AVATARS AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION: GIRLHOOD IDENTITY IN SOCIAL NETWORKING SPACES

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Avatars and the Cultural Politics of Representation:
Girlhood Identity in Social Networking Spaces

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Supervisory Committee

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by

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Abstract

Within social media and popular culture, new and diverse forms of online identity representation are emerging in virtual spaces. As traditional literacy practices yield to newer literacies, these forms of identity representation require and receive critical scrutiny. Personalized avatars are one such form. They provide a site through which individuals may represent themselves as a constructed product of identity and the discursive practices that contribute to it.

This qualitative study explores the cultural politics of representation with ten teenaged girls who constructed personalized avatars for social networking sites. Its purpose is to investigate the truth effects about representation, girlhood identity and culture, and to analyze the power structures present in the narrative and graphic images of girlhood self-representation. As part of this analysis, personalized avatars are deconstructed as forms of visual language within a broader context of critical media literacy.

The ubiquitous character of social networking places girls and their images under a scrutiny within which they become objects of a regulatory gaze. Drawing from a cultural studies methodology, this study utilizes critical ethnography informed by feminist poststructuralism to examine the politics of this gaze and to articulate the tensions between attempting to be true to lived experience while remaining cognizant of the always partial and ever political nature of representation. This framework challenges normative notions of the self and attempts to expose how power structures within a site of avatar production intersect with girlhood performative desire.

This study finds that normative discourses around gender, ability, class, ethnicity, and beauty govern representation for teenaged girls in online spaces in a manner similar to real life locations. Despite a widely held belief that girls have an expanded capacity to represent themselves through online forums of individual creativity, this study suggests that structures of social media continue to contribute to the power of these regulatory discourses. This study finds that girls report a constant insecurity and questioning around their self-representations and, as such, these findings have implications for critical media education as well as future research related to girlhood identities in new media spaces.

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And finally – I am thankful for the lessons I learned from my grandparents. Nanny taught me that a girl could get an education just because she wants to. And Raddy taught me that when you are curious about something, you've got to go look it up. If I close my eyes, I am a little girl standing in their library, loving the smell of books and pipe. I wish you could be here to see this. I know that you would be proud.

Chapter 1
Introduction

How do we know what we know about ourselves? How do we know who we are?
Smith and Watson, 2001

Personal and Practitioner Related Concerns

As a child and teenager, I grew up with scars on my jaw and neck from injuries I sustained in a car accident where my jugular vein was cut. The wounds I sustained required scores of sutures, or what are more commonly known as "stitches". At the time of the accident, there was little regard to the scars that might be left, instead the job for my doctor was to stop the life threatening bleeding. The notion of a suture as a kind of "just in time" remedy — a way to join a wound and make whole that which has untimely been torn apart — has come to represent more than a means to create a scar, and a visual reminder of an accident. With the lens of a doctoral student, my perception of suture plays a pivotal role in how identity and critical media literacy become stitched together, and how subjectivity is sometimes sutured using the images and assumptions available in popular culture's literacy practices. I was self-conscious of my scars growing up, and I had plastic surgery twice before grade twelve to try to remove them. I remember at eleven years old being determined that I would not be defined by what I looked like. I knew at a fundamental level that my appearance should not be a measure of who I was. But I was a girl, and in my world, it did matter.

In the first years of my doctoral work I was preoccupied with questions around media education and the constitutive effect of popular culture on how girls understand

body image. As a former English language arts teacher, and as one who now teaches educators, I am interested in the way English language arts, as a discipline, has recently moved toward an acceptance of multiple forms of representing as a means to create meaning. For a decade and a half, curriculum in Atlantic Canada has claimed to prepare students for an ever advancing, technically demanding future (Foundation for the Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum, 1996). Yet here, as in many other locations, concerted critical attention to the influence of electronically mediated texts remains lacking (Coiro, Lankshear, Knobel and Leu, 2008; Dolby, 2003; Hammett and Barrell, 2002; Kellner, 2000, 2004; Kelly, 1997; Kress, 2000, 2003; Morgan, 1998, 2000; Torres & Mercado, 2007). Despite movements that recognize the need for critical media education (Alvermann, Moon & Hagood, 1999; Buckingham, 2003; Dolby, 2003; Luke and Freebody, 1997; Morgan 1999, 2000; Quinn, 2003; Share, 2009), for many school students, print reading and writing remain the privileged modes of meaning-making, knowledge production and accountability at school (Burn and Nixon, 2005; Coiro et al., 2008; Kress, 2003, 1997; Luke, 2007; Pirie, 1993). Moreover, despite the mounting scholarship to suggest otherwise, popular cultural texts are not readily sanctioned for use in the classroom as objects of study or inquiry, much less the kinds of text students are expected to produce or analyze at exam time.

In the spring of 2007, I was introduced to a book, *Alter ego: Avatars and their creators* (Cooper, 2007). It presents a "gallery of portraits" and juxtaposes images of virtual gaming avatars with photographs of their real life creators. Cooper observed that while people initially seem to create their online persona under the guise of anonymity, the identities of online characters tend to be "less ordinary" than individuals are in real

life. While researching for his book, he also observed a lack of "fat" avatars in the gaming world. In my preliminary research, I found that Thomas (2007) had also observed only thin avatars in the context of virtual world spaces. This led me to wonder about the cultural politics of constructing virtual bodies with avatars in other online locations, and in particular about avatars designed to be intentional likenesses of their creators, such as those that can be made on Rogers Yahoo sites. (For the purposes of this dissertation, I employ the term *personalized avatar* to highlight the autobiographical and personal nature of this genre of avatar, and to distinguish it from alter ego avatars employed in gaming.)

While watching my oldest daughter choose a profile picture for her page on the social networking site, *Facebook*, I also wondered what might happen if she used a personalized avatar in place of her photograph. I wondered about the socio-cultural implications of girls writing themselves into existence through the discursive practice of such avatar construction. Juxtaposing the graphic limitations of personalized avatars with the desired identity performance, I wondered how girls negotiate the politics of representation with these avatars? How does this discourse function? What are the socio-cultural effects on identity, subjectivity and agency given the "personalized" yet commercially influenced nature of these creations? How can an examination of the visual language included in the girl's avatar graphics contribute to the production of meaning, subjectivity and power? I also wondered how personalized avatars might be likened to a visual form of autobiography. These concerns came to power this study.

On one level, I wondered if examining personalized avatars might provide an opportunity to broaden traditional understanding of writing and text decoding and allow

me to enter an academic conversation within the field of multimodal literacy (Alverman, 2002; Alverman and Hagood, 2001; Cope and Kalantis, 2000; Luke, 1997), or new literacy (Gee, 2003; Knobel, 1999; Kress, 2003, Lankshear and Knobel, 2003; 2006; Street, 1998, 2005). With the ubiquitous popular media serving as society's primary public pedagogue, hegemonic discourses define how (among other things) gender, ability, ethnicity, class, and beauty get understood (Dolby, 2003; Giroux, 1998, 1999; Hagood, 2008, Levin and Kilbourne, 2008; Share, 2009). Sociological and educational researchers have examined social and cultural discourses and the influences of commercially populated sites (Bloustien, 2003; Driscoll, 2002; Giroux, 1998; Harris, 2003, 2004; Kellner and Share 2007; Kenway and Bullen 2001; Klein, 2002; Linn, 2000; Schor, 2004; Steinberg and Kincheloe, 1998; Walkerdine, 1997). Conversations that were once material of private domain are now exposed, and shared in public forums (Cope and Kalantis, 2000). Engagement with this literature permitted me to question the politics behind how teenage girls might narrate themselves in their online social spaces.

On another level, the constitutive nature of popular culture's discursive formations (Foucault, 1972) allows a poststructuralist theoretical discussion around epistemology, the primacy of language and the construction of identity. It also permitted me to examine how a poststructuralist critique of personalized avatars might respond differently to questions humanism has answered about how individuals understand who they are (Adams St. Pierre, 2000). Historically, a humanist agenda has sought to bring order to a disordered society by employing a scientific and moral rationality. Through humanism, truth and knowledge are produced through reason and language has produced binaries, hierarchies and categories that often privilege similitude over difference in an attempt to

maintain order and structure (Derrida, 1976). In so doing, humanism has produced a wide range of taken for granted "truths" or "truth effects" that reflect what has been taken up as knowledge and which regulates, domesticates and orders society. However, poststructuralism has viewed the grand narratives and the truth effects of humanism as highly suspect.

Drawing from Venn (2006), Wetherell (2008) highlights a conventional definition of identity as the externally constructed public face of social groups. From this perspective, identity defines individuals in terms of relational categories such as race, gender, ability, and class, while these categories recognize association with social groups, for example: teacher, student, and parent. What makes this definition problematic, however, is that "It is about social categories, horrible clichés and modes of conduct derived from those social categories. It is how the person is known to others in the broadest most general and least interesting ways" (p. 77). Furthermore, Wetherell notes that a humanist definition of subjectivity is designed to sum up the complexity of a lived life. Here, the subject (or the self) is constituted through a set of deliberate actions, substantive thoughtfulness and reflexivity. It "annexes the experiential, the feeling stuff, the personal in contrast to the ready made, and the 'real' as opposed to the ideological" (p. 77).

When personalized avatars are considered from a commonsense discourse, they at first appear to offer girls an opportunity to construct an image of a coherent self, consistent with these essentialist and humanist categories. In fact, these types of avatars are often marketed as constructions of personalized identity. But when a feminist poststructuralist lens is cast on these avatars they are seen as part of a larger web of social

discursive formations, constituted amid commercial expectations, not to mention dominant patriarchal discourses. The visual language that constitutes these avatars is seen as forceful in shaping visual representations and regulating (even suturing) girls' subjectivities. As such, the avatars can be conceptualized as an important site of political struggle always open to dispute and redefinition, and any resistance to visual language as discourse is crucial to "the production of alternative forms of knowledge, or where such alternatives already exist, of winning individuals over to these discourses and gradually increasing their social power" (Weedon 1987, p. 111). More than two decades ago, Gilbert argued (1989), popular discourses in language and literature education and prevailing individualist pedagogies offered no position of authority for young girls to construct their own subjectivity outside the prevailing dominant patriarchal positions. Instead, these discourses assume that the self is "a coherent, ungendered entity, easily discovered and recognized and empowered" (p. 263). Given the continued privileging of humanist discourses in sites of language learning today, these constructed texts offer a pedagogical opportunity to examine how girls continue to be domesticated by dominant patriarchal discourses in popular culture.

Whether avatars are of the alter ego type, or intentionally autobiographical in nature, an avatar embodies a relation to a creator's identity. I wondered what considerations might ground the construction and sharing of such avatars when they are posted on social networking sites? In the relationships I have formed with teenage girls over the past twenty years, as a parent of three daughters, as a junior and senior high school English language arts teacher, and as a competitive figure skating coach, I have witnessed teenage girls struggle with how they want to (re)present themselves in the

world and to the world. I wondered about the peer pressure teenaged girls feel, and about the social cost of (re)presenting themselves in a commercially populated online space (Aapola, Gonick, and Harris, 2005; Bloustien, 2003; Bruckman, 1993; Butler, 2005, 2004, 1993; Comber and Nixon, 2003; 1989; Driscoll, 2002; Jiwani, Steenbergen, and Mitchell, 2006; Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie, 2005, 2006; Mazzarella, 2005; Pomerantz, 2006; Valentine and Holloway, 2002).

As a teenager in the 1980s, I was a competitive figure skater. In a sport that relies heavily on the opinions and approval of others, figure skating shaped how I constructed my appearance and my self-perception. On the ice, originality and appearance were important; individuality was rewarded, but only within strict parameters. Off the ice, however, it was important to fit in with the crowd. The commercial youth market was beginning to explode. MTV had just begun its evolution as a giant marketing machine, and teenagers were beginning to emerge as prey for hungry and unapologetic corporations (Kenway and Bullen, 2001; Klein, 2002; Schor, 2004). I was caught in the web of cultural currency, where loyalty to brand labels meant peer acceptance and belonging.

I share this autobiographical fragment (Berlin, 1992) as a way of positioning my subjectivity as a researcher and as a narrator. In my youth, notions of style, appearance and attention to detail shaped how I saw myself within a larger social group. They also affected my sense of belonging and my early understanding about what was valued in society and with my peers. These experiences were also situated within the dominant, patriarchal, humanist discourse that grounded my early education. They also shape how I understand the ways youth today are preoccupied with appearance, and more to the point, how some of them share a desire to hide what they see (or they think society sees) as

flaws they might possess. With a feminist poststructuralist lens, I recall my experience as part of positioning my bias as a researcher. I also ask how these insights reveal the way power has operated, and continues to operate, on the construction of subjectivity.

Combining this positioning with my understanding of personalized avatars as a form of visual autobiography and with notions of critical and multimodal forms of literacy, I was led to consider how performative desires inform how a group of teenage girls might create personalized avatars in an online social space. With this question in mind, I designed a study to gain insight into how girls create avatars, which are meant to portray or present their selves, or "who they are." A feminist poststructuralist orientation informs my deconstruction of personalized avatar texts with the hope that, ultimately, this research might inform pedagogy and curriculum that might be seen as transformative, emancipating and working toward a more egalitarian understanding of identity and subjectivity within a broader context of language learning and critical media education.

Theoretical Approach

With contemporary classrooms filled with technically savvy and socially connected students, I wondered how online social sites, and the market forces that guide the spaces they inhabit might permit or deny a representation of developing identities and subjectivities. Each new online community requires new literacy practices to negotiate and participate in its social culture. An understanding of the complexities of these discursive practices, and the capacity to engage with them fully and fluently gives young people the social power and status in these sites (Kafai, Fields and Cook 2007; Thomas, 2004, 2007). Commercially driven sites like WeeWorld.com, for example, allow

individuals to construct personalized avatars, designed in an open platform for use on WeeWorld's own social network, but also for transport to all major social networking sites, blog sites, instant messaging platforms and mobile phones. With the explicit intention of being digital expressions of an individual's identity, more than 33 million of these avatars already exist in thirty-nine countries (WeeWorld.com, 2011). Considering the rapidly increasing popularity of personalized avatars and the increasing proliferation of sites where they can be used, I began to question the social and pedagogical implications of these texts on those who create and view them.

Engaging with literature on avatars, girlhood identity and the cultural politics of representation allowed me to develop a conceptual base for my research. At the time of writing, no academic research has been published exploring the nature of *personalized* avatars as forms of visual autobiography or as socially discursive practices within a commercial market ethos. This led me to literature on the *alter ego* type of avatars in alternative realities and gaming culture (Kafai, Fields and Cook, 2007; Kang and Yang, 2006; Kolko, 1999; Thomas, 2004 2007), however, given the nature of the avatars created in these studies, the focus in this body of literature is on cyber identities often designed to hide or disguise the "real-life" person (Gee, 2003) behind their construction. A range of scholarship on girlhood identity provided me with insight into how teenage girls engage with each other in real world situations and in online social interactions (Aapola, Gonick and Harris, 2005; Bloustien, 2003; Cruickshank, 2006; Currie and Kelly, 2006; Driscoll, 2002; Harris, 2003, 2004; Hagood, 2008; Jiwani, Steenbergen and Mitchell, 2006; Kelly, Pomerantz and Currie, 2005; Mazzarella, 2005; Mitchell, 2005; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2008; Pomerantz, 2006; Poyntz, 2006; Stack and Kelly, 2006; Stern, 2007;

Theil, 2005; Thomas, 2004, 2007, 2008; Walkerdine, 1997). This literature finds that girlhood identity making and social relationships emerge fluidly through a collaborative engagement with popular culture and while negotiating complex and often conflicted notions of belonging, desire and fantasy. It finds that teenaged girls are often interested in claiming a coherent identity and a vital political space. However, as Pinar (2004) points out, conceptions of self representations are never straightforward. "In studying the politics of identity, we find that who we are is invariably related to who others are, as well as to whom we have been and want to become" (p. 30).

Research in media literacy and youth culture recognizes the role popular culture plays on the identity of young people (Bloustein 2003; Buckingham 2000, 2003; Haas Dyson, 1997; Giroux, 1999; McRobbie, 1996, 2005; Morgan, 1995, 2000; Pomerantz, 2006; Thomas, 2004, 2007, Theil, 2005; Walkerdine, 1997). This literature demonstrates profound implications for schooling and curriculum. While literacy curricula has undergone significant changes recently, it continues to require a reworking that will reflect critically on issues of power and the constitutive effects of popular culture.

Informed by feminist and poststructuralist notions of discourse (Britzman¸ 2000; Butler, 1999, 2004, 2005; Davies, 1992, 2000; Foucault, 1977; Gilbert, 1989; Peters and Burbules, 2004; Weedon, 1997, 2004), I draw from critical education scholars who argue for a rethinking of traditional models of literacy to account for a new access to learning and knowledge, mediated by and through technology (Alvermann, and Moon, 2000; Buckingham 2003; Coiro et al., 2008; Hagood, 2008; Hammett and Barrell, 2002; Kellner and Share, 2007; Kress, 2003; Lankshear and Knobel 2006, 2003; Livingstone, 2002, 2004; Luke, 2002; Sefton-Green, Nixon and Erstad, 2009; Share, 2009; Tyner, 1998).

When literacy is narrowly conceived as being only print centred, and when it fails to engage critical literacy, visual, media, or multi-modal literacies, then the manner with which individuals make meaning in the world (or meaning is made of individuals), and the opportunity to ask questions about popular media representations, or misrepresentations (in avatars, for example) is lost. Many point to critical literacy practices within a frame of cultural studies as a means to identify the ways ordinary culture informs our understanding of the world, our understanding of ourselves, and our understanding of others (Bloustein, 2003; Buckingham, 2003; Driscoll, 2002; Dolby, 2003; Giroux, 1993, 1998; Hall, 1996, 2000; Kelly, 1997; Livingstone, 2002; Luke, 1997; McRobbie, 1995, 2005; Stack and Kelly, 2006; Valentine and Holloway, 2002).

Conceptually, this cultural studies lens allows me to examine the construction of personalized avatars as a form of self-representation within a commercially dominated social ethos, a type of media production, a form of serious play, and a discourse that provides insight into youth culture. It also allows me to focus on the circuits of power via dominant and hegemonic discourses within them. Conceiving of the personalized avatar as a form of visual language production, the image becomes a site of political struggle, and a matter of literacy where competing discourses work to produce meanings rather than reflect meaning (Weedon, 1997).

As a theoretical lens, cultural studies offers justification for researching an "ordinary" text from everyday culture and it provides direction for a methodology that works between theories to interrogate such categories as gender, ability, race, class (Hall, 1996). One of the challenges inherent in examining popular texts and practices, however, is that they are both products of popular culture, and constitutive of the social world they

inhabit (Davies, 2000; Gray, 2002, Weedon, 2004, 1997). However, cultural studies provides the researcher a theoretical bridge between ways of being and ways of knowing. It offers a reflexive and critical methodology to analyse how the body and identity get represented, and it illuminates how categories, created in normalizing discourses, serve to regulate social membership.

It is important to remember that personalized avatars are deliberately positioned to represent the real life creator in online social spaces. In essence, they create a visual statement that says: 'this is who I am'. On the surface such a statement conjures a humanist conceptualization of the subject as real, truthful, unified and turned out by experience, history and social influence. In a commonsense discourse, the Cartesian logic of *cogito, ergo sum* thrives. It assumes that knowing subjects use language to express meaning and experience and that individuals are socialised through interactions with and by culture. Within similar humanist educational discourses, constructing a personalized avatar might be limited to considerations of personal choice, not unlike the choices present in humanist conceptions of autobiographical writing. Since the 1960s, such writing has relied on the celebrated personal response and imaginative narratives presumed to give voice to personal growth through creative writing and expressive language (Ball, Kenny and Gardiner, 1990; Peim, 1993; Pirie, 1993). However, this conception fails to account for more subtle renderings of identity and subjectivity that poststructuralism offer. Davies (1989) takes the question "who am I?" and explains that it often implies "a fixed knowable identity, as if it were possible to have made a set of consistent choices located within only one discourse" (p. 230). Even though we may

struggle with the diverse nature of experience and the impossibility of (re)presenting a self that is unitary and consistent, many demand that we try.

