

A Young Girl's Construction of Identity on a Multi-User Domain: Implications for Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract: In the borderless world of the Internet and computer-mediated communication, where anonymity and the creation of persona are rife, the construction of virtual identities is inevitable. Users adopt identities that are multiple: real and virtual selves. Identities may be constructed through personality, social roles, relationships and shared values. These may be manifest through the use of language, names and social cues such as emoticons in virtual environments. The virtual world therefore offers people the opportunity to assume different identities each time they log on. Changing one's identity is the norm of virtual games, Multi-user domains (MUDs) and social networking sites. These virtual platforms provide a new context for the exploration of identity, as the anonymity of these environments gives users the opportunity to play with their identities and experience new ones. This paper examines how an eleven-year-old girl engages on a MUD, and how she negotiates her identity in a MUD as a community of practice. The paper sets out to examine the following aim: to establish the influence of the Multi-User Domain on the identity construction of an eleven year old female.

Keywords: Virtual Identities, Language, Multi-User Domain, Communities of Practice

1. Introduction: Children and Technology

Increasingly, the virtual world has assumed an important role in children's peer group relationships, as they no longer limit their friendships to the physical school playground, but extend them into cyberspace. Technology has provided children with an alternate platform to engage in social interaction that will ultimately affect the socialization process. It is not uncommon to find that in many homes too cyberspace has overtaken the realm of the social, as young children spend their time dressing virtual dolls, and chatting online to friends they met across oceans. McKay (2003) states that many people believe cyberspace is not social by definition in that it challenges what we mean and understand as traditionally social – that of being physically together. However, she argues that personal relationships are possible, and even more abundant in today's society because of the platform provided for these personal relationships by technology.

Changing one's identity in cyberspace has also become the norm, particularly in virtual games, multi-user domains (MUDs) and social networking sites. These virtual platforms provide a new context for identity construction and exploration. As Asgari and Kaufman (2005: 1) comment "The anonymity of such environments gives people the opportunity to play with their identities and experience new ones". We are allowed, through virtual space, to express different facets of the self through the construction of online characters, or avatars and identities.

2. Aim of the study

This paper examines how an eleven year old girl engages on a MUD, and how she negotiates her identity in a MUD as a community of practice. Specifically, the paper sets out to examine the following aim: to establish the influence of the Multi-User Domain on the identity construction of an eleven year old female, in an attempt to answer the questions:

- How does an eleven year old female construct her identity on the *Moshi Monsters* site?
- How does the visual construction of the *Moshi Monsters* character and its domain influence her construction of identity?
- How does the *Moshi Monsters* community shape the identity of the eleven old girl?

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3. Literature Review

3.1. Constructing identities and virtual identities

In the borderless world of the Internet and computer mediated communication, where anonymity and the creation of persona are endemic, the construction of virtual identities is inevitable. Turkle (1995: 9) argues “(The Internet) links millions of people in new spaces that are changing the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the form of our communities, our very identities”. She continues “The Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life” (Turkle, 1995:180). Users adopt identities that are multiple: real and virtual selves. Identities may be constructed through personality, social roles, relationships, and shared values. These may be manifest through the use of language, names and social cues such as emoticons and avatars in virtual environments.

The virtual world therefore offers people the opportunity to assume different identities each time they log on. Changing one’s identity is the norm of virtual games, Multi-user domains (MUDs) and social networking sites. These virtual platforms provide a new context for the exploration of identity, as the anonymity of these environments gives users the opportunity to play with their identities and experience new ones (Asgari & Kaufman, 2005).

Hall (1992) argues that old identities, which stabilised the social world, are in decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject. This crisis of identity (Hall, 1992) is seen as part of a wider process of change, which is dislocating the central structures and processes of modern societies, and undermining the frameworks that gave individuals stable anchorage in the world. Thus, as indicated by Castells (1996), people increasingly make meaning, not on the basis of what they do, but on the basis of what they are, or believe they are. In Castells’ view “Identity is people’s source of meaning and experience” (Castells, 2004:6). Castells (2004) also suggests that, from a sociological perspective, all identities are constructed.

4. Research context, approach and methodology

4.1. Context: Moshi Monsters

Moshi Monsters may be classified a Multi-User Domain (MUD), or “an online space where children construct avatars, assume fantasy roles and interact with one another” (Calvert, Strouse, Huffaker & Lal, 2009: 250). Individuals inhabit a social world and use a variety of resources within it to construct their identities. They have access to vast amounts of information, learn to appropriate this knowledge and instill it with meaning that is useful to their interests.

