

When the game becomes serious; what are the rights and responsibilities of the learner's avatar in the virtual world?

*"I am my avatar; my avatar is me. I am beholden by any promises my Avatar makes on my behalf and my Avatar will honour any contract I make."*

There is an ever-increasing use of virtual worlds such as Second Life™, OpenSim and SmallWorlds in which learners explore, experience, communicate and act. In these 3D immersive (3Di) environments the learner adopts an avatar and becomes the new persona they devise. The appearance, actions and location of the avatar are under the control of the owner but are also affected by objects in the environment and other avatars. The immersive element results directly from the cognitive, dextrous, social and emotional aspects of the experience. Virtual worlds are becoming the home for serious learning as well as still retaining their more vicarious activities.

As teachers, tutors and trainers we have a duty of care towards our learners. By analysing the nature of avatar, we are better able to engage in informed discussion of social justice and inclusion with respect to the safety, well-being, freedom and rights of avatars within a virtual world. This work builds upon the model devised in the Masters dissertation (Scopes, 2009) and considers the persona of the avatar in terms of classical personality models such as those of Freud (1960), Kohlberg (1973) and Tansley (1920) as well as the learning domains (Scopes, 2009:22). It also considers what responsibilities exist or should be made explicit when using virtual worlds as the vehicle for learning. The principles proposed are illustrated by means of cameos based upon real avatars living, working and learning in a virtual world.

The key points arising from this work are: the use of virtual worlds is a current and real educational and sociological phenomenon; cyberbullying is a recognised issue. Our learners learn in virtual worlds and therefore we have a duty of care to have safeguarding measures in place. There are negative issues in the virtual world including: stalking; bullying; identity theft; prejudice based on appearance/status/quality of avatar; restrictions in freedom of expression (anti-BDSM); etc. and there are positive opportunities including: exploring identity; enabling experience of others (e.g. exploring in a wheel chair); liberating by bypassing physical disability; etc. All educators need to consider the issues and have informed opinions.

There are a number of key works relating to learning in virtual worlds. There are fewer considerations of the rights and responsibilities that exist for avatars in that same world.

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