Pomerantz (2006) employs a poststructuralist theorization to explain that identity is "the contextual and shifting understanding of 'who' we are in a particular social, cultural and historical location" (p. 176). Drawing from Hall (1996), identity is both past and present. It is how we have been represented in discourse and how those representations bear on how we represent ourselves 'in process'. "Though we are discursively produced through social categories, through this production we become subjects who are capable of recognizing and reiterating these categories, making them our own and infusing them with creativity, rebellion and change" (Pomerantz, 2006, p. 176). Wetherell (2008) illustrates the fundamental difference between identity and subjectivity further:

> 'Identity', thus, allows the researcher to investigate what groups and their relations make possible for subjects. 'Subjectivity' tells the story of how a specific self lives those available cultural slots, actively realizes them, takes responsibility and owns them as an agent, turning social category memberships and social roles into ethical, emotional and narrated choices…it is 'subjectivity' that makes it possible for any particular social identity to be lived either thoroughly or ambivalently, while 'identity' helps specify what there is to be lived. (p. 75-76)

Within poststructuralist thinking, the subject is constantly being reconstructed and reconfigured "and identity is presumed to be created in the ongoing effects of relations and in response to society's codes" (Adams St. Pierre, 2000, p. 503). The subject does

not preexist epistemology; rather it "finds epistemologies available both as tools for making sense that it can adopt and as effects of discourse shot through with power relations that it can resist" (p. 505). From this perspective, subjectivity is "precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse" (Weedon, 1987, p. 32). The subject is not the person who gets constructed or made into a 'girl' (for example); rather language/meaning systems produce what counts as 'girl'. Being a subject requires the primacy of language in terms of both discourse and meaning. The radical foregrounding of language is a challenge for researchers interested in 'real people", their practices, experiences and institutions (Jones, 2005). Because we are not regularly taught to consider the manner by which discursive practices shape what we know, and how we can tell what we know, we operate in a system that lets us believe that we are in control of defining the self. But we are not—at least not completely. Put simply, language produces us. Words have the power to craft bodies out of their own linguistic matter (Butler, 1993).

Considering the aforementioned conceptual frame, I am able to conceive a poststructuralist project in education that works on notions of identity/subjectivity through a form of autobiographical writing that utilizes visual writing to (re)inscribe the subject with greater political self-knowledge. This will require contributing to and participating in academic discourses of multimodal forms of literacy, critical media education, girlhood identity, avatar research, and visual grammar. But, my interest lies most strongly at the intersection of these scholarly conversations, and is underwritten by an understanding that identity and the self-image provide significant pedagogical opportunity that has yet to be fully embraced or exploited in public education. When

personalized avatars are considered alone, they may at first seem to offer girls little more than a playful opportunity to construct an image of a coherent self for an online social space. But, these avatars do not exist in a vacuum; they are part of a larger web of social discursive formations and relations, commercial expectations and dominant hegemonic discourses. By creating and critically examining personalized avatars, individuals become at once performers/producers/observers of culture and constituted by culture's discursive formations. When educators and researchers bring a reflexive lens to bear on these images, the ties between visual language and the self might be revealed and challenged, and alternative voices might be represented. Given the way girls socialize online and the autobiographical intent of personalized avatars, and the established relationship between culture and identity, the social and educational implications for representing girlhood identity with one of these avatars are significant.

Research Purpose

The methodology for this study was framed by the tenets of feminist poststructuralism, which focus on the deconstruction of language (visual and alphabetic), subjectivity and power. This lens seeks to make visible dominant discourses and social power within the avatar graphics which shape and regulate subjectivities, and how the girls who participated in the study understood themselves and others. The purpose of this ethnographic study is to challenge taken for granted truth effects about representation, girlhood identity and subjectivity, and thereby expose power structures present in a specialized form of visual writing. Beginning with the girls' essentialist and humanist readings of their own avatars, I move to a feminist poststructuralist deconstruction to

provide an analysis of the cultural politics present in this social and discursive practice. Exposing dominant 'truths' as partial, fragmented, multi layered and unstable, points of disruption yield generative possibilities for literacy education and a critical perspective on texts from popular culture.

Cultural studies provides a theoretical bridge to the exploration of the constitutive process of subjectification. This dissertation presents a perspective not previously presented in the literature as personalized avatars are reconceptualized as forms of visual self-narrative within commercially designed online spaces. This expanded notion of autobiography engages a feminist poststructuralist paradigm as an epistemological frame in order to analyse and critique the reflexive production of girlhood identity, subjectivity and agency in social online spaces. This framework will challenge normative notions of the self beyond a taken-for-granted, humanist and essentialist conception, and work to expose the hegemony within cultural discourses as they relate to gender, ethnicity, ability, class and beauty. It will also allow for an exploration of the power structures within the sites of avatar production and the cultural politics of claiming a place in the socio-cultural context of contemporary life. Results from this research might provide insight into the discursive production of a social text, and the cultural politics of such representations within girlhood.

Research Questions

The following questions guide an exploration of girls who are at once participants in and spectators of cultural production:

a. How do adolescent girls negotiate the discursive practice of constructing personalized avatars?

    i. When teenage girls employ an avatar image to represent who they think they are, what can be revealed about their desired self-narratives with a reading that employs a visual grammar (Kress and vanLeuuwen, 1996)?

    ii. How do teenaged girls use personalized avatars to position themselves in online social networking spaces?

b. What does the process of constructing a personalized avatar reveal about normative discourses (e.g. gender, ethnicity, ability, class, and beauty) in online social spaces?

c. What might be learned about the cultural politics of constructing personalized avatars by considering the notion of identity as performance?

    i. How do audience perceptions, or the anticipation of audience perceptions, affect how identity/subjectivity are performed within an online social network?

    ii. How do personalized avatars enable agency, and or create a suture between discourse and identity?

Methodology/Method

This qualitative study engages a cultural studies methodology to explore the discursive production of a cultural text that has emerged out of a changing social context (Fiske, 1992; Saukko, 2003). As a form of 'new ethnography' the method engaged here employs a poststructuralist stance in order to "unravel discourses that mediate our understanding of both the internal lived and the external social worlds" (Saukko, 2003, p. 56). The method recognizes an inherent tension between attempting to be true to the lived experience and being aware that the nature of this experience and any representation of it is always partial and always political. At the epistemological level, ethnographic research provides the researcher with a tool for observation that views both the social and cultural construction of personalized avatars with modesty and reflexivity, and it allows me to examine that which cannot be fully known though an objective, empirical method.

Because this research aims to learn more about how and why teenage girls might represent themselves with personalized avatars in their social networking sites, I deliberately sought participants already active in social networking. I recruited participants via an open invitation to join an "avatar creation group" on *Facebook*. Invitations went initially to those in my own network of friends, and then extended to friends of those friends, and so on. Members created a personalized avatar to post on the group page. When the number of the initial group reached 135, I invited all those who fit the desired age and gender demographics for my study. In all, 42 invitations were sent to girls who were between 13-18 years old. The final participants in my study included ten teenage girls from across Canada, ranging in ages from 13-17. An online Forum site was

developed to mimic the format of a social networking site as a place where the girls could post their avatars in order to discuss with me and with others in the study how and why they chose to represent themselves the way they did.

The data collected during this research includes the posted images of the girls' avatars, the transcripts of their online conversations with me and with each other, field notes from conversations and interactions on the initial *Facebook* "avatar creation group" site and later in the Forum site, and follow-up email conversations.

I progress with the optimism that the combination of the experience— the creation of the visual self-representations (the avatars), and the interpretative afterthought (my narrative understanding of the participants' Forum discussions) might make visible some small piece of what is lost in translation from one form of representation to another. Despite its apparent limitations, ethnography survives, based on an unspoken understanding between reader and writer that the account of what has been observed and written is thorough, honest, and transparent and as Britzman (2000) reminds us, only the names of the participants have been changed to protect the innocent. In the face of these challenges, ethnographic narrative acts as though time stood still. In a sense, the creation of an avatar in response to an accompanying question, who do you think you are? also demands that time freezes for a moment, while a critical analysis, reflexive commentary, and descriptive language are brought to bear on the image which represents the self at one moment in time.

Expectations

This study originated, not so much to address an existing gap in the literature on avatars, but rather to explore the cultural politics of avatars within a new and evolving social and communicative application. By situating this new literacy practice within a broader frame of literacy scholarship and critical media education, and by using a conceptual positioning from feminist practice and poststructuralist theory, theoretically this dissertation contributes to knowledge about avatars constructed as intentionally autobiographical representations and as socially mediated texts. It also expands academic theories regarding the representation of constructed identities beyond those used in applications of online gaming or virtual worlds where avatars deliberately embody alter ego personas (Cooper, 2007; Kafai, Fields and Cook, 2007; Kang and Yang, 2006; Kolko, 1999; Lankshear and Knobel, 2003, 2006; Thomas, 2004, 2007; Turkle, 1995, 2005). Furthermore, this study seeks to theorize about the political struggle of competing discourses within a visual image (conceived as a form of language production) where meanings are produced rather than reflected (Weedon, 1997). By examining an element of contemporary youth culture through methods of subjectivity rather than with methods of scientific and positivist research, I aim to contribute to a growing body of knowledge on girlhood identity.

Educationally, results from this study might make a contribution to policy considerations particularly relating to an expanded conception of literacy within English language arts and media education curricula by incorporating a form of visual autobiographical writing as a valid and important form of social knowledge (Gee, 2003; Knobel and Lankshear, 2006, 2003; Knobel, 1999). This study might also contribute to

insight into how new technologies which enable social communication practices are more than tools to accomplish the literacy practices that have dominated education for generations (Clark, 2005; Coiro et al., 2008; Lankshear and Knobel, 2006, 2003).

The intent of this study is not designed to make any grand claims regarding a typical avatar, avatar creator, or girlhood experience. Instead, the girls' prior inexperience with personalized avatars in online communications sheds light on potential educational opportunities, especially for English language arts or media education. To that end, this study seeks to explore a theoretical alternative to the humanist conception of the subject within representations of identity (Bush, 1995, Davies, 2000, Gilbert, 1989, Weedon, 1997) and the social spaces of girlhood.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations, however. From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, ethnography is a method defined, in part, by the partiality of language, its inability to say precisely what needs to be said, its unattainable promise to elucidate what was intended (hence signified), and its silencing of one narrative in place of another (Davies, 2000). While the incomplete, contested and often conflicting nature of the narratives produced by ethnography are incompatible with positivist methods which require objectivity, it helps me to follow Britzman (2000) and view the ethnographer as less concerned with being the authority and more concerned with constructing a "regulating fiction, a particular narrative practice that produces textual identities and regimes of truth" (pp. 37-38).

Another limitation of this study relates to a design that required an online space be created in order to model the kind of communication the girls might have in their social online experiences. I acknowledge the impossibility of completely simulating their social interactions within an artificial space. My responsibility as the ethnographic observer and narrator required me to inhabit the same discursive space that the girls occupied in order to facilitate the questions and discussions, yet my presence as a researcher added an unnatural element to their peer communications.

During the initial stages of the study, the girls were offered a choice of three programs from which to create their personalized avatar. The fact that they did not get to choose from a wider selection of avatar programs might be considered a limitation to the study insofar as it may have influenced the way they constructed their avatars. Some programs, for example, permit realistic, sexualized bodies, while others employ more cartoon-like images. At the time, very few existing sites permitted avatars to be exported to another online location (which was a key consideration for including the choices I offered).

While the non-synchronous feature of the Forum site allowed participants to drop into the study in order to participate at their leisure, it was challenging to regulate participation. Some girls participated nearly daily and posted numerous comments on every thread, while others participated only a handful of times.

Finally, several of the girls in this study associate with the sport of figure skating, which might appear to be a form of selection bias in terms of the participants involved in this study. However, the disproportionate number of figure skaters here more accurately reflects the manner by which social networking sites connect individuals at points of

common interest. Given that the participants were initially recruited from my own "friends list" on *Facebook* (then from friends of my friends, and so on), and that I remain strongly connected with a network of figure skaters, it follows that there might be a disproportionate number of figure skaters responding to my online invitation to join this study. Further study employing an alternative selection process might provide insight into a more representative population.

Outline of Subsequent Chapters

This dissertation continues with a substantive literature review in chapter two (2), which includes organizing concepts and terminology for the forthcoming data and analysis. Chapter three (3) presents the methodology employed in the research. Chapter four (4) presents findings based on a visual reading of the avatars the girls constructed, and their descriptions of these forms of self-representation. Chapter five (5) will present findings on how representation of normative discourses of gender, ethnicity, class, ability and beauty are offered by WeeWorld and negotiated by the girls as they construct their avatars. Chapter six (6) will explore some of the cultural politics involved when teenaged girls construct personalized avatars and how audience perceptions, and the anticipation of audience perceptions influence the performance of identity/subjectivity in this online social space. Here I ask questions around the use of the texts, and the manner by which these avatars function as a kind of suture between discourse and identity. Finally, chapter seven (7) considers what implications the findings presented here might have for further research into the possibilities for language and literacy education.

Chapter 2
Review of Literature

Introduction

This chapter examines literature that informs my exploration of the cultural politics involved when teenaged girls construct personalized avatars. As new literacy practices evolve, particularly in social spaces, the ability for youth to engage fluently affords them a form of cultural currency and social status. To recall, the avatars examined here are positioned as representative and constitutive cultural texts. These avatars are at once the constructed products of an individual's subjectivity, and a discursive practice that contributes to the production of identity as writing and reading positions are hailed from those who create them and from those who view them. By using cultural studies as a frame, these avatars provide me with a glimpse into the complexities of lived experience and meaning making within the discourses of popular culture premised on the notion that we are simultaneously multimodal producers *and* consumers of culture.

This dissertation employs a broad conception of literacies that are connected to socio-cultural contexts. These avatars employ a form of symbolic visual language, in varying degrees of complexity, which reveal (or conceal) the identity/subjectivity of their creators. Seen this way, personalized avatars are a form of literacy. More specifically, for the purposes of this research, these avatars are conceived as language-based, semiotic structures with multiple forms of signifiers. The language used to create these avatars is significant because meaning is shaped and silenced depending on how the text is

constructed. According to Hall (1996) we cannot separate understanding from how meaning is created, and this depends on how language is externalized and on what we bring to the concept being represented. The very act of representing a concept (like an avatar text, for example) is not fixed, but instead it is constitutive and unique to those creating the meaning. Everything is about context. Equally significant is the reading of these texts since there can be no guarantee that the positions they hail are the same as were intended. Textuality, then, becomes a site of power and of political struggle as individuals attempt to create meaning somewhere between the heterogeneous intent and possible multiplicity of meaning that their avatars create.

In order to attend to various semiotic structures of visual language within these representations, a feminist poststructuralist perspective offers literacy both a theoretical location, and a mode of analysis to take up this project by reading personalized avatar texts and asking: what politics are implicated in the reading and writing of these signs/texts? A critical literacy perspective (Luke and Freebody, 1997; Davies, 1992, 2000; Gilbert, 1989) gives the research described here a vehicle to challenge or disrupt the social constructs, foundational assumptions, and institutional power structures that maintain hegemonic practices within popular Western discourse and discursive practice. Drawing from a pedagogy of literacy education that involves not only reading the word, but also reading the world (Freire, 1970), the development of critical consciousness allows me to question the nature of a form of visual language employed to define themselves as subjects. It also sheds light on reading the world – or the politics of culture and cultural representations. As popular texts, personalized avatars create a site for youth to claim tastes and define membership within the larger social order (Pomerantz, 2006).

Employing a method that relies on a dialogic exchange between researcher and participants, this research unfolds in a process where together we learn, question, reflect and participate in meaning-making about the self. So conceived, examining personalized avatars can be instructive for educators who are interested in working within a critical pedagogy informed by lived experiences and interested in what gets taken up as social knowledge, especially in terms of how identity/subjectivity are constituted in and through popular discourses. While the constitutive effects of popular texts on identity/subjectivity are reason enough for educational curricula to attend seriously to new literacies, scholarship suggests that in educational contexts (Davies, 2000), texts from popular culture are often considered trivial, frivolous, and even low cultured, which accounts, in part, for their low profile in traditional English language arts classrooms (Alvermann and Hagood, 2000; Barrel and Hammett, 2002; Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008).

In what follows, I will conduct a brief survey of literature from the fields of feminist poststructuralism as a theoretical lens that provides a method of analysis for this research, and the field of literacy, particularly as it is conceived within an evolving social and educational context. The field of youth pedagogy is explored with particular attention to a participatory culture of online cyber communities. Participation with new and evolving forms of discursive practices inform how literacies are constituted in and through the construction of girlhood identity generally, and through playfully constructing avatars in particular. Finally, avatars are reconceived as visual self-narratives or autobiographical expressions. As necessary, key terms are defined throughout and placed in the context that they will be employed in this dissertation.

Feminist Poststructuralism

Cultural theory relies heavily on conceptions of subjectivity and identity. In chapter one, definitions of identity and subjectivity were provided to establish how the terms would be employed in this dissertation. To recall, as a social, cultural and historical construct, identity involves constant relational effects in response to society's regulations, while subjectivity requires a degree of reflexivity and is always being reconstructed and reconfigured, making it unstable, complex and often conflicting. One of the challenges of conducting research in this field is that connected fields of study such as cultural studies, media studies and literacy studies each draw on competing, and often conflicting theories of identity and subjectivity. While cultural studies has roots in Marxism, literacy studies uses feminism, and media studies relies on poststructuralism. To position my own orientation here, I acknowledge that individual paradigms of both feminism and poststructuralism are multiple, complex and at times conflicting. Scholarship from poststructuralist theory and feminist practice provides the means for this research to distinguish the workings of language (broadly conceived), semiotic structures and text as a cultural politics. More specifically, together they are utilized to examine the politics of identity representation in relation to personalized avatars; in short, they work together to identify the ways in which discourse works to construct identity and position girls socially, culturally and institutionally. By drawing from scholars whose theory examines the constitutive power of language, discourse, subjectivity, and the political power that regulates, I will analyze the social implications of representations of girlhood identity/subjectivity within a cultural studies framework that allows me to utilize a

popular text, produced using a media technology and influenced by popular commercial culture.

For the purposes of this research I am drawn to poststructuralist theory for its denial of grand narratives, totalizing truths and the universal foundation of knowledge. As a theory it offers an understanding that knowledge is temporally, historically and politically value-laden and it is suspicious of the humanist desire to pin down categories that privilege identity and discipline difference (Adams St. Pierre, 2000). Poststructuralism evolved from structuralist theory which viewed universal order (as well as linguistic, and social order) as 'constructed' or 'structured' in a number of ways *through* language, not to mention through individual action. Where a structuralist argument held that communication between subjects was not possible using private language systems unless some common ground could be found (thus, Saussure's structuralist linguistic triad of *sign, signified,* and *signifier* was used to explain the manner by which language is understood), poststructuralist theory focuses on the *origins* of the relationships to language and the word particularly as it relates to power and the unconscious. According to poststructuralist theory, language and discourse are unstable and incomplete modes of communication, making meanings indeterminate, contingent and fluid (Peters, 1998, 2001; Peters and Burbules, 2004). Furthermore, while language has the ability to produce what it names (Butler, 1999), it also exists in historically specific discourses as a site of political struggle (Gilbert, 1991; Harris, 2003, 2004; Weedon, 1997). Seen this way, language has the capacity to influence relationships of power, making subjectivity a site of conflict and disunity (Weedon, 2004). This view of language as a non-neutral, constitutive force challenges humanist claims of truth and

reality. In an alphabetic of visual image form, language can include, exclude, represent, misrepresent or maintain hegemony (Baker and Davies, 1993; Glibert, 1991, O'Brien, 2001). Instead of being seen as relative, a poststructuralist positioning understands notions of truth and reality as relational (Foucault, 1977, 1972).

Feminist poststructuralist scholars have acknowledged the constitutive nature of discourse. In her seminal work, Weedon's (1997, 2004) poststructuralist perspective provides feminism with the framework to move away from binary thinking and focus on gender as a complex social construct. Davies' (1990) work with young children disrupts binary conceptions of gender, power and sexuality while reading fairytales and myths. Like Weedon, and Butler (1990, 2005), she argues that language, institutions and individual consciousness are influenced by relationships of power, and she challenges limiting, humanist and essentialist conceptions of identity. Weedon (2004) argues that gender and citizenship identities are assigned through the discourses produced in social, cultural and institutional discursive practices. Feminine identity, for example, as it is manifest in manners of dress and behaviour "does not give rise to this femininity but is a product of it. It is acquired by performing discourses of femininity that constitute the individual as a feminine subject" (p. 7). As with Butler's (1990) performativity, individuals take on and internalize culturally and socially sanctioned forms of identity. The notion of gender as a performance regulated by cultural discourses provides a thread in the argument for critical pedagogy and the need for reflexive and critical attention to the discursive practices that regulate such identity and subjectivity.

