available in virtual worlds that are not available in offline life
- What are some of the consequences of having complete flexibility in terms of appearance
- How students might interpret the choices made by others

Variations:
This activity can be applied in different classroom contexts. Using printouts of virtual goods, it can be used as a way to prompt discussion of the meanings associated with virtual consumption by allowing students to choose the items they would most like to have in their virtual life. For goods that must be purchased, adding the prices to the back of these printouts can add another dimension to the activity, allowing student to calculate the expense associated with their desired virtual items as well as the reasons for price variations between different virtual goods for a class that is more specifically focused on consumption.

Simplified pictures of avatars can also be used to prompt more specific discussions on identity, both in terms of how individuals present themselves and how others interpret their self-presentation. Providing students a variety of basic undressed avatars and a selection of clothing and features can be used to explore identity construction and discuss why students constructed their avatar in the ways that they did. Finally, asking students to create an avatar with a particular persona in mind and then having classmates attempt to interpret their meaning can be used to highlight the difficulties of “reading” other individuals in online environments.

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2 For large classes a variety of images can be made available to the group as a whole, while in a smaller class it is possible to create individual packages containing avatar images and a selection of pictures of virtual goods from which students can choose.