Youngsters can log onto the site with a pseudonym. They are given a Moshi Monster character which they ‘individualize’ by dressing from a range of outfits. The ‘Monster’ is then allocated a room on the site which the user designs and personalizes by buying furniture and accessories via virtual shops. Once this is completed the user can then embark on collecting as many friends as s/he can in the *Moshi Monsters* community. These friends have the opportunity to rate or score one another’s rooms – an activity that holds much esteem. On the site the user under the guise of the monster and pseudonym can complete tasks, visit other monsters’ rooms, and progress up a ladder of achievement, while simultaneously chatting with children around the world.

4.2. Approach and methodology

The study is a qualitative case study. Using Denzin and Lincoln’s notion that qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected methods, hoping always to get a better fix on the subject matter at hand (1998:3), the study utilized interviews and observations as methodologies within the case study.

4.3. Research participant

The research began by selecting a sample that fell within the category of an eleven year old girl, who, for the purpose of this study and to maintain privacy, is referred to as Jane. She attends school and is a good

student. After school she participates in some sport, and enjoys reading and spending time on her computer. The time she spends on her computer is monitored by the mother. Jane was interviewed extensively around her cyber practices, as well as her engagement on the *Moshi Monsters* site in particular. She was observed during the time she spent on the MUD over a period of a few weeks. She was asked to talk the researcher through her activities while she negotiated her way through the site, and a narrative emerged. All conversation was digital recorded and later transcribed, as note-taking could have distracted her.

4.4. Data analysis methods

The recorded dialogue was transcribed and responses were coded according to themes laid out in the research questions. Categories based on the variables being studied were drawn up for analysis.

5. Data description

The main themes that emerged from the interviews and observations provide the framework for analysis.

5.1. Avatar and room

When logging on to the site, as explained earlier, participants have the task of personalizing their monster avatar. When asked what the most important factor in determining popularity on the site, Jane's view was "how the monster looks". What makes the monster's looks significant is its ability to help you acquire friends. She said "You get more friends, 'cos if you on the road they will add you". Jane explained further that when you log on to the site you are able to see all the individual monster avatars. In order to ascertain the monster's user details "you put your mouse over it and it says boy or girl, name and country". Thus, each user is afforded the opportunity to determine some biographical information about the user behind the monster avatar.

Jane said she "bought" her monster new clothes and accessories to make it look "prettier". One of the ways to get money in the form of rocks and gems to clothe each monster, and to provide décor for a room was through rating other participants' rooms. Scoring a room of a new participant was one of Jane's favourite tasks in the game. Jane added that she decorated her monster and room the way she liked, not necessarily to score higher points. However, she felt it would upset her if a friend gave her a low score.

5.2. *Moshi Monsters* community

Jane said that her *Moshi Monsters* community comprised mostly of her school friends. While she had several overseas friends, she communicated more actively with her school friends or children she knew. Therefore it appeared that she accepted friends more for their ability to score her room, while maintaining contact and chatting online with those she already knew. The issue of chatting also relates to the health of your monster, in that the more you chat, the longer your monster stays alive. In a way social interaction was necessary for its survival. She said however, that she still preferred face-to-face conversations at school rather than online chatting. All messages sent to the monster are sent to a display board and are visible to the monster's friends. Jane said that you could delete messages you did not want others to see, or you could delete messages if "someone says something ugly about you". She said "If they have three mishaps, they off *Moshi Monsters*".

Most times Jane said she knew the identity of the monsters. However she once had a negative experience when someone wrote "bad things" about her. She was shaken at the incident, but figured out in face-to-face conversations with friends at school that these were other children at school. This highlights the issue of anonymity on the site through the mask of the avatar. Jane understood how easy it was to create a fake identity "so I can like just make myself like I am 23 and I live in America and I can go by (the name) Jack". At one stage she created a monster called JoJo who was a 14-year old American boy, but she did not maintain the site and JoJo "died". Thus, being aware of the possibility of deception, Jane soon lost interest and preferred maintaining her own identity with her friends.

Popularity on the site was another topic of interest. A user named Mac was considered the most popular because "he always gives cheats and stuff". Becoming a member on the site was an additional attraction.