Subjects are not only socially constituted in and through discourse; their subject positions are in constant flux because they are multiply positioned, contingent, conflicting

and fractured. This conceptual perspective acknowledges that meanings are not fixed in language, in cultural symbols, or even in relation to institutional and cultural factors. It therefore allows me to conceptualize the graphics of avatar images as a form of visual language implicated in political struggle. Created in and through discourses available in popular culture in various forms of electronic media, personalized avatars provide an avenue to explore how identity/subjectivity gets stitched together (or unraveled) in a ubiquitous media culture, and how desire and belonging factor into such representations. The popular literacy practices available to youth culture are inherently pedagogical in terms of how claims and/or assumptions of truth are implied in such representations of identity/subjectivity. The complex nature of subjectivity supports the emphasis on a feminist poststructuralist philosophical orientation that attends to the unstable, discontinuous and conflicted elements of the subject by seeking to explore shifting truths and the fluid motives that ground them.

Position and role

A feminist poststructuralist perspective also helps to frame the notions of positioning and role as crucial to understanding the constituted nature of identity and subjectivity through discursive practices. Using preschool children to demonstrate feminist readings of a familiar children's story, Davies and Harré (1990) reorganize the conception of "role" as a way that individuals understand the complexities of being a person constituted in and through discourse. As a primary organizing concept, "role" is something that is taken on and cast off as with a variety of theatrical roles. The person can always be conceived separate from the role(s) one takes up. Language is often dictated and shaped according to the role an individual assumes and by those who will

communicate with the individual. One also moves through multiple positionings in any one day or even in any one conversation. Positions are discursively and interactively constituted and are open to shifts and changes as the discourse shifts or as one's positioning within or in relation to that discourse shifts (Davies and Harré, 1990, Weedon, 2004).

Agency

Strictly speaking, the constitutive effects of discourses and of discursive practices from poststructuralist thinking limits the possibility of agency, but a *feminist* poststructuralist thinking acknowledges that individuals are capable of exercising choice in relation to those practices (Davies and Harré, 1990). From a feminist poststructuralist perspective agency, like subjectivity, "is fragmented, transitory, a discursive position that can be occupied within one discourse simultaneously with its nonoccupation in another…it is a readily attainable positioning for some and an almost inaccessible positioning for others" (Davies, 2000, p. 68). Those positioned on the negative side of dualisms (for example, black/white, child/adult, mad/sane) are less likely to possess the kind of legitimacy necessary to possess agency. Therefore, the language that embeds such dualisms needs breaking up (Gilbert, 1989). However, it is possible to attempt to disrupt hegemonic discourses and cultural narratives, by "being subjected to the meanings inherent in the discourses through which one becomes subject" (Davies, 2000, p. 27). While individuals can possess subject positions within discourse, they can only possess agency from within the discourses they occupy (Butler, 1993). This follows a central assumption of Foucault that any form of critical agency must be aware that power and authority are secured through language. The conditions for agency must be created –

individuals must be empowered, they must have voice, and they must have the space for reflexivity in order to allow authority, power, and authorship to exist.

A caveat regarding humanism's reach

Despite my commitment to a feminist poststructuralist rendering of epistemology, I cannot progress without acknowledging that humanist ideology remains a privileged discourse in the field of education, and more common sense discourses of the status quo cannot be ignored. This acknowledgement is not intended to concede a place of privilege, but instead to recognize the challenges inherent in working within these boundaries. Adams St. Pierre (2000) explains:

> Humanism is the air we breathe, the language we speak, the shape of the homes we live in, the relations we are able to have with others, the politics we practice, the map that locates us on the earth, the futures we can imagine, the limits of our pleasures. Humanism is everywhere, overwhelming in its totality; and, since it is so 'natural,' it is difficult to watch it work. (p. 478)

Despite its reach, however, I proceed with the intent of unstitching the cultural politics that bind and privilege how we understand ourselves through the constructed representations that our discursive practices allow.

The Evolving Project of Literacy

In order to critically examine how identity and subjectivity are created through the construction of personalized avatars, I position these texts within the broad frame of literacy education and its companion, critical media education. To that end, and for the purposes of this dissertation, I draw from scholarship that grounds literacy and the project

of reading/writing within representational forms of meaning making and within a turn toward cultural studies and its theoretical inquiry into lived experience. Literacy is conceived here as more than an alphabetic decoding—it is also a social practice (Luke and Freebody, 1997). Central to my understanding of how personalized avatars are constructed and viewed is the constitutive influence of social, cultural, and historical contexts, and especially the influence of a dominant visual language perpetuated by a ubiquitous, self-serving, global commercial media. More recent notions of literacy have evolved not only to include multiple and multimodal forms of representation (New London Group, 1996), but also to demand a critical understanding of the socio cultural contexts from which, and in which, literacies evolve (Luke and Freebody, 1997; Street, 1995, 2003), and the nature of the cultural politics of representing the subject (Davies and Harré, 1990). For some, new definitions of literacy include texts that are socially situated, collaboratively created, and held in technology that allows for a new kind of knowledge (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, and Leu, 2008). For the purposes of this dissertation, I ground literacy in critical cultural studies in a gesture toward expanded possibilities within English language arts. Just as a feminist poststructuralist lens allows us to view discourses as constitutive, literacies take the project of reading these texts as a cultural politics and the project of 'reading the word' as constitutive so as to 'read the world' (Freire, 1970) as a politics of culture.

Expanding the project of literacy

In order to explore the inclusion of personalized avatars within an expanded conception of literacy it is necessary to recognize that literacy has been, and continues to be, a kind of work in progress. Central educational policies and curricula in Canada and

indeed worldwide, are guided by conceptions of literacy; yet, the term "literacy" remains contested. Earlier definitions that draw exclusively on a static alphabetic decoding inadequately capture its current complexities. As an educational imperative it can be traced to three factors (Lankshear and Knobel, 2003, 2006). The first is Paulo Freire's (1970) work with Brazilian and Chilean peasants, which demonstrated how literacy could provide a basis for radical approaches to education by developing a form of critical social praxis. Beginning with an understanding of humans as the only animal to know that we know, Freire established that before we can learn the skills necessary to read alphabetic text, we first read the world—assigning meaning and understanding to objects and experiences with language. His notion of "reading the word and the world" propelled the concept of literacy beyond traditional decoding models. Learning to decipher the alphabetic code enabled groups to learn together in order to gain a kind of critical consciousness (*conscientization*) as a tool to work against an oppressive social regime.

The second factor involved a post-industrial restructuring of a labour market, its organizations and institutions that in turn propelled a crisis in adult illiteracy in the early 1970s in the UK, North America, Australia, and New Zealand. In response, governments promoted skills based curricula to address functional literacy. The third factor evolved from a rise in consciousness about socio cultural perspectives as they relate to language study and social sciences. Among these conceptions, New Literacy Studies positioned the notion of literacies as politically and culturally "powerful" (Gee, 1990, Street, 1995). Later, through work in socio cultural linguistics, Gee (1989) argued that the use of language is intimately connected to our social circumstances and the roles we play. Having a powerful literacy involves having control, or fluent mastery over how language

is used within secondary discourses where individuals are identified and identifiable as members of groups or networks, and where individuals negotiate their sense of belonging. The key to acquiring Discourses is that they cannot be overtly taught. They evolve through socialization with a group (family, or peers).

Also part of the shift to New Literacy Studies, Street's (1984, 1998) anthropological approach viewed new literacy practices within the ethos of reading and writing and as *enabling* social practices. He recognized that literacies take on multiple forms over space and time, and they are contested in terms of power. Street (1995) proposed an understanding of models of literacy that are either autonomous (the view that literacy itself will effect practice) or ideological (which suggests a more culturally sensitive set of practices). Rooted more in socio historical contexts than in the acquisition of skills, this perspective troubles dominant literacies and seeks the voices of those who have been traditionally marginalized by dominant practices. By grounding literacy in socially constructed epistemologies, literacy is about knowledge. That is:

> The ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being. It is also always embedded in social practices, such as those of a particular job market or a particular educational context. (Street, 2003, pp. 77-78)

Within the context of public education, literacy became an industry in and of itself, attracting research attention, funding and public focus. In response to increased funding opportunities, literacy achievement initiatives began to flourish. With that, the definition of what counts for literacy also expanded to include concepts such as (but not

limited to) "digital literacy', 'cultural literacy', 'critical literacy', and 'multiliteracy' (New London Group, 1996).

Toward new literacy: A tapestry of perspectives

The movement from a sole emphasis on a literacy of decoding alphabetic text to "new literacies" is coupled with a collaborative engagement with technology and the enabling of shared meaning-making across time and cyberspace, where "new" implies both a socio cultural turn as well as an ontological and chronological shift (Knobel, 2003). During this shift, a number of scholars have classified literacy into sub genres. For example, New London Group's (1996) seminal "Pedagogy of new literacies" defines literacy as a multiplicity of discourses, which extends the scope of literacy pedagogy to include diverse and plural notions where the influence of technology informs the type and manner by which texts are disseminated. As members of the New London Group, Cope & Kalantzis (2000) further clarify the seminal pedagogy for multiliteracies by arguing that critical engagement with and through technology-laden literacies, combined with linguistic diversity, are important and interconnected threads in literacy practice, especially within a society which values multiple forms of literacy. Conversations that were once material of private domain are now exposed, and shared in public forums.

Moreover, when these sites are ignored, then pedagogical opportunities are missed and dominant school-based socializing practices construct hegemonic notions of identity, belonging, our sense of the Other (Giroux, 1999; Morgan, 2000). Furthermore, the ubiquitous nature of computer and digital technology makes earlier definitions that connect literacy strictly to alphabetic writing problematic. Hammett and Barrell (2002) note that pedagogies move beyond traditional "transmission models" and have been

replaced by "inquiry and project based learning" while "representations of student learning now include visual and other non-traditional ways of representing knowledge" (p. 15). From this position, an avatar image can be conceived as a non-traditional, multimodal from of representation. Kress (2005) argues that the visual image represented on the screen now carries more cultural power, prominence and persuasion than the printed word. With that, language needs to be redefined to include a greater focus on the semiotic. Attending to the grammars of visual design, rather than focusing exclusively on "signifiers" (such as line and colour) and "signifieds" (how meanings are made), Kress and vanLeeuwen (2006) argue that sign-makers have meanings which are "motivated…conjunctions of signifiers (forms) and signifieds (meanings)" (p. 8). Seen this way, signs are never just arbitrary. In fact, the context under which the sign is constructed cannot be properly addressed without also acknowledging the motivation used to create it and the act of producing analogies and classifications with it.

The pedagogical capacity of literacy

Born of a scepticism toward any single-method, magic bullet solution designed to ultimately fix "the literacy problem" by developing skills and deep competencies, Luke and Freebody's (1997) seminal *four resources model* of reading (later described as a *family of practices*) provides a vision of the pedagogical capacity of literacy by offering a multiple set of sociological approaches. For Luke and Freebody, literacy is a complex construction of social practices, influenced by institutions and their politics, and guided by pedagogical positions that can be both enabling and constraining. Their model provides a map of possible practices, which include what they describe as "roles" that are each necessary but alone are not sufficient. These are: the "code breaker" (described as a

competence to decipher alphabetic text), the "meaning maker" (or the semantic competence to understand and compose text), the "text user", (the pragmatic competence to use texts for the function they were designed), and the "text critic" (the critical competence to analyze text by understanding that they are necessarily unnatural and not neutral). Rather than providing a prescriptive set of skills-based practices, the *four resources model* is designed to map the normative terrain of possible practices. As it relates to my research, this model provides a frame not only to seek an opening in existing English language Arts curricula to introduce personalized avatars as a form of text to be explored, but also to critically explore a new form of text and its constructed representation of identity/subjectivity.

Freebody and Luke (1990) also provide a "three dimensions model" of literacy capabilities, which include the breadth of literate practices, the depth or extent of control one might have over a literacy practice, and the extent of hybridity an individual's literacy practices might afford. They argue that educational practices have the capacity (and responsibility) to attend to the issues of what kinds and how much literacy will be developed. Having the opportunity to acquire and practice multiple repertoires of capability in reading and writing with out of school literacy activities, for example, provides social (and even economic) opportunities that should not be ignored.

Freebody, Luke and Gilbert (1991) advocate a kind of discourse critique with students in an English language arts classroom, where stereotypical and erroneous texts are exposed, cultural, social and historical biases are laid bare, and the traditional authoritative hierarchy or teacher, text and student is reconfigured. They stress that a text exercises "multiple syntactic and generic options", and expresses "distinct socio-cultural

ideologies" (p. 444). It also limits interpretation by hailing particular reading positions, and demands an understanding of a particular kind of ideology. To that end the "semiotic structure of text constrains possible interpretations, in effect structuring subjectivity of its ideal reader" (p. 445). The manner by which the teacher approaches a text (or avoids it altogether) signals to the students what counts. Part of the educational agenda must be to change perceptions about what counts for literacy. Unless there is an effort to evoke a kind of "disciplined multiplicity" in reading responses, educators tend to avoid the kind of pedagogies that deliberately evoke a "reading and writing 'against the grain'" (p. 450). Part of this disciplined multiplicity requires reading one text against another with the aim of providing contrasting perspectives and representations. It is this kind of reading that this study employs.

Attending to discourse positions

Over two decades ago, Gilbert (1989) argued that pedagogical discourses around language and literature in schools did not offer positions of authority for girls and young women "largely because they are discourses which assume that the self is a coherent, ungendered entity, easily discovered and recognized and empowered" (p. 263). However, rather than empowering young women, these discourses force them into a compliance with stereotypical subject positions that disavow any form of questioning. She argued that too often girls would write themselves within discourses of storybook fantasies and patriarchal "normalcy." When these discursive productions are not questioned or challenged in the classroom, even worse, when these productions are endorsed in the classroom, patriarchal subject positions are reinforced. Gilbert finds that writing positions are learned just as are reading positions; and most often these are

gendered positions. If a feminist position does not allow for reading to be understood outside its "misogynist and submissive constructions" of the nature of woman, then writing is a "learned social discursive practice of a gendered subject, not as a natural personal response of the 'self'" (p. 262). In fact, Gilbert argues that there are very few positions of authority to be found in the classroom from which young women can speak (or write). Gilbert (1989) has argued that language classrooms often embrace activities that are inherently misogynistic in their patriarchal patterns of social control, and yet these same classrooms hold the potential to undo gendered subjectivities and patterns of domination if a feminist pedagogy is employed and language instruction becomes more critical, and reflective. Two decades later, Gilbert's scholarship still provides guidance for an exploration of personalized avatars and the stereotypical subject positions that serve to visually write and perform gender representations. Such a project of critical media literacy can also be linked to a movement in radical democracy (Giroux, 1999; Kellner and Share 2007a), where students are taught to use media texts to enact transformative social change through democratization and civil participation.

Davies (1989) also argues that alternative texts, which offer discourses that position girls as independent and with authority must be allowed into the language classroom. Constructing personalized avatars alone may not position female subjectivity in a space of power, but when a critical pedagogy and a reflexive lens is brought to bear on these images, the ties between visual literacy and the self might be cut or unravelled and alternative voices might be represented (Gilbert, 1989). In the same way that Freire's seminal pedagogy of the oppressed proposed that helping poor Brazilian peasants learn the word (the language of their oppressor) and so, learn the world (gain a critical

understanding of the world and conditions under which they live), troubling normative, gendered, and classed forms of (visual) language embedded within avatar images and evaluating the constitutive effects of these discourses on the way youth understand identity/subjectivity affords educators and students the opportunity to learn the language of the oppressor—that is the language of commercial, status quo, patriarchal, and class based messages present in the construction of personalized avatar images.

Critical media literacy

By further broadening traditional definitions of literacy, critical media literacy has become an educational imperative, not only "to include different forms of mass communication, popular culture, and new technologies" (Kellner and Share, 2007b, p. 60), but to enable a form of participatory democracy, and a transformative vision for education. In this location, individuals learn to critically read and interpret popular media texts as well as produce and disseminate alternative texts to the world. However, without a pedagogy that includes critical analysis, creating media texts alone lacks the capacity to trouble hegemonic representations, or struggle against oppressive assumptions (Kellner and Share, 2007a). As it is conceived here, critical media education would enable power to be shared in the classroom as a dialogic exchange between teachers and students that challenges hegemonic media representations. By acknowledging the complexities and constitutive effects of our relationship with media and popular culture, such pedagogy refuses to privilege only traditional alphabetic literacy or to inoculate passive audiences from harmful media messages (Postman, 1985). Instead critical media education draws from Dewey's (1916/1997) active, experiential model of learning where praxis connects

theory with practice, and from Freire's (1970) pedagogy that has teachers and students posing problems together.

Drawing from Lankshear and Knobel's (2003, 2006) notion of multiple literacies, Torres & Mercado (2007) argue for pedagogy of critical media literacy that embraces new forms of literacy based on new technologies. For them, new literacies provide more of an opportunity to address how students engage with and through these pervasive and omnipresent new technologies, even though they are often absent from current curriculum. Kellner and Share (2007b) explain that such a pedagogical approach is challenging because "it is not a pedagogy in the traditional sense with firmly established principles, a canon of texts and tried and true teaching procedures" (p. 64). It does, however, provide a location to analyze dominant discourses that are at once entertaining, and pedagogical, and to produce counter hegemonic texts in a space traditionally dominated by book learning (Buckingham, 2003). This pedagogical approach understands that audiences actively struggle between dominant, oppositional and negotiated readings as meaning is created (Hall, 1980). For others, media texts offer a transformative opportunity when cultural studies and critical pedagogy are added to the mix (Alvermann, 2002, Dolby, 2003). A critical pose provides ethical opportunities for both educators and students as it encourages the production of alternative forms of text and addresses the role of language in how notions of race, gender, class and power are represented.

Ethical possibilities for evolving literacies

Using critical pedagogy that views literacy in expansive and multimodal terms has the promise to interrogate how status quo beliefs perpetuate messages of power, privilege

and domination through various texts, teaching practices, and attentiveness to issues of inclusiveness. From this perspective, employing an expanded understanding of literacy and text becomes an ethical imperative for educators to attend carefully and thoughtfully to the cultural politics present in each classroom and to how they avow or silence discourses. This becomes particularly salient if, as Freebody, Luke and Gilbert (1991) note, "reading tastes and preferences are conventionalized and learned... through schooled entry into particular cultures or sub cultures" (p. 437). Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler (2008) note what is important is "the deliberate creation of spaces for diverse opinions to be represented" (p. 186). However, defining what will count as literacy within a broader project of formal education and curriculum development is a complex political process involving various interests from editorial boards in publishing houses that compile authoritative texts, to curriculum developers to educators who select the pieces to be studied, each are implicated in the production, influences and traditions that will get sanctioned as literacy. In the final analysis, however, it is up to the classroom teacher and her sanctioning and/or silencing of material and ideologies regarding what forms count and how they will be utilized.

Freebody et al. (1991) suggest that more important than the decision of how to best teach reading is the decision to "scrutinize the various reading practices and positions that are interactively built and privileged in the classroom" (p. 428). This can either be liberating or problematic for students depending on the perspective of the educator. For example, in Atlantic Canada, the Council of Atlantic Ministers of Education and Training (2009) recently released an action plan for the region entitled: *Literacy - Key to learning and path to prosperity, 2009-2014.* In this document intended to guide educational

policy, literacy is framed only in terms of a print decoding which ignores earlier foundational documents and instead opts for traditional expectations that literacy equals print reading and that it is enough for students to learn to "break the code" (Luke and Freebody, 1997).

Locally, the common Atlantic Canadian English curriculum may support the theory of viewing a text such as an avatar, and even recognize the value inherent in employing technology to do so. The stated goal of the *Foundation for the Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum* (1996) is to guide students "to become reflective, articulate, literate individuals who use language successfully for learning and communicating in public and private contexts" (p. v). It asks educators to attend to a number of multimodal forms of representation in order to consider "the diverse range of texts with which we interact and from which we construct meaning" (p. 11). However, this commitment, along with a definition of "text" that includes "any language event: oral, written or visual" (p. 11), fails to embrace a poststructural positioning where a broad conception of literacy practices are very much matters of culture, identity and subjectivity. And it fails to acknowledge the constitutive nature of image and sound texts from popular culture, missing the point that the subject is constituted in and through multiple literacy discourses (Davies, 2000; Davies and Harré, 1990; Gilbert, 1989). Instead, the pedagogical influence of popular culture within the English curriculum is relegated to a "zone of literacy" (Kelly, 1997, p. 74) and culture is a thing to be possessed, rather than negotiated (Davies and Harré, 1990). Furthermore, "the criteria pertaining to what will count as reading are inevitably normative in that they entail value-laden and ideologically interested decisions about which texts, positions, and practices to

select" (Freebody, Luke and Gilbert, 1991, p. 450). This subtle, but critical omission of English classrooms to make the connection between the nature of discursive practices and the ongoing construction of subjectivity places the conception of knowledge production in humanist, often patriarchial terms (Gilbert, 1989). Furthermore, "[f]ailing to engage the popular presents an educational loss to everyone involved, for it bypasses an opportunity to examine how culture, power, desire, and identity intersect in all of our lives" (Kelly, 1997, p. 79).

If educators are guided by political leadership that operates from a perspective that views literacy as a narrowly defined form of decoding with operational objectives to secure social and economic stability in the region by ensuring citizens can ultimately read pill bottles and safety manuals, then there is much work to be done in the reframing of what might count as literacy, not to mention textual knowledge and competence. What Allan Luke's (2007) vision of literacy provides is an alternative vision, which in its most basic form is intrinsic to issues of social justice as it considers (for example) indigenous communities and those from lower socio economic locations. For Luke, new literacies are not only the new basic, but they are also required to navigate the Internet, just as the Internet is required to utilize new literacies. They provide agency-creating opportunities and offer children a critical disposition as they mould, shape, reject, accept, and anticipate ideas. Because we live in a text saturated culture and a multi semiotic universe, new literacies are necessary to allow children to move from the local to the global, from the known to the new.

A Critical Pedagogy for Youth and by Youth

By engaging in a form of critical pedagogy in sites where youth are gathering socially, educators and researchers are able to explore pedagogical opportunities to view a multiplicity of discourses, share power and provide space for counter hegemonic representations in relation to the subject. As a discursive site, popular culture works as our society's primary pedagogue in terms of how we understand ourselves, and others, not to mention how we understand notions of identity/subjectivity, desire and belonging (Dolby, 2003, Giroux, 1998). It is here that young people learn about "social relations, power, gender and ethnic identities, and the worlds beyond immediate neighbourhoods and communities" (Luke, 2003, p. 398). With the rapid proliferation of online cyber communities, opportunities are emerging for youth to participate in, communicate with, and belong to newly conceived forms of peer groups (Lanksheare and Knobel, 2006). Whether these opportunities are conceived as a means to express actual or potential cultural significance, as Willis (1990) suggests, or as Thomas (2007) found with the development of a new form of online community "children are participating in new forms of literacy. Literacy is being transformed and is evolving with every new set of social practices" (p. 182). Along with the constitutive power of popular forms of literacy practice, literacy is very much a matter of identity.

Cross-stitch: the girl in media and popular culture

For over a decade, scholars have examined how social and cultural discourses are influenced by images from commercially populated popular media sites. For each of these scholars, a critical approach of media literacy exposes representations of hegemony in popular media texts. Walkerdine (1997) used a cultural studies lens to explore how

young working-class girls in the United Kingdom are regarded as a site of adult, middle-class fantasy (as portrayed in pop music and film), and how middle-class girlhood provides a form of escape which embraces the potential for upward social mobility. Steinberg and Kincheloe's (1998) seminal work on *kinderculture* exposed the corporate intent of using marketing to exploit the generation gap between children and their parents or educators. Giroux (1998, 1999) argues that major media conglomerates like Disney, for example, use patriarchal stereotypes and dominant white hero characters in their animated films, and (for example) to define and regulate discourses around race and gender.

By positioning youth first as consumers, dominant media sites work to create our desires and define who and what will become valued. Kenway and Bullen (2001) demonstrate how young children have become the intended targets for money seeking corporations. Bloustien (2003) found that when teenaged girls used video cameras to document how they negotiate their public and private identities, their stories were ripe with recognizable hegemonic codes. Driscoll (2002) focused on fashion, makeup and body image as forms of expression in feminine youth culture, and Klein (2002) exposed the political agenda behind brand labels, corporate logos and the cultural currency of adopting (or being adopted by) a brand tribe. Linn (2000) exposes the lengths that psychologists will go when hired by major corporations to get into the minds of children in the name of corporate profit. And Schor (2004) draws links between a cradle-to-grave commercial culture to children's mental health problems, family conflict and increasing anxiety in children and youth. Nixon (2002) demonstrated how popular television

programs (like Dawson's Creek) could be used as sites for critical examination of representations of identity.

While McRobbie (1999) found that youth are primarily responsible for the rapid turnover in ideas within popular culture, particularly within more resistant forms of expression like youth Rave culture, others (Kenway and Bullen, 2001; Linn, 2000; Schor, 2004) remind us that more nefarious strategies of manipulating and deploying fashion, trends and styles to unsuspecting youth are at play. Commercially driven "cool hunters" for example (Klein, 2002) market notions of cool and cultural belonging to unsuspecting youth. Attending to discourses in popular culture around the cultural currency of belonging and acceptance becomes a critical piece in the examination of how girls position themselves and their literacy practices in social spaces. Negotiating identity and subjectivity in these spaces requires accute attention to the positioning girls within popular and commercial discourses. For example, McRobbie (2005) demonstrates how recent reality programs on television serve as a forum to justify a reclassification of women by attempting to reinvent them by making them over or by instructing them in what not to wear. For McRobbie, these programs are a throw back to the time when romance was glorified in popular culture, and young, slim and successful women were seen as direct competition for one another to get the 'fella'. She exposes the cultural politics of this mode of symbolic violence and social control against women in its presentation of class "habitus". However, her work in youth pedagogy in general, and with young girls in particular, had begun to shape scholarship in this area decades earlier.

Studying the Girl

In the late 1970s, scholarship in cultural studies began to shift when Angela McRobbie insisted that the academic literature on youth culture could be more accurately equated with a focus on boyhood culture. McRobbie's (1976) focus on girls, their social class, the politics of their subcultures, their relationship with and expressions through popular culture, fashion, art and music opened the doors to studies in girlhood culture and girlhood identity in both academic and popular literature. In her later work she found that the production of youth culture in the United Kingdom in the 1980s and 1990s was a response to the oppressive reality of social life in the age of AIDS. "Youth cultures, in whatever shape they take, stake out an investment in society. It is in this sense that they are political" (McRobbie, 1999, p. 156). McRobbie rejected the recent arguments that young women were experiencing either a "narrative of progress" or one of "backlash", rather she suggested that there had been a significant "unfixing" of what femininity means socially and within commercial culture, and that the binary categories placing feminism and femininity at polar opposite ends of the spectrum were no longer acceptable. Instead she argued for a greater fluidity in conceptions of gender relations, which would not only "unhinge" the role of women, but also destabilizes men in their traditional roles and expectations. McRobbie argued that youth styles and preferences do more than promote subculture. Instead, elements such as music production, fashion, and hairstyles represent "intense activity of cultural production" (p. 161).

The complexity by which girlhood identity and subjectivity are socially, culturally and politically negotiated has been the continued focus of scholars who find that girls are constituted by intricately layered categories of (among others) race, class, gender and

ability. Kelly, Currie and Pomerantz (2009) explore the conflicted nature of social representation in their ethnographic study called 'Girl Power' which investigates the cultural politics of style and fashion in a high school setting. These scholars understand the notion of girlhood and its modes of representation exist within an often-conflicted social structure. Similarly, Driscoll (2002) defines girlhood as "an idea of mobility preceding the fixity of womanhood and implying an unfinished process of personal development" (p. 47). And while I argue that this definition might imply a humanist assumption that womanhood is itself a fixed location, her conception of the unfinished process of girlhood is appealing. This unfinished business and mobility echo themes of identity-in-progress stated by Bloustien (2003), Thomas (2007) and Hall (2000, 1996). While representations of identity and belonging have often taken on tangible and concrete forms (for example, clothing, and hairstyles) scholarship has focused on sites where girls gather—homes, malls, parties, schools (Jiwani, Steenbergen and Mitchell, 2006); the introduction of digital and online spaces have provided locations for girls to represent themselves that combines earlier study in girlhood culture with research being conducted in new literacies (Thomas, 2007).

Girlhood identity online

My own writing on personalized avatars (Morrison, 2010) aside[1], there is no existing academic literature on the newly evolving discursive practice of *personalized* avatars or the cultural politics of representation of girlhood identity/subjectivity in social online spaces per se. Therefore, I turn to related research on other manifestations of girlhood identity and then to literature on avatars that have been designed as alter ego

representations in online spaces in part as a way of distinguishing my work from that which has come before me, and to join in academic discourses where possible.

As a defining social construct, scholars have examined a growing number of ways in which youth can express identity/subjectivity in online social environments. A number of scholars conducting identity work with youth have found that when children are creating identities within social networks (both online and offline), the connection between "virtual" and "real" worlds is mutually constituted (Kafai, Fields and Cook, 2007; Valentine and Holloway, 2002). Furthermore, the manner by which children negotiate identity is as diverse and varied as the individual children, their economic and material locations, and their shifting purpose for engaging within technology. From these findings, I position my research within scholarship that investigates the social construction of girlhood identity and the politics of representation as it exists in social/communicative discursive practices in "real life" (Gee, 2003) locations that include cyberspace.

Kang and Yang's (2006) Korean study examined how avatars are constructed and used in the context of two forms of online communication: Instant Messaging (IM) (a form of social software used between people with prior relationships), and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) (used by people who have never met in real life). They found that avatars used in IM applications tend to have more realistic features than the avatars used in IRC contexts, which often include expressions of imaginary identities (having fairy wings, for example). Driven by a desire for varying degrees of online anonymity Kang and Yang find that avatars deliberately represent a user's self-identity, not to mention their wish for self-disclosure. "Users want their identity within a virtual community to replace their

physical body and to control the degree to which they disclose themselves over the computer" (pp. 1173-1174). While this study is limited to avatar use in Korea where, admittedly, the discursive practices and engagement with avatars is more mainstream than it is within North America, generally, given the rapid uptake and growing popularity of avatars in North America, this research may provide some insight into what me might expect to see in the near future.

As a discursive site for social interaction, online communication in Instant Messaging (IM) serves as a location for examining girlhood identity construction. Stern (2007) found that IM is a dominant mode of communication for a large population of adolescent girls where commercial influences weigh heavily on the identity constructions of the girls she studied, particularly at the level of gender. With the media and popular culture establishing and maintaining hegemonic forces within society and influencing how adolescent girls understand themselves in terms of sexuality and beauty, Stern found "Adolescent girls are particularly prone to crisis in identity as a result of dominant cultural and media discourses" (p. 2) which they are told can be bought and possessed as a means to rise above intellect.

Identity Play with Avatars

In a series of case studies that examine how and why children choose the avatars they do, Thomas (2007) found that even though avatars were not purposely created to look like their creators, often similarities in appearance do exist. She found that when youth chose avatars for play in a cyber community called *The Palace,* identity served as a kind of "performance of fantasy and desire – a pursuit of being and becoming the image

of this desire" (p. 5). Recalling Cooper's (2007) observation regarding the gaming avatars, which played a pivotal role in initiating my own study, Thomas also found that in *The Palace*, there were no fat avatars but those that were available were complicit with patriarchal ideologies of Western beauty. This point raises questions regarding the ability of avatars to represent the identity/subjectivity of the creator, and the desire of the creator to be represented in accordance with dominant discourses.

Thomas (2007) draws heavily from Butler's (1999) notion of performativity as "that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names" (pp. 111-112) through repetition and recitation, and also from Haraway's (1991) feminist perspective on identity, embodiment and cyberspaces to counter any notion of a common feminine identity. Thomas found that one of the most important aspects regarding how identity is shaped online relates to a sense of community belonging or a "coalition of affinity". This finding followed earlier research where Thomas (2004) found that the avatar images girls produced were either consistent with ideals of Western femininity and beauty, or they were statements of resistance and rebellion. Her findings demonstrate how cyberbodies are often encoded representations of fantasy and desire. Using Foucault's (1967, Online), notion of the mirror as a "heterotopia" (a placeless place where one can see oneself where one is not) Thomas (2007) points to the close and selective editing involved in this form of public online representation. Thomas describes these avatars as literally being rewritten or traced over by desire, not to mention deliberately posed or performed statements of identity. She also found that children or youth are more likely to exaggerate their identity through gender performance, or what Butler (1999) calls "hyperbolic

exhibitions" of gender, rather than engage in the kind of gender swapping that is commonly reported with adult experiments online (Turkle, 2005, Bruckman, 1993).

Also recognizing the teenaged years as a critical time for the development of identity, Kafai, Fields and Cook (2007) examined how teens engage the cultural politics of avatar construction in the context of a tween virtual world called *Whyville.net*—a large scale multi-user graphic virtual reality (GVR) environment with over 1.5 million registered players. An analysis of the avatars, group interviews and email postings in the online newspaper, *The Whyville Times*, finds that the online site provides a vehicle for self-exploration and identity play in what can be described as a form of "identity workshop" and that participants have complex and multiple reasons for constructing their avatars as they do. The authors find that the social nature of the GVR lead players spend a great deal of time customizing their avatars before using them to interact with others online.

A decade ago, Kolko (1999) examined how avatars were used to represent virtual bodies in multi-user graphical virtual realities (GVRs) like *Second Life*. Kolko argues that the design of an avatar affects the possibilities for communication inside virtual worlds. She argues that until her study, the question of how gendered bodies (represented in avatar form) affect communication patterns has been largely ignored. Her argument is premised on the belief that GVRs cannot be understood apart from their technological capabilities. "How physical bodies can be represented in electronic spaces, ultimately reveals how gendered bodies come to affect gendered voices" (Kolko, 1999, p. 179). Her study begins with a debunking of the once popular belief that separated the physical self and the self of online self-representation. She explains that early scholarly work on

computer mediated communications (CMC) focused on "the fluidity of on-line identity, developing a kind of mediated electronic body that resulted in certain inconsistencies between the virtual and physical self" (p. 177). Identity play allowed experimentation, empathetic identifications, virtual border crossings, and a sense of the non-unitary nature of identity. Kolko found that markers of identity such as gender or race are not within the sole control of the users creating the avatars. Drawing on Kress and vanLeeuwen (1996), Kolko argues that the author of an avatar is masked behind the producer of the program that allows its construction. This relationship gives power to the designers of the avatar-making program in terms of what can or cannot be represented. By limiting the possibilities of how the avatar can be created there is a "denial of agency encompassed by this dynamic" (p. 184). Social interactions and social relations can be encoded in pictures and images through a Western grammar of visual design. Kress and vanLeeuwen's argument links language's semiotic code to the way that images or pictures can be encoded, and as such provides my study with justification for considering the visual grammar of avatar design within a larger socio-cultural fabric.

Girls negotiating subjectivity

By giving a group of teenaged girls video cameras to record their experiences, Bloustien's (2003) study addresses the tangled nexus between a text and a lived experience in order to demonstrate how "subjectivity is negotiated, reflected upon and constituted through everyday social practices. Texts become a way of testing our limits, and through play ultimately enable the representation and the simultaneous constituting of the self" (p. 18). Bloustien explored the deliberate nature of their self-representation. She examined how subjectivity is negotiated within the socially discursive practice and

explored how girls changed through a highly personal and self-reflexive project. While the mode of self-representation (video images) differs from my study (personalized avatars), similar concerns guide my research. Rather than resist the hegemonic structure of a broader culture, the girls Bloustien studied reported feeling safer within these boundaries. She noted that the girls in her study were aware of "striking a pose" in front of the camera. They understood the self as a construct-in-progress, and self-making was an active, purposeful process.

Bloustien (2003) approached the ethnography of girl culture from a position that refuses to pathologize the fantasy and play of their constructed worlds. For her, the world of the teenaged girl does not have to be described in familiar and popular terms of deception and confusion, addiction or delusion, ritual or resistance. Instead, Bloustien insists that girl culture is purely playful. The world of the teenaged girl is one where meanings are made, changed, and remade; it is a place where identities are tried on and explored and refitted; and it is a place where identities are transient, experimental and shaped.

Fashion and style as cultural currency

Driscoll's (2002) work, specifically on body culture and body image situates the cultural currency of discursive practices involving fashion, make up and self production within an ethos of feminine adolescence. Fashion provides not only a "range of already sanctioned codes for coherence and recognition" but also "a process of simultaneously producing, recording and consuming the self" (p. 215). It is understood to be mass-produced, and in that sense it represents something mainstream and often hegemonic. It is rarely an expression of individuality, although it is always an expression of identity.

"Fashion is both change and continuity, and ambiguity particularly associated with youth" (p. 246). This perspective is instructive to my own analysis since dressing personalized avatars makes deliberate (posed) fashion statements as claims of individuality and subjectivity. These claims are read through the critical lens of feminist poststructuralism where the hegemonic intent of a political culture that positions girls at once as both producers and consumers can be exposed.

In response to a wave of news stories which sparked moral debates around girlhood fashion, and a public discourse around the new 'slut' look of bare midriffs, exposed bra straps, body piercing, exposed cleavage and micro mini skirts, Pomerantz (2006) conducted a year long ethnographic study in a Vancouver high school to highlight the complexity of schoolgirl style and to conceptualize an aspect of girlhood identity. Pomerantz found that regardless of social or cultural group, girlhood style is a politically driven statement of identity and belonging that girls enact most passionately in school environments. Since school is the central social location for social relationships in the teenage years, "Inside the schools, overt and covert negotiations take place that are contingent upon the meanings that are created within its social world" (p. 189). She found that girls conceptualized clothing as a kind of "social skin" and a form of embodied subjectivity: which symbolized not only a manifestation of how girls see themselves, but also how they wanted others to see them. Seen that way, "Style is a shifting and malleable text that enables girls to find each other, to form (dis)identifications, and to distinguish themselves, and how they want to be seen within the social world of the school" (p. 175). The creative use of style allowed girls to embody subjectivity and negotiate their identity in this social space.

Similarly, Currie and Kelly (2006) found that when girls negotiated the cultural politics of girlhood style within the boundaries of emphasized femininity, they became the objects, not the subjects, of desire. They found a gendered economy of emphasized femininity not only present in schools, but actively positioning girls politically within the school culture. They found that in order for girls to feel a sense of belonging, they were forced to succumb to the peer pressure of image loyalty or otherwise become subjugated or marginalized for not adopting a mode of dress reflective of the dominant girlhood politics. They found that girls utilized their power by being "mean" to those who did not fit within heteronormative versions of emphasized femininity.

Style as the 'suture' between identity and discourse

The conception of a "suture" describes the process of joining a subject with a signifier. It represents the articulation of available subject positions. As a theoretical concept, suture was first introduced by Jacques-Alain Miller (1966) in relation to Lacanian psychoanalysis, and then later appropriated for film theory by Jean-Pierre Oudart (1977). Its earlier intent was designed to highlight the effect that a cinematic performance has on an audience in terms of bringing them along on a temporary journey of believability. However, for the purposes of this dissertation, I propose an understanding of suturing that begins with Hall's (1996) use of the term as an articulation of a subject position that goes beyond the subject being "hailed" into his/her position to include a kind of reflexive and purposeful investment in identity/subjectivity. For Hall (1996):

> The notion that an effective suturing of the subject to a subject position requires, not only that the subject is 'hailed', but that the subject invests in the position, means that suturing has to be thought of as an articulation, rather than a one-sided process, and that in turn places identification, if not identity, firmly on the theoretical agenda. (p. 6)

When a subject position is unavailable a wound is created and language provides a suture to repair it. The wound is therefore sutured with language (visual or otherwise), and the unavailable subject position is replaced by a more readily available – often more status quo subject position—that serves to reinforce hegemonic discourses. Pommerantz (2006) also draws from Hall's understand of suture when she found that for teenaged girls, "style fashions the body into a fluid social text that bridges private and public space, or the interiority of the mind and the exteriority of the corporeal self" (p. 176). She found that when girls are in school, their social visibility depended upon their style; in fact, their social identity was dependent upon it. Drawing on Hall's (1996) understanding of identity as constantly "in process" and constituted within discourse, Pomerantz, (2006) found that fashion is the "point of suture" between discourse and identity—an extension of the body. She explains that identity is understood as "the structural constraints that shape us and the resulting subjecthood that enables us to shape ourselves. This suturing is made possible through agency" (p. 176). She found that style, in particular acted as an element of cultural currency, but also as

> a membrane of permeability, or a porous covering over the body that enabled girls to transfer something of themselves into the school's social world (subjectivity),

> while simultaneously enabling the school's social world to transfer something of itself into girls (discourse). (p. 177)

For the purposes of this dissertation, I will employ this notion of style as a cultural currency and also draw from Hall's conception of suturing. However, my conception of suturing will also include a definition of the medical kind of physical stitching together. Conceived this way, the term "suture" might offer a conceptual explanation for understanding how the girls in my study have chosen (at times by default) to construct their personalized avatar images.