What lured Jane was that “everyone else was a member, I wanted to play with them”. Membership ensures you get certain privileges such as mystery boxes and treats. Those friends who are not members are excluded.

Jane made a clear distinction between the real world and the cyber world. When asked if she would like her life to be like the *Moshi monsters* world, she did not hesitate: “no, because you got your own world, you are real, they are monsters”.

6. Data analysis and interpretation

The data described above is located within a theoretical framework in order to be analysed and interpreted.

6.1. Avatar and room

Taylor (2006: 40) states that avatars “come to provide access points in the creation of identity and social life.” Through an avatar, a user is able to embody a persona within a social networking site. The avatar becomes the focal point of all social interaction on the MUD, and it is through the avatar that the user brings to life all aspects of the virtual world. The research shows that Jane values highly the appearance of her monster avatar. It is through the monster’s appearance that other participants in the virtual world would consider becoming friends and part of her cyber network. This aspect of social interaction foregrounds issues of identity construction. Identity, according to Hall and others is socially constructed, and through this socialization the participant negotiates her identity. When looking at identity being constructed through mediated symbolic material, the avatar can be said to embody the symbolic artefact. According to Thompson (1995: 217) we have access to symbolic material from a variety of places, in this instance the *Moshi Monsters* MUD. Through using the symbolic artifact of the avatar Jane has been able to create a personal narrative on the site. The narrative consists of the life that the avatar has come to embody, the friends she makes, the conversations she has, the room that she has designed and decorated. All these elements or artefacts work together to construct Jane’s cyber identity. It is this narrative that constructs her (cyber) reality (Thompson, 1995).

While it may seem evident how Jane goes about constructing her online identity through the use of her avatar, one may ask if this practice has any bearing on whether or not this practice has had any bearing on her identity construction in the ‘real’ world. Taylor (2006: 41) states that avatars “form one of the central points at which users intersect with a technological object and embody themselves, making the virtual environment and the variety of phenomenon it fosters real.” This “real” can extend to all that is experienced in the offline world. While the research reveals that Jane took the act of creating the perfect avatar very seriously it also shows that she was well-aware that she had her own life, which she regarded as better because “you are real and they are monsters”. Thus she was aware that the avatar was merely a creation in the virtual world that did not significantly impact on her real world.

Jane’s assurance that the monster and room are constantly appealing to other users can be seen in terms of what Taylor (2002: 46) explains as affiliation with the virtual community. The act of decorating and making personal choices that pertain to her avatar and room is an attempt to ensure acceptance within the virtual community, and becomes a tool to ensure that other users befriend her. While her online identity rests on the appearance of the monster avatar and room, it can also be argued that through the process of constructing an online identity, Jane aided in the production of her offline identity. Dutton (1999: 5) refers to anxiety, societal goals, day to day experiences, self-esteem and relationships as influencing identity construction. One may view Jane’s perceptions related to her avatar and room perfection as well as friendship numbers as anxious striving to achieve a goal, and that it has an effect on her self-esteem and both online and offline relationships, criteria established by Dutton. Taylor (2002: 56) also states “identities and bodies are not constructed in a vacuum but are given meaning, as well as supported or challenged in social contexts.” Thus the interaction occurring at school among peers pertaining to the site allows for the discourse needed for online communication and identity construction. The attitudes and judgements of offline peers serve to reinforce participants’ self concept and identity. Smith (1996) points to the premise that individuals develop in response to the attitudes of others, they incorporate certain aspects of others’ attitudes that

ultimately develop in response to the attitudes of others, that ultimately come together to constitute the formation of the self.

The issue of gender experimentation also arose in the interview through the creation of Jane's second monster on the site, Jo Jo. She consciously designed Jo Jo as a male with biographical detail contrary to her own. Calvert et al (2009) state that children construct their identities around their gender, and therefore inadvertently engage in gender-based activities. However, in today's technological age, it has become easier to blur boundaries and cultural restraints, and to present themselves in different ways. An avatar is one such mode. Jane's experimentation with Jo Jo demonstrates this, however, she was not sufficiently stimulated by her self-constructed male persona to pursue it very far.