Avatars Defined

Since the representative decisions behind the construction of avatars figure heavily in this study, I situate the type of avatars used here within academic literature on avatars as representations of girlhood identity and subjectivity. An avatar is traditionally defined as a two or three-dimensional representation of an individual for use in a virtual world in cyberspace. Three-dimensional avatars are often created and used in gaming applications (Cooper, 2007; Turkle, 2005, 1995) and are often (though not always) created with the intention of being an alter ego of their creators. In other cases, such as with those created on WeeWorld.com, an avatar is a two dimensional picture or icon that is more often used on discussion forums or other cyber communities. In his book *Alter Ego*, Cooper (2007) explains that the term avatar has evolved from:

> A Sanskrit word originally referring to the visible forms adopted by Hindu gods to represent themselves in this, our lesser, mortal world. Online culture nicked the term to name the digital forms that represent us in virtual worlds, and it gives us

> godlike feelings to inhabit them, that's not to say we're anymore immune to the seductions of these worlds than the ancient gods of myth were ever safe from ours. (Introduction – no page number provided)

According to Sandifer (2009), while the term avatar was first used in 1985 in the video game *Ultima IV,* credit for the term avatar is also given to Marningstar and Farmer, the creators of the online game *Habitat* which ran from 1986-1988. In this game, online characters were called "Avatars," (written as a proper noun). Stephenson (1992) also takes credit for inventing the term in his seminal novel, *Snow Crash*, where it is used to describe the inhabitants of Metaverse. Stephenson's definition of avatar is closely aligned to the definition that Cooper describes above where the avatar is understood as an embodiment of a god descended to earth (Jordan, 1999).

For the purposes of this research, it is necessary to make a distinction between the above form of avatar (which is often the kind of avatar cited in the academic literature relating to online identity) and the kind that will be discussed in this dissertation. The god-like avatars used in online gaming or in applications that use alternative realities such as *Second Life* are often designed to possess characteristics and attributes that are greater than or more exaggerated than their human creators (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006, 2003; Thomas, 2007, 2004). They are often constructed as alternative identities and often as highly sexualized, three-dimensional bodies. The avatars in my study, however, are deliberate (though admittedly stylized) representations of their creators. They are flash-based and two-dimensional but they are not overtly sexualized. WeeMee avatars do not exist to compete with others in the gaming sense (Cooper, 2007), or to necessarily inhabit imaginary cyber worlds (Kang and Yang, 2006; Kolko, 1999; Kafai, Fields and Cook,

2007; Thomas, 2007, 2004).[ii] What distinguishes WeeMees from avatars in other online spaces is that they are intended to replace a user's photograph in online social spaces, or to be used as a kind of stamp of identity in online communication. They also have a built in capacity to travel to other online sites as a kind of visual signature of the user.

Finally, and for the purposes of this dissertation, I employ the terms: *personalized avatar* and *WeeMee avatar* interchangeably. I have adopted the term "personalized avatar" from Mike Kinsella, creator of WeeWorld.com, to refer specifically to the WeeMee avatars constructed for this study. The term is intended to highlight the autobiographical and personal nature of this form of avatar and distinguish it from the gaming, alter ego form of avatar.

Autobiographical Expressions

For the purposes of this dissertation, given the deliberate self-narrating intent of personalized avatars, I have conceptualized these constructions as a form of visual autobiography. Traditional and humanist accounts of autobiography suggest that such narratives are simply true and authoritative accounts of experience and memory (Smith and Watson, 2001). In such circles autobiography represents the essentialist educational logic discussed earlier. However, a poststructuralist lens reminds us that "People tell their stories through the cultural scripts available to them, and they are governed by the institutional strictures about self-presentation in public" (p. 42). Gee (2001a) suggests that such an engagement requires individuals to negotiate the semiotic structures of a secondary Discourse. Recalling my earlier cultural studies frame, I pose questions regarding the social and cultural politics of representation, and ask what can or cannot be

represented, what values are represented and who benefits or gets marginalized by using these avatars? From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, the socially constitutive nature of identity seems to eliminate any possibility of fully controlling one's self-narrative (Kress, 2003).

Visual Autobiography

At the time that this dissertation was being written, a search of educational databases using the terms "visual autobiography", "representing the self with avatars", "avatars and humans" and "avatars as autobiographies" located no academic literature (excluding my own work on the topic) on visual autobiographies as they are conceived for the purposes of this research.

Whitlock's (2006) conception of an autobiographical avatar is explained in terms of the comic drawings used in forms of narratives, specifically the graphic novels *Maus* and *Persepolis*. Whitten's focus is on the narratives of graphic autobiographies and the visual images the authors create to tell their stories. While this is the most current reference to autobiographical avatars I found in academic literature, the conception here lends little to my own study.

Earlier work conducted by Motz (1989) examined the photograph albums of Midwestern American women between 1880-1920. While there is a vast difference in the ease of production between the technologies of the first hand-held cameras and the digital construction of personalized avatars, there are similarities worth noting. Motz recognized the constructed nature of these photograph albums as an individual's expression of personal identity and as carefully staged performances designed to meet traditional and cultural expectations, and to position women as fulfilling or rejecting their traditional

family roles and social obligations expression of the family unit. "Like autobiographies, such albums presented women's constructions of their lives as they saw them and as they wished to have them seen by others" (p. 63). Photographic technology was not only relatively new; it was quickly gaining a wider popularity (as is the access to cyberspace, and indeed the applications for personalized avatar construction today).

Finally, visual autobiography is referenced in Perfect (1984) in the form of a description of an elementary school art activity to create an *autobiobox* which is a visual autobiography in a container which holds items of personal significance as a means to tell a self-story. Given the dearth of scholarship on visual autobiographies as I have framed them here, I will employ scholarship from autobiography in its traditional print form, and appropriate theory from a traditionally print-dominated genre for my analysis of WeeMee avatars as expressions of visual autobiography.

Autobiography and poststructuralism

Seminal work by Graham (1991) highlights that autobiography is traditionally aligned with neopragmatist and constructivist epistemologies where Dewey's influence has continued to privilege students' experience and knowledge. However, Graham provides a view of autobiography as part of a broader project of education which allows for an examination of the relationship between the social and the self, and sees transformative opportunities for students to claim their own voice. This poststructuralist perspective allows scholars to challenge how autobiography in education has romanticized notions of personal development and the self by highlighting a paradox that had evolved. The role of autobiography in education is far more than "an idiosyncratic mixture of history and fiction, or [...] a writerly project [...] reclaiming lost sources of

intentionality" (Graham, 1991, p. 141). Instead, it is "a mode of discourse whose very function is to make problematic the meaning of subjectivity within a culture" (p. 149). For him, using autobiography in education appears to work in two diametrically opposed, but concurrent ways. It is part of the dialectical interplay between the construction of subjectivity and a project undertaken both collectively and socially. First the act of reading and writing the self works from the inside out to express a self as something already and always constituted, and then from the outside in as a way to "work on the self through the production and consumption of a *text*" (p. 145). This perspective allows me to examine the personalized avatars constructed by the girls in my study as social and collective representations of constructed subjectivity.

Similarly, Kelly (1997) notes that experiential writing has traditionally focused on "the *individual* of liberal humanist and modernist thinking" (p. 48) where the visible is privileged as a text within the realm of progressive literacy, self-writing has traditionally been seen as truth bearing and able to provide glimpses of the "authentic self". She also cautions that with one autobiographical telling, other stories are silenced or denied. By exploring and giving voice to sedimented layers of individual consciousness that may have been buried or silenced under pressure from dominant discourses and modes of representation in a culture, Kelly (1997) explains that a poststructuralist conception of autobiographical writing invites a "more radical practice, which questions the discursive production of memory, history, representation, desire and knowledge" (p. 48). Here a poststructuralist perspective questions notions of "the truth of experience, the political necessity of public access to stories, and the collectivity built through shared experiences" (p. 49). Like Graham (1991) who draws from literary theorist, Sprinker (1980) to

illuminate that the intersubjectivity inherent in articulations of self, are "structured within and around the discourses available at any moment in time" (p. 325), Kelly (1997) demonstrates that "[t]ruth is multiple—and always ever partial" (p. 66). Autobiography therefore must be seen as selective. Rather than see this unsettled constituting of the self as limiting, Kelly finds an opportunity for further growth through a more critical and reflective autobiographical writing. By interrogating the revealed stories as created truths, a poststructuralist stance allows the stories to be examined for "the will to truth that informs these stories" (p. 53) and acknowledge that they are shaped by the desire that is present at the moment of their creation. The method employed in this study deliberately seeks to examine the desires present at the time the avatars are created and to explore the selective representation as a critical moment of reflection. More than demanding a re-presentation or a re-writing of stories, Kelly (1997) explains that those engaged with autobiographical writing must also understand *how* this re-writing negotiates our created truths.

Graham (1991) cautions there is a challenge inherent in asking students to write personally and to engage in personal disclosure, since such writing often yields inevitable feelings of alienation. However, these challenges also hold opportunity for further exploration as they represent an opening for broader discussions around social and cultural issues. Graham explains that autobiography is

> an ancillary method in educational settings for marginalized groups like women and people of color as an example of what Freire (1970) calls *conscientization,* of seeing how subjectivity is constructed along different relations of power, and hence of being placed in a position to effect meaningful change. (p. 144)

Such a quest for transformation and greater political potential is the ultimate goal of my research project.

Autobiography as 'mystory'

In response to a dearth of scholarly discourses on lived experience, Sabik, Davin and White (2007) conducted a project of "mystory" writing as an alternative form of knowledge creation that is "not satisfied to just 're'port, to 're'iterate, to 're'view our 're'search…to 're'live what has been sanctioned" (p. 568). By inviting students to critically examine media literacy and engage with popular media texts, they employ Ulmer's (1994) pedagogy of "mystoriography" (read: my-story-ography) to plunge students into the realm of theoretical curiosity. Mystory writing "alters the means of textual production (what it means to write), the means of consumption (what it means to read), and the means of inquiry (what it means to know)" (p. 568). It rests comfortably in the folds of postmodern theory and includes fragments of personal experience (autobiography), engagement with popular culture, and scholarly discourse and goes beyond that which is already known, entrenched and colonized by modernist literacy practices. It is through this combination that the writer may participate and explore more fully in the process of meaning making. It also requires that the writer stay "present in body, mind and spirit" (p. 568). What "mystory" writing offers to this inquiry is a genre of writing (and reading) that "cuts across forms of media, that sharpens our critical eye, that provides a way for us to simultaneously enact, critique and reflect" (p. 574). It also provides a lens for how discourses in the real world are taken up in the on-line worlds of youth (Valentine and Holloway, 2002). It also helps to provide theoretical guidance to my study in that this form of writing " juxtaposes fragments of personal experience,

popular culture, and scholarly discourse, and so the writer participates more fully and more critically in the construction of meaning" (p. 568).

By creating what the authors call an "autoethnographic artefact", with language not learned in school, the writer is able to look with fresh eyes in a manner that is at once difficult, gratifying and conflicted. As I conduct my analysis of the girls' personalized avatars and the cultural politics implied in their representation, Sabick et al. (2007) provide a caution for those who conduct similar projects. They should not view these stories as

> indulgent self-exploitation of the writer, but as evidence of distinctive experience of the oppressed and exploited, and to know the politics of the oppressed is to be invited into personal lives and experiences. The mystory writer is not merely the talking-head, the wizard behind the curtain, she is exposed, identified; her subjectivity not only acknowledged, but lit up by bright neon signs. (p. 572)

While this form of writing does not lend direction to the visual self-representation of an autobiographical avatar, it does offer a framework for understanding the intensely personal hermeneutic involved in exposing the self in any form of writing. Sabik et al. reveal that this form of writing does not fit comfortably with many in traditional academic circles because it denies the removed objectivity of learned and sanctioned knowledge. It is that very point that makes mystory explorations, in whatever form, necessary work in that it provides a location to bridge the chasm that exists between traditional pedagogies and ones that espouse progressive notions of writing, text, and personal development. It is intended to be the beginning of a journey of self-discovery within broader social and cultural discourses that allows the mystory writer to continuously look with fresh eyes.

In the following chapter, the parameters established here help frame the critical and reflexive methodology of critical ethnography used to examine personalized avatars that have been constructed as a representation of identity, subjectivity and autobiography.

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[i] My 2010 book, *Who do they think they are? Teenaged girls and their avatars in spaces of online social communication*, is part of a Peter Lang series on New Literacies and Digital Epistemologies edited by Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear. It was written based on the doctoral research I have presented here. Its focus is theoreticially different from this thesis, however, yet it does help to inform this work. During the final drafts and analysis of my avatar research, the cultural politics of girlhood identity emerged as more salient and the shift in focus here represents the complexity with which our understanding evolves during research and analysis.

[ii] This statement is accurate for the time the study was conducted, however, since then a new component to WeeWorld.com has been added to allow WeeMees to gather and socialize in a two dimensional online environment.

Chapter 3
Methodology & Description of Study

I positioned myself behind their backs to point out what they could not see, would not do, and could not have said even as I struggled against such omnipotence.
(Britzman, 2000, p. 32)

Introduction

In this chapter, I describe the methodological approach to research that examines the cultural politics evident when ten teenaged girls constructed personalized avatars in online social networking sites. I begin by situating this qualitative and empirical research within a cultural studies framework, in general, and ethnography, in particular. Rationale for the study's design, its sampling procedures and choice of participants is followed by a brief description of the online sites used in sampling and to conduct the online interviews/focus groups. These descriptions provide context for the findings and analysis in subsequent following chapters. Finally, I will describe how data were collected and analysed and then provide a methodological evaluation and a statement of researcher reflexivity.

Locating the Research in Cultural Studies

The examinations of personalized avatars created for this research are interrogated as an element of lived experience—texts that represent a social discursive practice within a particular social climate. Seen this way, personalized avatars are much more than representations of the physical body; they represent subjects who are both read and misread by conscious and unconscious discourses. They also represent embodied dreams, desires, hopes and fantasies that are part of social, cultural and historical discourses,

perpetuated in an ethos of a ubiquitous commercial media presence. The research I describe here examines the politics and power structures implicated in how identity/subjectivity can and does get represented and how certain meanings and knowledge can get naturalized in these everyday cultural texts. I situate this research under the paradigm of cultural studies, which has a history of qualitative, and empirical research that has focused on the social, historical and economic context of lived experience, texts or discourses (Fiske, 1996; Saukko, 2003).

Evolving out of 1930s and 1940s adult literacy programs and emerging in the United Kingdom in the 1950s, cultural studies sought to examine elements of culture through methods of "subjectivity" *in relation* (Foucault, 1999) to individual lives as opposed to the "objectivitism" that had been popular within scientific and positivist research (Willinsky, 1998). Richard Hoggart's (1957) *The Uses of Literacy* provided guidance for work going on in adult literacy programs. Here he expressed concern for established academic boundaries, and structures of power. He linked literature to the real-life experiences of working class adults, which positioned education as a tool of empowerment (Giroux, 1994). This seminal piece explored literacy practices and the potential of working class culture by drawing from structuralist methods of semiotics and linguistics to examine how thinking is influenced by language patterns and tropes. Meanwhile, Raymond Williams' (1958) *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, dealt with the separation of culture (implied high culture) and society (the whole way of life). Williams made it clear that the driving force behind cultural studies is a pedagogy centred on the exploration of how power is constituted within historical, social and political contexts (Giroux, 1994). Together, these founding publications by Hoggart and Williams provided

the genesis of cultural studies with a collective understanding of pedagogy as a critical, and even transformative practice. They would lend themselves to further explorations around knowledge and identity formation within various cultural sites (school included).

The evolution of research within the academic discipline of cultural studies in the 1960s and 1970s in the United Kingdom examined elements of contemporary culture by using subjective methods rather than the positivist traditions that had been guiding empirical forms of social research. Here cultural studies research sought to secure a middle ground between humanist, structuralist and Neo Marxist research agendas. It eventually moved beyond this location to secure ideologies of democracy and pluralism, and to perform criticisms of media and popular cultural spaces (During, 1999; Hall, 1980). In a kind of stitching together of research intentions, cultural studies created a location that joins together divergent philosophical perspectives in order to:

> articulate a mediating space between right wing optimism and left wing pessimism that allowed the paradigm to examine how people's everyday life was strife with creative and critical potential, while their lives and imagination were also constrained by problematic cultural ideologies as well as structures of social inequity. (p. 13, Saukko, 2003)

Focusing an academic lens on everyday lived experience and the interpretation of texts within a larger social, political and economic context brought seminal multidisciplinary research to the field. These concepts were then taken up in three key texts: Paul Willis's (1977), *Learning to Labour* which focused on class structure and the world of work; *Resistance through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson, 1976) which examined youth subcultures in the United Kingdom, and Morley's (1981) *Nationwide Audience* which examined

audience reaction to media coverage of the national miner's strike in the United Kingdom. Meanwhile, McRobbie and Garbner's (1976) work on *Girls and Subcultures* brought an academic lens to the politics of identity and representation within girlhood culture that had been lacking in cultural studies research. Together they pointed to a need to explore the terrain of girlhood culture, and the different leisure and personal spaces than those occupied by boys. Other research focused on media audiences as active producers of meaning by employing reception analysis, as with Ang's (1985) *Watching Dallas*, and Morley's (1986) seminal study, *Family Television,* which examined television as a patriarchal instrument of power. In each of these cases culture was conceived as ordinary, contested and negotiated. The semiotic concept of polysemy (the multiple meanings created by a signifier) gained popularity, as the ultimate quest in cultural studies research was the suggestion of conjectural questions, rather than positivist responses to rigid questions. This notion gave the process of cultural production the recognition that culture is something that is negotiated through conflicting and multiple hybridizations. "More recently, cultural studies as a whole has become increasingly interested in cultural consumers, and it often uses qualitative methods to study processes such as attitude formation or meaning attribution" (Meyer, 2008, p. 69). The increase in media technology and information communication technology has generated new and evolving forms of cultural texts and practices and consumers. With this, contemporary cultural studies looks to discourse in order to better understand the complex and often-conflicting dynamics of consumers and their cultural texts.

One of the inherent challenges with research that interrogates lived experience is that it requires subjective interpretation. Early criticisms of cultural studies held that it

was a discipline which lacked a well-defined methodology or clearly differentiated fields of inquiry (Durring, 1999). These criticisms prompted more nuanced articulations of a form of critical research that recognize the situated nature of research and researcher, subjects and subjectivity. There is also the trouble of describing a lived experience that is at once proximate and distant (Geertz, 1983), first hand and second hand (Pickering, 2008). In traditional essentialist paradigms, firsthand accounts of experience have been privileged as true and real. Furthermore, the implication of focused humanist and essentialist agendas that attend to experience clash with disciplined multiplicity of poststructuralist intentions, which insist that truth is relational and that words, representations and subjects are often unstable and contradictory. Instead, discourse makes experience fractured, partial, and impossible to recount completely. What cultural studies provides is a means to stitch together these apparently oppositional intentions. It is here that the concept of "disciplined multiplicity" (a theme repeated in many locations throughout this study) is perhaps most salient (Freebody, Luke and Gilbert, 1991).

Ethnography within cultural studies

For the purposes of this research I draw from Britzman (2000) who provides guidance for conducting this educational ethnographic study. She highlights three expectations for ethnography within modernist theories. First, ethnography is understood as both a process and a product; second, the narrative qualities of ethnography are designed to provide both pleasure and new information to the reader; and third, the writing of ethnography (if done well) brings the reader, via a form of cultural assimilation, to a time and a place where they feel immersed in the culture of those being studied. Ethnography is a logical choice as a method here since, like cultural consumers

it involves both a production and a consumption of meaning. However, since media producers and consumers are in no way a homogenous grouping, the point of this form of research is not to discern a singular response (Fiske, 1996). To that end, research questions are devised *in situ* and in response to the complexity of topics that arise in the natural context. This method depends on a sort of willing suspension of disbelief, or verisimilitude on several levels. Doing and reading ethnography requires an amount of trust between writer and reader such that the researcher is first capable of capturing the truth of the experience being observed, and that the reader trusts that the written accounts are capable of translating what is "out there" in a manner that can be accessed and understood "in here" (Britzman, 2000). In a sense, both writer and reader are meant to become voyeuristic observers as cultural secrets are learned through the presumed accuracy of the second hand accounts. In mainstream and modernist versions of ethnography, there is an expectation that "ethnography depends on rationality and stability of writers and readers and upon noncontradictory subjects who say what they mean and mean what they say" (p. 28).

However, bringing a poststructuralist sensibility to bear on ethnography questions modernist expectations of such holistic representations and "reads the absent against the present" (Britzman, 2000, p. 28). It puts representation in crisis, and makes knowledge constitutive of power. It also allows me to frame my research as "new ethnography" (Saukko, 2003) which attempts to remain true to lived experiences while trying to "unravel discourses that mediate our understanding of both the internal lived and the external social worlds" (p. 56). Here, the poststructuralist intention of ethnography "disrupts the ethnographers confidence in 'knowing' experience or in processing the

writerly power to do anything else but borrow discourses and track them onto other discourses" (Britzman, 2000, p. 32).

With the emergence of a ubiquitous global media and Internet based communication the production and consumption of cultural texts is changing not only the cultural politics of representations but also the research landscape (Nightingale, 2008). With these changes the traditional ethnographic tools of face-to-face interview and focus groups, questionnaires and surveys have opened the door to include video, digital recordings and technologies connected to the Internet. This has lead to research designs that "encourage the sharing of power between researcher and research participants," (p. 112) where digital technologies are employed for the purpose of recording, and where participants produce text as part of the research process.

From its earliest days as an intellectual and political project, the methods of cultural studies have been wrought with tensions and criticisms. As previously stated, one of the challenges with cultural studies research is that the interrogation of lived experience requires subjective interpretation. Pickering (2008) argues not only that investigating experience is the heart of cultural studies research, but also that the subjective dimension of any examinations of experience depends on "the complex intersections between public culture and private subjectivity and the transformative potentials that may arise there" (p. 18). Any attempt by a researcher to present experience also begins with an acknowledgement of that researcher's situated interpretation. Experience is always, already mediated. A critical stance requires that experience can neither be presented as raw data, nor treated with an empiricist's objective lens; experience therefore, must always be interrogated for multiple forms of situated

knowledge and understanding (Britzman, 2000). When this is combined with my poststructuralist frame I deliberately provoke multiple voices and contradictions in the narratives that the participants present.

As a field that attempts to bring together a phenomenological desire to understand a particular group of people with the structuralist commitment to analyze the discourses that shape perceptions, one of the greatest challenges stems from the classic notion that in order for research to be "valid" it must be objective. Earlier traditional approaches to validity such as triangulation (Denzin, 1997b) are limiting in the present and evolving context of a cultural studies paradigm since they are incapable of unifying multiple (and often conflicting) forms of reality. The issue of the positivist notion of "truth" versus a relativist notion of multiple truths continues to challenge validity moving into the early Twenty-First Century. More recent methods in cultural studies have combined the poststructuralist intention to analyze discourse with a vision for a new form of ethnography that is truthful to the lived experiences of those who are studied (Saukko, 2003). I take guidance from these newer forms of research and seek to consider the complex nature of these avatar representations and of the at times conflicting intentions of those who have created them.

The challenge here is to stitch together the insistence within poststructuralism's multiple and fluid forms of reality with situated humanist forms of knowing. Within such a climate, that which constitutes research "validity" in its traditional sense has been reconceived in alternative forms (Lather, 1993; Lincoln and Guba, 1985) to include dialogic validity, which finds truthfulness in the collaboration of participants in their representational self-reflexivity (which invites the researcher to examine critically how

his/her perceptions are influenced by his/her historical, cultural and social location), and polyvocality (which recognizes that many voices are at play when studying lived experience). Richardson (2000) suggests that rather than speaking of triangulation as a means to provide validity, the image of prisms provides a more accurate representation of the kind of disciplined multiplicity that is required within cultural studies. The image of a prism allows a space for alternative perspectives to be viewed from multiple approaches. What each of these perspectives ultimately provides is not a view of people from the outside in, as with earlier forms of ethnography, but rather "an encounter or interaction between different worlds" (Saukko, p. 20, 2008). A poststructuralist project evaluates research in terms of how well it challenges, disrupts and is aware of always partial, conflicting discourses and how well is seeks to deconstruct these. In this way my research attends to a form of deconstructive validity.

Research Design and Rationale

The guiding questions for this study focus on the cultural politics of girlhood identity in the construction of personalized avatars for social online spaces. Further questions address how adolescent girls negotiate the discursive practice of constructing personalized avatars, the cultural politics inherent in the act of constructing these forms of visual language and how these representations expose, reproduce, and/or challenge hegemonic discourses within popular culture. Questions about the theoretical struggle between conflicting discourses and the complexity of meanings that get produced rather than merely reflected (Weedon, 1997) focus on the choices the girls made (or were unable to make), on their collaborative and reflexive interpretations of the avatars they

constructed, and on my situated and subjective interpretive analysis of the cultural politics involved.

Davis (2008) points to a history of cultural studies research which focuses on the output of cultural texts as a means of insight into those who produce those texts. The production and consumption of cultural texts are analyzed in order to provide insight into discourses and codes that exist within these texts and the broader cultural, social and linguistic conditions found therein. Questions such as: "What can be said about the individuals featured in the texts? What are the terms and phrases used and what is their symbolic meaning? What are the assumptions embedded in the texts?" (p. 56) may provide such insight.

Because making and posting personalized avatars in social networking spaces is a relatively new practice, this research emerges out of a curiosity around the function of this social discourse and the pedagogical opportunities for bringing it to English language arts curricula. Rather than being designed to fill a gap in the academic literature, the focus on this study seeks to open a new space and a new conversation. Rationale for designing this research draws from related fields of study and from studies that have attended to similar themes in, for example, girlhood identity and avatar production. The conceptual case for my methodology comes from earlier research in cultural studies as highlighted above, and in part from scholarship in "new" ethnography (Saukko, 2003). Here ethnographic research is conducted over the Internet thus moving ethnographic studies from the field to a virtual setting – in essence, to a wider electronically mediated field (Press and Livingstone, 2006; Whittle, 2000). Given the Internet is the location where my participants are communicating, and since the avatars they designed are

intended for use in digital and electronic spaces, it was fitting to study the girls where they already are. For that reason the site for this research is a virtual one, as it has been for other previous avatar research highlighted in Chapter Two (for example: Kafai, Fields and Cook, 2007; Kang and Yang, 2006; Kolko, 1999; Thomas, 2004, 2007).

Consistent with my epistemological orientation detailed in Chapter Two, this research engages a qualitative methodology that explores discursive practices in a manner that is dialogic while also recognizing elements of self-reflexivity and subjectivity in my interpretations (Saukko, 2003). My methodological approach disrupts the "positivist" principle that knowledge may only be derived from and validated by impartial, objective methods. Drawing on the belief that human behaviour is neither passive, nor solely determined by outside factors (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000), ontologically this research reflects a view that reality is "political, personal and experiential" (Denzin, 2004, p. 501). Such research does not attempt to remove the scholarly inquiry from people who are conducting it, rather there is an understanding that as individuals we bring complex layers of personal belief systems to our work, and that we are influenced by, and cannot be completely removed from our histories, or our social and economic locations (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). A crucial element of any cultural studies research that explores lived experience is the subjective dimension of interpretation (Pickering, 2008). The complexity of social relations, political power and "the complex intersections between public culture and private subjectivity and the transformative potentials that may arise" (Pickering, 2008, p. 18) are essential for our understanding of who we are, and who we might become.

Focus groups and interviews

The qualitative position stated above allows me to conduct an ethnographic study that permits observation and interaction with participants with a form of interviewing (Kvale, 1996) in a setting that is more natural than experimental and that is combined with a critical interpretation of what gets presented in the name of experience (Pickering, 2008). Given the intention of the study to gain in-depth knowledge about a cultural practice, a hybrid combination of interviewing and focus group discussion is employed (Meyer, 2008). Since teenaged girls creating personalized avatars on their own would be doing so online and in social networks, then it seemed fitting to find my participants online and to maintain an environment for the study that most closely resembled this setting. The belief is that a qualitative position also provides a level of flexibility that balances a form of focus group with a method of interviewing that closely resembles a dialogue, with an assumption that relevant concepts and ideas will develop as the study progresses. Pickering explains, "Both focus groups and interviews can produce in-depth, detailed and complex data on attitudes, practices and experiences of cultural consumers, as well as the discourses and motivations behind their meaning-making processes" (p. 73). By engaging the participants of my study in dialogue with me and with one another regarding their avatars and their observations about them, questioning and communication with the participants evolved in a way that was deliberately emergent and guided by the girls themselves (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Pomerantz, Kelly and Curry, 2006). I began with guiding questions to inform my understanding, then the questions and discussions evolved, guided by the interests of the participants, their statements and their observations. This positioning was a deliberate attempt to allow the girls' voices to

come through as clearly as possible, to have the focus of inquiry be on what they thought mattered about this discursive practice and to allow their reflexive analysis determine the direction of my inquiry.

One of the challenges of ethnography is in how the researcher can report on "authentic" lived experience when, within a poststructuralist orientation, such realities may instead turn out to be "the product of institutional discourses" (Saukko, 2003, p. 76). To address that challenge, my research seeks to move back and forth between the discursive choices within the cultural production of personalized avatars, the reflexive interpretation of these avatars by the collective of girls themselves, and the interpretative analysis of the social, political and cultural codes by an acknowledged subjective researcher. A new ethnographic, qualitative frame of inquiry allows me to proceed with the assumption that salient concepts will emerge from the research as it progresses, rather than insist that a prescriptive set of directions is necessary to come to a definitive truth. The points of analysis, particularly around notions of gender, ethnicity, beauty, class and ability, are salient because the girls in my study have made them so. Their words and their representations give primacy to my own explorations of cultural politics.

The fundamental difference between focus groups and interviews involved the manner by which data were produced. Debates and interaction typical of focus group participants add a rich layer of potential data not always possible in interview situations (Meyer, 2008). "This is particularly useful for research into motivations and discourses behind attitudes and practices of cultural consumers because in discussions participants have to explain, justify and argue for their opinions" (p. 73). While the design of this ethnographic study cannot be described as exclusively interview or focus group, in a

hybrid fashion, it draws the most salient qualities from each in order to inform this scholarship.

Statement of Ethical Issues[1]

Once participants came forward and expressed interest in participating in the study, they were sent a pair of consent forms: one for them and one for a parent/legal guardian. One parent called both the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICERH) at Memorial University and me to confirm that the study was in fact legitimate. Copies of the consent forms may be found in Appendix C and D. Through the consent process participants were apprised of potential harms and benefits that might arise as a result of this research. Given the non-invasive, quasi public recruitment process and the existence of prior online social networking activity, being part of a study that was designed to mimic that setting and conversations that might occur there, the potential for harms was relatively low. However, as with any online communication where anonymity is present, potential harm from bullying or stereotyping was a possibility. The potential risks for such harms were outweighed by the contribution to the pedagogical practices that attempt to understand the creative and social contributions of youth culture, particularly as they relate to how youth view themselves, their representations of self and each other in their online social environments. In the event that these behaviours surfaced, a mechanism for direct email contact with each of the participants was established within the Forum site to allow for such issues to be discussed and addressed (Berlak, 2004). While I had established contingency plans to provide counselling to any participant who was subjected to online bullying or harassment, it was not necessary.

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[1] **Please see Appendix A for ethical approval and Appendix B for amendment to research timeframe.**

Confidentiality

On several occasions, and in multiple places (The Avatar Creation Group homepage, the Forum homepage, and the consent forms) it was made clear that participant identity would be protected at all times during the research, writing and dissemination of this project. Participants and parents/guardians of the participants were also informed that they could leave the study at any time, and that any data relating to them would not be used against their wishes. While the online forum questions were active, participants were able to respond, or not, to any of the threads of questioning that interested them. In this way, the degree of each girl's participation was entirely self-regulated.

While this research recruited adolescent girls who were in no way attempting to hide or keep private the information that they were posting in a social networking space by posting photos, profile pictures and status updates, and about themselves, the move to the Forum promised a secure, password-protected site where the girls could discuss their thoughts and concerns regarding the avatars they constructed without the worry of having their sentiments read by their wider social network. Understanding that social and peer pressure might impact what or how a participant might respond to the questions being posed (Pomerantz, Kelly and Currie, 2006; Bloustine, 2003) it was felt that a degree of anonymity would give girls the freedom to respond with less pressure of social censorship or embarrassment (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993).

I understood that my presence on the Forum would change the dynamics between the girls and thereby make the environment more like a classroom where a teacher is present, than like the social networking site inhabited only by friends. Great care was

taken to create a positive and collegial, informal and casual relationship with the girls. They all addressed me by my first name, and eight (8) of the ten (10) added me to their friends network on *Facebook*. Marshall and Rossman (1999) explain that most participants "detect and reject insincere, unauthentic people" (p. 85). Being open with the participants about what I was attempting to accomplish with this research, and being openly non-judgmental about their responses, was important to gaining their trust. On several occasions I told them that I was going to be on the Forum mainly to observe them, but that I would ask them to elaborate on their responses sometimes and direct the line of questioning based on their responses and their interests. In short, I let the girls know that while I might be running the study – they were setting the agenda. I deliberately gave the girls positive feedback anytime they responded to a question, and I often asked them to tell me more about what they thought. While there was no payment for the girls' time spent on the Forum, I did consistently thank them for their contributions. At the end of the study I offered to sign off on volunteer hours that they needed to accumulate for a course that I discovered many of them were taking (or would be taking) on Career Development. In every case, the girls said that they appreciated the offer, but that they already had the required thirty volunteer hours accumulated.

Site Access and Recruitment: the Avatar Creation Group Site on *Facebook*

During the sampling process outlined above, potential participants were recruited on *Facebook* by joining the Avatar Creation Group. A snapshot of the top section of this group's home page is shown below. To view the actual group home page, with full colour background and in its entirety, log onto *Facebook* and search Avatar Creation Group. For formatting reasons, I am restricted to showing only small sections of this

home page at a time. The avatar on the right hand side of the page is one I created of me at the time of the study.

Avatar Creation Group
Basic Info

Type:

Description:

Create your avatar!

You are invited to participate in research
being conducted by Connie Morrison
at Memorial University.
Your participation is completely voluntary.
Right now I am building a collection of avatars - later I will narrow that group to 15-20 who will participate in a case study. In the case study you will discuss your avatar and how you created it.

To be part of this initial collection:
1. Join the Avatar Creation Group
2. Create your avatar
Choose from one of the avatar programs below.
(Or, use another program if you want to).
3. put your avatar on your Facebook page/ post it to the group page
4. Email Connie through her Facebook page if you would like to be part of the case study.
5. If you are chosen, you will be sent information about the study and about how to get consent to participate in it.

To create your avatar use one of these:
http://www.weeworld.com/
http://www.doppelme.com/create/wardrobe.asp
http://birgits.net/eng/eng_grafstor.shtml

Contact Info
Email: conniem@mun.ca

View Discussion Board
Message All Members
Edit Group
Edit Members
Edit Group Officers
Invite People to Join
Create Related Event
Leave Group
Share

Group Type
This is an open group. Anyone can join and invite others to join.

Admins
Connie Morrison (creator)

Events
There are no events.
Create Events.

Figure 3.1 Avatar Creation Group Home Page on *Facebook*

A note about the avatar program options

After conducting extensive online searches for avatar creation programs, three were chosen to be included on this group site because they were free, easy to access, and each included an expressed intention for the avatars created there to be uploaded or exported to email signatures or profiles pictures on other social networking sites like *Facebook* or *MySpace*. Avatars from *weeworld.com*, *doppleme.com* and *birgit.net* all had so called "traveling" options, which implied an intention to use these avatars in other

online spaces. Finally, these three programs were chosen because they were not associated with any online gaming community where creating an avatar was part of deliberately creating an alternative online persona. In the end, *weeworld.com* was the exclusive choice for the participants to create their avatars for this study. Two members of the original Avatar Creation Group chose to create and post avatars using one of the other suggested sites, however, these members were too old to meet the age criteria for the study.

Below this section on the Avatar Creation Group were a list of group members and a "Wall" with an accompanying "Discussion Board." This space provided a location for group members to ask questions, and for me, as the group administrator, to respond directly in a way that other members would also be able to access. This section was only used ten times, and questions here were limited to technical queries regarding uploading or exporting their avatars from the WeeWorld site to their *Facebook* profile. In order to ensure confidentiality, the transcriptions of the comments are not included here because the eventual participants of my study made most of the comments which include their profile pictures which will easily identify them.

The Avatar Creation Group home page also provided a section at the bottom to post photos. It is in this section that participants were invited to upload their avatars. Over a period of two and a half months beginning in the middle of June 2008, the size of the Avatar Creation Group grew to 136 at its peak. Of those members, 54 met the demographic requirements established for this research project and were each invited to join the study. At the peak, 41 avatars were posted to this section. No names or

identifying markers were posted with any of the avatars in this section. A complete view of the 41 avatars are below.

Figure 3.2 Avatars created and posted to Avatar Creation Group

As one scrolls down the home page of the Avatar Creation Group, a section called "Recent News" allowed me, as site administrator, to post information that might be relevant to the group. I used this section to place directions for those having trouble uploading or "exporting" their avatars to the group (particularly from the Wee World site). On several occasions, I heard from group members (both those who would

eventually become part of the study and those who would not) that they were having difficulty uploading avatars once they had created them on WeeWorld. It appeared that part of the challenge was language. The WeeWorld site used the word "exporting" the avatars as opposed to the more commonly used term "uploading." That prompted me to post a detailed set of step-by-step directions on the group site. When group members had successfully made their avatars, they also had the option to contact me and I was able, as the group administrator, to post their avatars to the photo section of the group site. This section became a kind of holding ground for all the avatars as well as a place for group members to see what other group members were posting. I also messaged all group members to let them know that I would move copies of their avatars to the photo section of the group page for them.

The Participants

In order to examine the insights into online representations of identity and subjectivity, I sought participants in an environment where such expressions were already being constructed. Today's teenagers are members of the first "cyber generation" raised in a culture of ubiquitous online and digital communication (Kellner and Share, 2003). A number of studies presented in the review of literature in chapter two focus on issues of representation of girlhood identity in real life interactions and online as a way to frame the study of how girls construct personalized avatars in social networking spaces. Kelly et al. (2006) note the connection between technical competence in girls and their ability to construct gendered identities online. While technical competence with computers is most often coded as a predominantly male quality, girls more often constructed their identities while engaged in email and chat functions online (Holloway, et al., 2000).

According to Statistics Canada's ongoing Census at School project nearly 60% of female students prefer to communicate using some form of electronic or digital technology such as Instant messaging, email, or cell phone as opposed to communicating with others in person (Statistics Canada 2010). What these findings suggest is that it would be fairly simple to find a sample of young people who are highly involved with communication technology to participate in my study.

The conceptual base for the demographics of my participants comes from the literature noted in chapter two. When I combined my intention to study the cultural politics of a form of identity representation present in the construction of personalized avatars with cultural, social and educational research that finds young people heavily engaged in electronic forms of communication, I chose to focus on an age demographic where identity and representations of identity are found to be important. For example, Bloustien (2003) chose participants between the ages of 15-18 because she recognized that in Western cultures girlhood is defined as a time where identity is "in progress" from childhood to maturity. This transient time of identity that is "in progress" make the teenage years an ideal time for examining identity and subjectivity as it gets "tried on" in its various forms of expression. In an ethnographic study, Pomerantz, Kelly & Currie (2006) followed a group of teenaged girls in their Vancouver school because of the social nature of school and because of the highly political nature of fashion, style and identity in this demographic of participants. For Driscoll (2002) teenaged girls and their expressions of identity/subjectivity were tied closely to how they used makeup, fashion and body image. She understood that girlhood is a fluid, and unfinished time between childhood and adulthood where identity is complex and often conflicted.

The Sample

This study makes no claim of determining quantifiable, generalized statements regarding teenaged girls and the avatars they create. Nor does it aim to represent an entire population of teenaged girls via a systematic random-rule (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas and Robinson, 2001). As is frequent in forms of social research that utilized focus groups and interviews, the sample size is small. My goal was to ultimately have between six and twelve girls to interview/observe, a number that is both large enough to allow participants to engage with one another in discussion (a desired element of my research), yet small enough to manage the individual contributions and concerns of each participant (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, and Robinson, 2001). In the end, my study included ten girls.