6.2. *Moshi Monsters* community

Another view on identity is that it is linked to one's knowledge that one belongs to a social group (Stets and Burke, 2000: 225). Jane elucidated that she entered the *Moshi Monsters* MUD because she saw her friends from school on it and that the reason she goes online is to chat with her friends. Likewise she is a member in an attempt to participate with her friends in certain activities, thus making her part of the in-group. This suggests very strongly that in order to maintain solid relations with her offline friends it was necessary for her to join the MUD community. Self-categorisation has thus been established through the participant firmly establishing similarities between herself and her offline social group. If the participant had chosen not to join the site there would have been a marked exclusion between herself and her peers. As social identity purports, the fact that one has engaged within the group and subsequently this group unity is what leads the individual to believe her identity is rooted within that social group. Interaction and chatting is an activity that all users partake in. Holloway and Valentine (2003: 131) clarify that for most children online friends are virtual manifestation of their offline friends. This can be applicable in the case of Jane as she stated most of her friends are "people (I) know from school, and that she only talks to the ones she knows. In this instance the MUD is a medium to support and solidify existing offline friendships. Here it is again important to restate the participant's initial motivation to join the game as a way to ensure membership amongst her existing social group.

While this research is not focussed on the participants' language usage on the site, it must be mentioned that "personality develops through encounters with the physical world and through relations with other human beings which are mediated by language" (Smith, 1996). Language is therefore an activity which is fundamental to the construction of the self, as people use it to influence behavior over one another and over their own actions. This also intersects with Thompson's (1995: 210) notion of narratives. In addition to the avatar being the centre of the participants' online narrative, so too are the chat topics that occur both online and offline about all that is experienced on the *Moshi Monsters* MUD. Jane creates a narrative for herself offline through the sharing of online stories and encounters with her friends. This is evident in an encounter described earlier when participants were talking negatively about Jane and it upset her. The avatar named "Sishater" was said to be "talking rubbish" about her online, yet these issues were confronted offline, at school with peers; solidifying the notion that the online cannot be separated from the offline in this particular instance.

Although the participant made clear that she would rather talk to her friends at school and in real life, she too alluded to the fact that they were online she would prefer to chat online rather than on the telephone as it "wastes money" and "cos its fun". This reveals to us that while Jane still finds the online world of chat exciting she enters into it with the hope of talking to existing friends about issues pertaining to school or the holidays, for example. This legitimizes Smith's (in Holloway and Valentine, 2003:11) observation that individuals carry with them the sum-total of their experiences and expectations generated in more social spaces. This point is vital in the identity argument in that it alludes to the fact that one's offline identity plays a role in how one behaves online, and vice versa. One of the pertinent moments during the interview was Jane's recognition that her virtual and real worlds were separate, though intertwined entities. She perceived her real life to be more exciting because she was not a monster (that could be manipulated). While this can be seen as a mature analysis of a MUD environment, it cannot be ignored that the social world of MUDs has a profound impact on Jane's everyday actions and interactions.

7. Conclusion

The findings explored the assumptions set out in the aims of this paper. Through an analysis of observations and interviews with Jane, her use of avatars, as well as her individualization of her room, it can be seen that Jane and other participants engaged in activities that not only constructed online identities, but that these constructions extended offline as well. The Moshi Monsters community afforded Jane an opportunity to share experiences with her friends, and strengthen relationships that ultimately enhance her in-group status – which is a concept central to identity construction. Furthermore, the MUD environment created an alternative context for Jane in which to cognitively and emotionally construct an identity, based not only on self-presentations to the online audience, but to those in her offline space as well. The plethora of symbolic material afforded Jane through the *Moshi Monsters* domain has enabled her to actively seek out a community in which she interacts and designs an identity she feels most comfortable with; one that can be changed at any time as she feels necessary. She can even create alternative identities, such as Jo Jo, even though she does not pursue this. The unique narrative that Jane has created through her avatar, room and overall community experience have overflowed into her offline world, and through these Jane has engaged in the socialisation process necessary for the construction of her self-concept.

The concept of identity is laden with psychological and semantic meaning. The exploration of this notion relies heavily on both theoretical and practical evidence. This study served to examine whether the construction of identity is in any way moulded by the emergent virtual spaces in which children participate. The study is unique in that it has contributed to existing knowledge in a new way. It is inevitable that there are limitations to such studies. However, longer term studies with a larger range of participants would most likely provide stronger results. Future research could delve into longer term studies. One could also examine social and contextual factors such as the influence of family as mediators in the construction of identity.

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