During the initial sampling for this project (Nisbet & Watt, 1984), I recruited participants via an open invitation to join an Avatar Creation Group, which I posted on the public, popular online social networking site, *Facebook*. The justification for using this particular site for my recruitment was that it provided a population of potential participants who were already immersed in the mode of social online communication, which acts as a backdrop for the discursive practice this study seeks to examine. The "invitation" to participate in the research acted as an electronic version of a recruitment poster designed to find participants where they already are (rather than find them in an artificial context like a classroom where they may or may not engage in forms of social online communication). A detailed explanation of this *Facebook* group with a visual representation of the screen that participants would have seen is provided below.

Participation was completely voluntary, and *Facebook* members joined the group if it was of interest to them.

The nature of the study and its recruitment location online allowed the study to take on a diachronic nature. Sampling was more opportunistic and *ad hoc* than fixed. The convenience sample (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000) was deliberately limited to those who use *Facebook*, and who were, by extension, connected to my initial network of "friends" (a term used on *Facebook* to designate contacts within one's online social network). Invitations went initially to those in my own network of friends. I began with my own teenage daughter, and then invitations extended to her friends, then to their friends, and so on. This demographic also fit with the target population for my study and the networking possibilities it could attract. Members were invited to create a personalized avatar to post on the group page.

At the time of the study, regulations on *Facebook* required that groups be listed according to category. The Avatar Creation Group group was classified as "Internet / Technology" with the group "type" listed as "Cyberculture." The group was set up as an "open group" meaning that there were no restrictions to membership and all members could invite anyone from their networks to join.

In order to gather the largest possible initial sample, I placed no limitation on age or gender. Once a period of nearly two months had passed, I hoped to have enough members on the Avatar Creation Group to proceed with a participant selection process. While the number of individuals who joined the Avatar Creation Group reached one hundred and thirty six (136) at its peak, getting enough eligible participants who fit the target population within the restrictions I had placed was a challenge. My initial plan was

to begin by narrowing the members of the Avatar Creation Group who had created avatars to a group of 15-20 girls within the age range of 14-17. During the process of gathering the initial participant base, it became apparent that some minor changes were necessary regarding how and when participants were selected. After nearly three months, I did not have enough girls eligible to participate in the study. By extension, changes in dates were also necessary in the parental consent forms.

At this time, I sent a second letter to the ICEHR requesting changes to how I defined my sample and providing justification for that change. In my original research proposal I indicated that when choosing participants for the case study, I would not accept "*individuals who are known directly by the researcher and individuals whose parents are known directly by the researcher.*" Given the social nature of *Facebook* this proved to be extremely limiting. I requested that the wording of the proposal be changed so that I might be allowed to accept participants who "*are not friends or relatives*". I made it clear that my intention remained to conduct the study using individuals who are removed from the researcher as much as possible, but I also acknowledged the reality of a site designed explicitly around social connections. This point becomes salient later when I consider the number of participants who identify as figure skaters. This apparent anomaly is likely a result of the social network feature of the sample collection process and procedure.

When the membership of the Avatar Creation group reached 135, I invited all those who fit the desired age and gender demographics for my study. The age parameters for participants in my study were influenced by the age requirements for having a *Facebook* and WeeMee avatar account. In the privacy statement that individual users must agree to prior to setting up a *Facebook* account, a user must be at least 13 years of

age. Admittedly, these age requirements are impossible to monitor online, and individuals younger than that age do have *Facebook* and WeeMee accounts. However, despite having interest from younger potential participants for joining this study, I declined requests for participation by those under the age of 13 because they did not meet the legal age for having a *Facebook* account.

In all, 42 invitations were sent to girls who were between 13-18 years old. While the study did lose participants in the initial stages, and during the consent process, once the online forum was set up, the ten participants who began the study all participated and finished the study. A slight attrition of the original sample can be attributed to a mortality that is often found in ethnographic research (Cohen et al., 2000). The final participants in my study included ten teenage girls from across Canada, ranging in ages from 13-16. Six of these girls were either 15 or 16. The remaining four were 13 or 14. While I had committed to an initial group of girls between the ages of 14-17, the 13 year old in the group was only a few weeks away from her birthday, and actually turned 14 during the course of the study. Seven girls lived in small rural communities in Eastern Canada. Two others came from a larger urban city in Eastern Canada, and one lives in an urban city in Western Canada. Chapter four (4) provides a fuller introduction to each of the participants and the avatars they created for this study.

A wee bit about WeeWorld.com

With the participants in the study creating their avatars exclusively on the WeeWorld.com site, what follows is a basic overview of the web site as it relates to the purposes of this study. This overview will help to frame the forthcoming discussion and

analysis, one of the foci of which is the site and the avatar construction choices available to the participants.

According to BusinessWire.com (2006) the popularity of WeeWorld is vast. It is "the world's first and most extensive multiplatform visual identity with …WeeMees in more than 39 countries around the world." The intent behind its US launch in 2006 was to "create, update and maintain a consistent, personalized visual identity throughout their entire online mobile life." It is a deliberate attempt to tap into an increasingly rich visual capacity within online environments and mobile technology. What WeeMees offer is an opportunity to personalize an individual's online and offline expressions by allowing them to create a "personalized identity that travels throughout their digital world." WeeWorld has partnered with many of the world's biggest Internet and mobile technology companies such as MSN, Skype, Vodafone, and Motorola. In a partnership with AOL, WeeWorld allows AIM users to build WeeMees and select backgrounds for free. The WeeWorld.com site claims that there are WeeMees born every few seconds using this application. Through AIM, which is the largest instant messaging community in the United States, users in Canada and the United Kingdom can also enhance their instant messaging experience by adding animated WeeMees to their applications.

Windows Live Messenger also boasts hosting 14 Million WeeMees since March 2005. Using their site, WeeMees can be built for free, however, if they want their friends to see it, and if they want to share emotions while chatting, it will cost an average of 3 euros. Skype has also held a partnership with WeeWorld since 2005. Since then nearly 450, 000 WeeMees have been made and can be used while texting and Instant Messaging within buddy lists. WeeMees are available on Skype in the USA, UK, Germany, France,

Netherlands and Poland, and they are also available on SkypeOne which allows virtual global access.

A snapshot of WeeWorld

In order to provide an understanding of the site where participants constructed their avatars this snapshot provides the essence of what the girls might have seen when they created their avatars. It is impossible to describe fully and completely all that the girls saw with respect to the commercial aspect of this site since the site changes advertising content on a moment-to-moment basis by streaming video. Advertising content is dependant on the age and location demographics of individual users, as well. As part of a security feature of the site, simply taking a screen shot is not possible, nor can a user's home page be saved or be reproduced. The explanation given is that in order for others to see a WeeMee in her "room," they too must be members of the WeeWorld online community.

When the participants in the study logged onto the WeeWorld site during the summer of 2008, the first option provided to them was to "Create Your WeeMee, Get started it's FREE", alternatively users were invited to "Chat with Live friends: 24 million WeeMees and counting", or they could "Get cool stuff, play games, millions of items are downloaded a week". The screen on the home page I was able to view with my own WeeMee was embellished with advertisements for cruise vacations, new music videos, or the latest gaming release. The bottom of the page was divided into three main sections. One section urged users to "Get Cool Stuff for your WeeMee: Earn Green Points Now." Another section invited users to get a rating meter to find out if their "Room" is "Totally hot or totally cool." The third section invited them to "Validate their email today" and

"Grab 500 points now." The points that are being referenced are used as a form of currency to "purchase" items for their avatars. (It should be noted that given the nature of this site, there was significant content changes in terms of advertising over the few months that I investigated the site. However, the principle behind the content remains fairly consistent in that there is still a commercial component that invites users to partake in "opportunities" in order to accumulate to purchase items for their WeeMees).

When the user clicks the button "Get Started" they are taken to another page where they are asked to choose between a male or female WeeMee. From there, the user can choose between six different skin colours, then from three different head shapes. From here, the user can choose from six different eye colours, after which they are asked if they are happy and want to proceed. At each stage, the option to "Go Back" and change your mind is available. At this stage, the user's WeeMee is placed in its undergarments on a themed background (which can be changed later). The default backgrounds are changed frequently to reflect the current season or holiday. For example, in October a Halloween background was provided on the WeeWorld site.

From this point a user may choose to add "Features" (hair, facial hair, makeup, emotions, belly and shape); "Clothes" (headwear, tops, bottoms, footwear, eyewear); and "More Stuff" (food & drinks, interests, accessories, environment). Throughout the options for hair and clothing a colour bar appears to allow users to change the shade of most choices. In many cases, items have an icon attached to it indicating the number of points a user must have in order to "purchase" the item for the WeeMee. At the time of the study, prices for items ranged from 75-600 points. It should be noted that over the duration of this study the commercial nature of the WeeWorld.com site and the number of

items with "points" associated with them has changed, almost daily. Approximately six weeks after I set up the Avatar Creation Group on *Facebook*, I began paying close attention to the WeeWorld.com site once it became clear that this was the program that the participants were choosing to use to make their avatars. It appeared that the number of items for purchase had increased significantly since the first time I browsed this site.

At this point, it is necessary to adopt a "critical orientation" (Luke, 2003) and attend to the various options available to the girls in order to frame later analysis and discussion around issues of access and equity, agency and suture which are limited by their semiotic choices in terms of avatar construction options. In order to demonstrate the degree to which the girls would have had their avatar construction choices limited, a brief survey below highlights the number of options the girls would have been able to choose for making their personalized avatars. It is important to note that the participants of the study would not have accumulated any points so they were limited to the free options in order to construct their personalized avatars.

Features	**Items requiring points /Total**	**% with points**
Hair Salon	36/168	**21.4%**
Facial Hair	0/51	
Make up	0/5	
Emotions	0/18	
Belly	0/2	
Shape	0/3	
Clothes		
Headwear	48/118	**41%**
Tops	227/337	**67%**
Bottoms	64/151	**42%**
Footwear	46/78	**59%**
Eyewear	22/66	**33%**
More Stuff		
Food & Drinks	16/56	**29%**
Interests	77/184	**42%**
Accessories	103/169	**61%**
Environments	0/43	

Figure 3.3 WeeWorld.com Avatar making choices after registration on October 15, 2008

It is also important to note that the options available for users to "purchase" points have also changed since the study was conducted. When this research began, users (or parents of users) could use a major Credit Card, or PayPal to purchase points. At that time $5.00 USD would get a user 25,000 points. More recently multiple options are available to users to "earn" points by trying out online games, purchasing advertised merchandise or completing online surveys which essentially sell demographic data to marketing companies. For example, users might "TRY Outsparks groundbreaking Free Online RPG!" for 83 WeeWorld Points. They might choose to purchase a "hard-to-find, head-turning color" iPhone for 300 WeeWorld points. Or they could "Discover who loves you!" by having horoscopes sent directly to their cell phone for 413 WeeWorld Points.

The Forum

After the ten girls had submitted consent documents to participate in this study, they were sent directions through *Facebook* email to "register" to the online site referred to as the Forum. I asked them to use a pseudonym in order to protect their identity. The online site was designed exclusively for this study and administered through the Virtual Teacher's Centre at the Newfoundland and Labrador Teacher's Association (NLTA), by Mr. Brian Pittman. The Forum was designed to allow the girls to interact online in a manner not unlike the kind of social space they were familiar with on *Facebook*. There was an attempt to replicate, as much as possible, a natural site for the research to occur while also providing a space where I could collect data through a combination of online interviewing and participant observation (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

I understood, however, that the site could not replicate the vastness of the social network available to the girls on *Facebook*, and for that reason, the Forum was described as a kind of online classroom where the girls would run the class and where I would simply moderate. I took design direction from Kang and Yang (2006) who used a kind of chat application where their participants were represented by their avatars. This site was password protected, and, aside from the researcher and the participants, Mr. Pittman was the only person who had access to this site. His access was limited to the site's technical troubleshooting. At times he was called upon to upload avatars to special files where all participants could access them. On one occasion, he was asked to help remove a post that had been submitted several times by mistake. Participants and parents/guardians connected to this research were informed of Mr. Pittman's potential access to the site. The home page of the site can be viewed at http://www.virtualteachercentre.ca/avatar/index.html

Upon entering the home page for this site, the participants would see the Virtual Teacher's Centre logo on the top left hand side of the page. Beside this logo is an image of a teacher in front of her classroom. The following message takes up much of the page and is designed to have participants acknowledge that they are voluntarily entering a site where they will be part of a research project.

Welcome

By entering this site you are participating in a research project where you will be asked to join in discussions that will look at how and why you created your avatar. Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary.
Your identity will be protected at all times during the study, and during the analysis, writing, and publication of the findings. Information you share here will not be stored or used against your wishes. Please contact Connie Morrison through the email feature on this site if you have any questions or concerns.
The proposal for this research has been approved by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research at Memorial University. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 737-8368.

A Hyperlink was enacted to take them straight to ICEHR email if necessary, and a red link that reads "Visit the Forum" appears at the bottom of the page. Once a participant clicked on the "visit" link, they are taken to a login page with the title "YetAnotherForum.Net" where they see the message "Welcome Guest" and are prompted to provide a username and a password, which were registered with Mr. Pittman at the NLTA. Once on the Forum, participants would see a list of topics under the title Avatar Research. They were instructed to set up their profile using a pseudonym, and to upload their avatar either from their own computer or from a collection of avatars that had already been collected and put in a file for retrieval.

On the Forum site there were three ways for participants to take part in the study. The girls had the option to contribute to the discussion Forums using their pseudonyms, which all did to varying degrees of engagement. They also had the option to post anonymously, though no one did. Finally, they also had an opportunity to communicate any comments or concerns to me privately through a private message (email) feature. While some did avail of the private message feature, it served participants as a space to ask questions regarding formatting issues, but did not prove to be a significant source for data collection. I interacted with and observed the participants chat with others on the Forum. Minimal guiding questions initiated conversations about their avatars and permitted a flexibility that allowed the girls to raise and pursue questions and observations that were pertinent to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2004).

Once the girls had registered their pseudonyms on the Forum, they were able to begin reading and responding to the posted questions by clicking on the question links.

When they responded to the question threads, their avatar would appear beside their responses. The closed online forum lasted for a period of approximately four to five weeks. The original proposal indicated that I would conduct the study over a four-week period during summer holidays and prior to school commencing in the fall. However, when numbers were not sufficient to warrant beginning the study at the beginning of August, a request was made for an extension of time in order to allow for sufficient numbers to come forward. For this reason, the original parental consent form was revised in order to indicate this altered time frame. The permission for these changes was granted.

The nature of the Forum was intended to allow them to post as often as they wanted and at a time that was convenient for them to do so, thus allowing for the same kind of a-synchronous social engagement that they would have in their other online communities such as *Facebook*. One of the challenges with this format, however, was that it took some participants longer than others to get to the questions and to post their responses.

Data Collection

The data collected includes the posted images of the girls' avatars, the transcripts of the online conversations/interviews with me and with each other from the Forum site, observation field notes collected *in situ,* reflections of conversations and interactions on the initial *Facebook* Avatar Creation Group and in follow-up email (Meyers, 2008). Data were also collected by means of observation of the WeeWorld avatar site by using thick description (Geertz, 1973). In the early days of ethnographic research, much credibility was given to the participant observer (Becker and Geer, 1972) who could provide rich

conceptualized information based on a long period of both proximate observation and interrogation. However, Nightingale (2008) notes, "Somewhat paradoxically, the capacity to devote time to observing has been dramatically reduced because of its cost and complexity" (p. 108). With the changing social networks, and the rapid advance in technology, new ethnography takes advantage of the new social and technological tools. In this case, observation takes place in a virtual space.

This broad collection of data was typical of qualitative research in general and ethnography in particular. Cohen et al., (2000) call ethnographers "methodological omnivores" and suggest that it is common for them to employ multiple instruments to collect research data. The subjective nature of this study and its heavy reliance on the constructed avatar images and the voices and opinions of the participants lead me to make the online asynchronous interview/focus group a central method for collecting data where my role was less like an interviewer than it was a moderator. Because the research focuses on the cultural politics of these autobiographical constructions, it is important for the participants to feel a sense of control and autonomy in terms of the direction that the questioning would take. It was important for them to feel as though they owned what was being discussed and could talk freely and without fear of judgement by the researcher. In order to do that I chose a form of interviewing that was semi-structured (some original guiding questions were used to start the discussions), and invited the girls to post their own discussion questions to the group. This approach "has the advantage of giving respondents space to explore issues as they consider important" (Meyer, 2008). As stated earlier, great care was given to building a rapport with the girls. I made it clear to the girls that I did not have (nor did I want) complete control over the questioning. Unlike

traditional face-to face interviews, timing, body language and interrupting a respondent was never an issue. The nature of the study gave the girls time to think about, and if desired, edit their responses.

Observations of the avatars and the weeworld.com site generated data that was fruitful, particularly in the analysis. Meyer (2008) points out that when conducting research related to cultural products and cultural consumers, interview/focus group transcripts should be analyzed in relation to the analysis of the cultural text. While Meyer suggests that this data is most helpful when collected prior to the interviews, I found that the changing commercial nature of the weeworld.com site meant that observations of that site had to be made on an ongoing basis. Field notes were kept in the form of an online journal and focused on my observations about the avatars, the construction choices as they relate to how the girls were able to represent themselves though these texts. This journal became a space where I could attend to emerging thoughts and where I could pose questions that helped me focus my findings. It became a central organizing space for keeping track of progress and for theorizing. While my goal was to make these observational notes descriptive and detailed, I recognize that in using a feminist poststructuralist lens for theorizing, they also were made with my own interpretive conceptualization, and so they had to be filtered though my subjectivities.

A post analysis briefing in the form of follow up questions allowed for data analysis to be confirmed by participants (Denzin, 1997). As part of their informed consent procedures, the participants were aware that the images of their avatars and the transcripts of our online conversations would form the basis of my analysis. A few weeks after participants posted their final comments on the Forum, follow up questions were

sent via regular email or through their *Facebook* email. Participants were given the opportunity to withdraw any data relating to them at this time, though none did. During this phase many of the girls added more observations and expressed positive comments about their participation in the study.

Protecting the data

The transcriptions of the online discussion forums, and observer field notes are stored in password protected computer files, and on a computer that contains no file sharing software. printed data is held in a secure, locked location where it will be destroyed no later than five years after the completion of the study.

Data Analysis

Using an *ad hoc* method to generate meaning (Kvale, 1996; Meyer, 2008) is consistent with cultural studies methods and ethnographies that focus on cultural consumers. My quest for deep understanding about the construction and purpose of avatars as cultural texts, and the participant's perceptions of the cultural politics of this form of social representation is also consistent with ethnographic methods. Recalling my feminist poststructuralist frame, my goal is not the quest for truth, but rather a search for the salient concerns of the participants and a conceptualization of how these concerns emerge theoretically. I analyzed the Forum transcriptions with a form of open coding and axial coding (Shank, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994) even though in cultural studies methods "it is also acceptable for researchers to adopt no particular method [of coding] and simply analyse transcripts through themes and their relations to wider knowledge contexts" (Meyer, 2008, p. 83). The open coding process began when I collected and printed the transcriptions of the online discussions, I read and reread the transcriptions

line by line in order to develop analytical codes. I used no *a priori* codes, concepts categories or themes on this data. Instead I choose to develop codes that emerged from the girl's words in an effort to remain open to the possibility of discovery and points of inquiry. These codes worked as broad descriptors for naming broad categories and chunks of data that were further divided into more nuanced categories, and eventually into emerging themes. I was cognizant of not rushing the coding process based on a first impulse (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and returned to the transcripts after short breaks to attempt to maintain a clear perspective.

I created computer files according to theme, and using a word processing program, I colour-coded the transcriptions and observations accordingly. In many cases, if a girl posted a comment to the Forum and it included data that required multiple codes, then these transcriptions were coded with multiple colours, and comments were placed simultaneously in as many files as was appropriate. In these cases I kept larger comments intact so as to maintain the context of the response. Once the transcriptions from the Forum, and email were coded they were arranged thematically in separate documents where I began making speculative inferences and began drafting summaries of the emerging themes, and issues.

A process of axial coding was then used to develop categories, and to search for links and relationships within categories. This required an interpretation of the conceptual categories, and a further conceptualization of meanings, commonalities, links and patterns. The constant comparison was achieved by searching for relationships between the data. When necessary, I communicated with the girls via email to confirm

my conceptual interpretations, careful to seek their voice each time. This was followed by a process of deep analysis of themes and interpretation of meaning.

A systematic second level of analysis (Meyer, 2008) allowed me to examine the WeeWorld site and the personalized avatars created there against media and popular discourses as they relate to the data in from the transcripts.

Leaving the field

Since the parameters of the research were established in the early stages, and the participants were informed that the Forum would be an active online space for a period of 4-6 weeks, the matter of disengaging was relatively simple. The school year had begun and the girls were becoming involved in their academic pursuits and with a number of extracurricular activities. As a parent, I was aware of the time commitments the girls were giving to the study and that I did not want it to interfere with time spent on their own schoolwork. Participation in the Forum had peaked and started to dwindle near the end of the fifth week when summations and final observations were being posted. The Forum was kept active for one participant who had computer trouble during the study so that she could post comments and participate. Each of the participants was contacted via email after a month after the initial coding had taken place in order to check observations.

Methodological Evaluation

Empirical research is not a neutral endeavour. It is political, subjective and informed, at best, by the limits of the researcher's ability to observe with a keen and open eye, and narrate with precision, detail and believability. The qualitative methodology described here draws from scholarship in cultural studies and critical ethnography that

despite its refusal to claim absolutes and truth does adhere to academic rigour in its attention and commitment to rich and thick description.

Despite its apparent failings and limitations, ethnography survives, based on an unspoken understanding between reader and writer that the account of what has been observed and written is thorough, honest, and transparent (Britzman, 2000). In the face of these challenges, ethnographic narrative acts as though time stood still. In a sense, the creation of an avatar in response to an accompanying question, who do you think you are? also demands that time freeze for a moment, while a critical analysis, reflexive commentary, and descriptive language are brought to bear on the image which represents the self at one moment in time.

Within new ethnographical approaches to cultural studies (Pickering, 2008; Saukko, 2003) there is an understanding that the researcher is an integral part of the culture, its structures and its politics. As I conduct critical research and I consider the politics of representation present in a commercially dominated digital age, I also acknowledge that I cannot be removed from the research as an objective observer. My position as a researcher is interpretative, and as such it is political. My interpretations cannot be removed completely from my values, or subjectivities. While the intention of ethnographic research is to attempt to open a space where "experience could not speak for itself" (Britzman, 2000p. 32), I also confront the poststructural concept that there is no way to represent the real within the limits of language. There is a politics present in recounting, just as there is a politics present in the desire to be accountable (Britzman, 2000). We may be constituted by discourse, but I confront the poststructural reality that although representations of identity/subjectivity may be constituted by discourse,

language fails to capture these representations fully. In fact, there is no way to completely represent the real within the limits of language. Instead, there are several layers of interpretative loss to acknowledge in this research.

The inability of language (visual or otherwise) to fully capture the differences between experience and representation is one thing; however, I must also acknowledge that there is a loss in translation in my job as a narrator who stands removed from the experiences of my participants, observes them and then interprets in an attempt to reveal their intentions through imperfect and incomplete language. Furthermore, if there is a question concerning the authenticity of the writer's account of what has been observed, there must also be a doubt about the ability of the reader to glean from the writing that which was intended (Hall, 1980). Despite these questions, I progress with the optimism that the interpretation of my understanding of the girls' avatars and their discussions might make visible some small piece of what is lost in translation from one form of representation to another.

Researcher Reflexivity

> Finally, as Nightingale (2008) points out,
>
> Observational-based research is highly dependent on the exercise of self-reflexivity- critical reflection by the researcher about the impact the observer has, or is likely to have, on the sorts of things that are said or done while the fieldwork is in progress. (p. 106)

As an educated, white, middle class mother, doctoral student, university lecturer, former high school teacher and figure skating coach, I am informed and influenced by my location is each of these roles, past and present. I realize that, as a participant observer in

this research, my role as mother, teacher and coach position me in a location of social control in some instances, so I deliberately sought to offset that power imbalance (as noted above). Self-reflexivity is also important during the analysis and writing because it is within the researcher's power to shape the representation of the research (Britzman, 2000; Pickering, 2008). As Britzman (2000) does, I struggle with the authority I possess as a researcher and narrator, and with my inability to represent my participants as they would represent themselves. So while I reluctantly position myself behind the backs of my participants, I must be clear that my intent is not to capture a truth that is already out there—that would be impossible. Despite multiple efforts to check meaning and interpretation, there is still no guarantee that what I have is truth. What I have instead is doubt. Therefore, I admittedly construct a version of truth, and in this construction I will recall my cultural studies frame in order to question the power structures behind how meanings and knowledge get naturalized in these everyday cultural texts.

Britzman (2000) asks, "If ethnography authenticates representation, what does it mean to employ theories that call into question promises of representation and belief?" (p. 37). In search of categories of agency and voice, a poststructuralist lens allows that the personalized avatars created here are much more than representations of the physical body; they are also embodied dreams, desires, hopes and fantasies. While this perspective provides a subject, who is both read and misread by conscious and unconscious discourses, it also seeks a descriptive language that is more provisional and open to the possibility of agency (Britzman, 2000). Therefore, I proceed to construct a version of truth, a stitching together of truths that are relational (Foucault, 1999), and truths that are imperfectly and impossibly situated.

Chapter 4
Findings: Avatars

We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful what we pretend to be.
-Kurt Vonnegut

Introduction

In this chapter, I present my interpretive findings based on the personalized avatars constructed by my ten participants. These findings are drawn from an analysis of the avatar images and from the online discussions posted by the participants on the Forum site. My interpretations contribute to an understanding of their individual discursive practices and, collectively, of a larger discursive category of girlhood. When I began this study I had questions about how these girls might negotiate the politics of self-representation using these avatars, and how this discourse functions within their online social and communicative practices. I wondered about the socio-cultural dynamics of the personalized, yet highly commercialized dimensions of these avatars. Could the construction of personalized avatars be theorized as a digital example of performed identity? The English teacher in me wondered if, or how, these personalized avatars might function as forms of visual autobiography. What self-narrative might be made possible with a visual language and what might require clarification with an alphabetic text?

As I proceeded to write the analysis of findings I was paralysed by an inner disquiet, in part based on the discomfort of speaking on behalf of the girls, but more so because I felt as though I was betraying their trust by digging behind their words and their constructed self representations. I was uncomfortable describing them as being ever

duped by a market designed to profit from shaping their desires and feeding their insecurities about belonging. I was troubled profoundly by the expectations of an established ethnographic process, which granted me an authoritative voice to describe people and their textual identities. One of the dilemmas I faced was that I began like a dutiful ethnographer, attempting to record what the girls said, assuming that their words would reveal "truths". My early drafts included questions, headings and even titles like: "who do they think they are?" which inadvertently implied an essentialist position where a fixed identity might be possible. At every turn, I felt the humanist pull to design categories of agency, voice and resistance to explain the girls' responses to regimes of power and to position them as the originators of truth. However, a feminist poststructuralist lens offered a more provisional understanding of agency and voice that is being constantly revised, situated in practices and the effect of social practices and historical locations. So, after considerable inner struggle, my conceptual frame allowed me to rest more comfortably with the notion that this form of representation would not and could not deliver an unmediated access to an authentic self.

Britzman (2000) describes a similar dilemma within her own work in educational ethnography. She too is conflicted by a methodology that promises the researcher will cohesively represent the subject and her commitment to poststructuralist theories that disrupt the desire and possibility for any such narrative. What Britzman (2000) allows is a repositioning of ethnographic research that casts findings as narratives and understands that representations will be partial versions of truth. She questions the neutralization of truth such that it becomes accepted as knowledge, and also invites a responsiveness of its readers to accept the myth that what they read is real. What she offers to this form of

research is a space "to push thought against itself" (p. 38) where ethnographers locate their own textual strategies and political positions in order to point out "the differences among the stories, the structures of telling, and the structures of belief" (p. 38). Such a commitment exists as a site of disquiet – a place that doesn't fit tidily into the practices of accountability so craved by modern education. I recognized this tension in my own work and was relieved to find it described in the literature.

In order to move forward, I positioned my own ethic, not only as a researcher, but also as an educator, to consider the responsibilities that arise from working and reading critically. Embracing this challenge, and facing the obstacles that come from a speculative and critical reading yielded results that were liberating. This reading allowed me to unravel normative discourses and shift away from humanist conceptions of identity as unproblematic and already accomplished, toward a more complex and tentative understanding of identity that is always in progress, and that is always incomplete (Hall, 1990).

As I coded my transcripts, broad themes emerged relating to gender, class, ethnicity, beauty, and aesthetic forms of representation. These categories framed a thematic analysis which revealed inconsistencies between how the girls sometimes represented themselves with their avatars, and their explanations of how and why they did so. While I narrate findings according to categories, it would be contrary to my conceptual framework to assume that these categories exist in isolation or in any hierarchal order. In many instances, the girls made comments that require a complex rendering on many levels, therefore, every attempt has been made to acknowledge these complexities. I acknowledge the impossibility of attempting to provoke multiple voices

through my poststructuralist positioning in ethnography. However, the linearity of a written thesis at times betrays any such complexity. After working through multiple drafts, my hope is that from my tentative and subjective stance as an ethnographer, I am able to "reposition the site of struggle from individuals to their narratives and to pluralize their retellings to account for the competing stories" (Britzman, 2000, p. 35). While part of this narrating requires me to assume a position of power and ultimately pin down descriptions and observations, I do so cautiously and reflectively with the understanding that not even their words can be taken for granted as truths. I have interpreted their avatars and their observations individually, and I consider what they have to offer as pieces of a larger experience of girlhood and how that can be represented in online spaces.

In broad terms, the subsequent sections and chapters organize my analysis as guided by interpretive, emergent theory as described in the chapter 3 (methodology). In what follows, I explore the discursive practice of constructing a personalized avatar by employing a reading via Kress and vanLeeuwen's (1996) visual grammar. As a kind of exploration that functions as a "code breaker" (Luke and Freebody, 1999), I attempt to decipher the visual text and the accompanying descriptions that the girls provide. Here I examine how meaning is made through images and explore how the girls use (or not) a form of semantic competence or "meaning making" for their desired self-narratives with a language that relies on the visual image. Avatar images and the written descriptions from the girls juxtapose my visual reading and point to a number of theoretical complexities, which will be analyzed in the following chapters.

Using a Visual Grammar to Read Avatar Images

"She…may be a hundred different things within the measure of a day"

– Elvis Costello

This section will address my findings about how each of the girls in my study negotiated the process of constructing their own personalized avatars. The images of the avatars are provided below. Footnotes provide brief introductions and descriptions and are intended to familiarize the readers with the girls and the personalized avatars they constructed. Here and within the subsequent findings and analysis, I will use the girls' own words where possible. The misspelling from the original transcriptions have been corrected, however, I have taken great effort to ensure that the intent of their wording is not compromised.

Media studies has a long tradition of employing conventions to "read' visual images. Recalling that this study relies on a definition of literacy that recognizes the ubiquitous nature of multimodal texts and that acknowledges the social function of language, I employ elements of Kress and vanLeeuwen's (1996) *Grammar of visual design* to offer a reading of these avatar texts that allows for multiple interpretations of the same image and provide context for my findings and analysis. Visual grammar is not a prescriptive set of rules that govern composition of images; rather it offers a way to begin unpacking the multiple meanings that images possess. This visual grammar combines formal art theory and functional semiotic theory where the meanings of an image and its visual components are grounded in a social context. It explores a system of semiotics in the same way that linguists study systems of language. Images are understood as representational structures that can be narrative or conceptual, or a combination of both.

Described as a "social-semiotic theory of representation" (p. 5), this component-based approach to analyzing images identifies smaller structures in images and considers the relationships between them en route to understanding a pictorial image. It recognizes that signs posses meaning, but that those meanings are not solely in the hands of their authors.

This visual grammar suggests that when viewing an image, a reading path is created between an image and the reader (viewer) where vectors (created by lines, gestures, gaze, and positioning, for example) direct attention to the most salient aspects of an image. Readers are positioned by conceptual structures in which the elements of an image are either subjects or carriers. Classification structures are often superior elements that have been posed and which suggest a normalization of the subject. The positioning of a subject, for example, can be read as creating a degree of personal distance, hence establishing a personal relationship to the viewer. The gaze of a subject determines the mood by establishing a kind of relationship between the subject (participant) and the viewer, as well. A *demand* gaze (looking straight on) invites the viewer into an imaginary relationship with the subject by explicitly acknowledging the viewer. Whereas an *offer*, on the other hand, does not gaze directly at the viewer and thereby positions the viewer as an onlooker.

Horizontal and vertical angles position the perspective of the viewer as either subjectively (the vertical angle suggests a position of power held by the viewer), or objectively (horizontally), which signifies the involvement that the viewer has with the image. The manner by which an image is centered is also significant. The closer an element is to the centre, the more salient that element is to the image. The closer an element appears to the periphery, the less significant it is. Finally, for the purposes of this

study (though certainly not for the complexities offered by this form of visual grammar), the axis of an image can be divided to signify a structure called the *real* and *ideal*. Here, the top section of an image is said to represent the *ideal*, a dream or an aspiration, whereas the bottom of an image often holds more *real*, practical and factual information.

When combined, the symbolic structures of an image offer suggestions to the author's intent through deliberate and unstructured (implied) affinity to something or someone. The authors argue that visual image and graphics are often accompanied by alphabetic text in order to make meaning. They draw from Barthes' notion of *relay* to explain that alphabetic text adds layers of meaning to a text. Only a couple of the avatar images constructed here include words (on a t-shirt and a shopping bag), however the girls' accompanying written discussions might also be conceived as a form of relay that adds layers of meaning to these constructed images. What this form of reading offers my findings and analysis is a chain of connected concepts or a "toolkit" that argues that the relationship between a sign and a signifier is always motivated. This gives the reader (or viewer) the power to change the meaning of a particular sign in a given context.

Overall, these readings are at once *representational* (of physical or semiotic entities); *interactive* (in that they construct the relationships between the viewer and what is being viewed); and *compositional*. In each case the avatars are presented in whole body thereby inviting an objective, close social distance between the text and its viewer/reader. The forward facing avatar (or the represented participant) is theoretically conceptualized as establishing a direct contact with the viewer thereby creating an interactive *demand* where the avatar (participant) explicitly acknowledges me (or you) as the viewer and the viewer becomes the object of the look. With these vectors "contact is established, even if

it is only at the imaginary level" (p. 122). Because the body proportions of a WeeMee avatar are not representative of real life, the head occupies approximately the same amount of two-dimensional space as the rest of the body thereby giving the face a more salient focus. Moreover, the face is closely centred to the middle of the entire frame. To this end, elements like skin tone, facial expression, and make up options become focal points. Kress and vanLeeuwen's grammar suggests that a straight on posture of these avatars infers a sharing of power between image and viewer, however, since it is not technically the girls in this study who actively produce the *demand* – rather, the producers of the avatar program who established their posture are influencing (whether intentionally or not) the viewer to enter equally into an imaginary relationship with the avatar (participant). This sharing of power has implications for how the avatars are presented and read with multiple intentions and perceptions.

Since the avatars are depicted on a predominantly vertical angle, and facing the camera squarely, the viewer is invited to become involved with the avatar image. Such vertical angles tend toward naturalistic and subjective interpretations. Backgrounds act as a frame that gives the viewer an opportunity to respond with varying degrees of familiarity. Furthermore, since the avatar images are two dimensional, the backgrounds often occupy mainly the upper two thirds of most avatar images, therefore situating what is represented as *ideal*. Seen this way, backgrounds become less like an afterthought in the process of construction, and more salient in terms of the generalized information they might present around dreams and aspirations. On the other hand, the lower section of the background or the objects placed at the feet or on the periphery of the avatar represent the

real. Elements here suggest more specific, factual, practical and mundane information about the avatar (participant).

I will proceed with a brief reading of the visual grammar present in the girls' WeeMee avatars, combined, where possible, with their own descriptions as a way to establish themes that will be analyzed further. When theorized as representations or statements of a girl's subjectivity the visual language therein constructs a variety of social/historical discourses. Identifying and understanding these discourses and how they might inform social practices, authorities, rules and regulations, fields of knowledge and truths frames them within a conceptualization of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1972).

Roxy[1]

Figure 5.1. Roxy's three WeeMee avatars

With the face as the focal point of these avatars, a close examination of the facial features of Roxy's three avatars reveals that the first avatar has lipstick and the other two

[1] Roxy was fourteen-years-old and from a small rural community with a population less than 2500 in Eastern Canada. On her *Facebook* page she has well over 300 friends and she describes her interests as figure skating, being with friends, her phone and her computer. When asked what five single words she would use to describe herself, Roxy names "caring, friendly, funny, considerate, and kind." She comes from an economically challenged community, her family is working class and she is involved with a number of extracurricular sporting activities in and out of school. More specifically, she is a figure skater who not only skates a couple of times a week in her local community during the winter, but also attends off-season schools in a nearby city (which means a substantial financial and time commitment by her family). A quick examination of her three different avatars reveals that each of them is wearing a different shade of blue. Roxy was unable to find the right kind of glasses for her avatar, so she opted to omit them from her WeeMees. In spite of these inaccuracies, Roxy told me that she was pleased with their autobiographical nature.

have eyelashes. At the time of the study, it was not possible to include more than one facial feature/makeup option at a time. A choice between five options for facial features (freckles, eyeliner, eyelashes, lipstick or a mole like Cindy Crawford's) precluded a user from using choosing a second option. Roxy's choices here represent reiterative and citational practices that produce a discourse of feminine beauty and simultaneously reveal the effect of that discourse (Butler, 1993).

Four girls chose to use a Paris backdrop for one of their avatars. The Eiffel Tower serves visually to represent an element of fantasy that can be read as an *ideal* (Kress and vanLeeuwen, 1996). Roxy confirms that it represents her dream of future travel. The background of her second avatar, however, represents a more practical (though less accurate) connection with figure skating since she would not be skating outdoors. She is one of the girls who would have preferred to have a rink for a background. Her explanation offers a more complex justification for this winter scene that satisfies her desire for multiple/simultaneous narratives.

> I choose a wintry background with different shades of blues and some whites because skating is mostly a winter sport so I wanted to match the skater with a good environment, I also like the ski-doo and the snowman in the background!

In subsequent postings, Roxy noted that she included the winter background because she enjoyed winter, Christmas and getting out in the snow when the weather is fine.

A school desk and locker frame Roxy's final avatar which reflects a real life return to school in the fall. The bag bears a Jonas Brother's logo, and like all Disney sponsored options on WeeWorld, it required no points to include it. The free nature of such branded items serve as cultural currency that affiliates the users of the WeeMees with others of like

interests, and it provides a marketing opportunity as the avatars become virtual billboards for brand logos.

Star[2]

Figure 5.2. Star's only WeeMee avatar

Applying the elements of visual grammar to Star's avatar provides insight into Hall's (1996) assertion that an intended message is not necessarily that which is received by readers/viewers of a particular text. In this case a number of challenges restricted Star's ability to construct the avatar she wanted and she reported a deep dissatisfaction with her avatar. The options she wanted to choose had points associated with them, however, she had not accumulated points to cash in on desired items, nor was she willing to pay for them. Star's main complaint about her avatar was that she disliked her background. When I asked her to explain her choice for her background, she told me that it was not so much a matter of choice. She tried to pick something else, but she couldn't figure out how to do it. She explains:

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[2] Star was thirteen years old and also living in a small, rural community in Eastern Canada. She describes herself as "nice, intelligent, smart, friendly, and forgiving." Star encountered a number of technical challenges throughout the study. She had difficulty creating her avatar and uploading it to the Form site. She had Internet trouble with her home computer, then her older sister moved away to university taking the computer, and with it went the Internet access Star needed to participate with the study. Once the rest of the girls had completed their entries and reflections, Star was reconnected with a new laptop and chose to complete a few more questions on the Forum. At this point she answered follow up questions directly with me through the message function on *Facebook*. Star's only avatar is wearing figure skates indicating that she identifies with figure skating. However, her comments indicate a level of frustration that this avatar did not represent what she initially attempted to create.

It did kind of bother me that the Nair sign was in the backround

I tried to change it but I couldn't cuz I didn't know how to.

The visual grammar for an object positioned to the right of the focal point (the avatar) indicates a *newness* or *change*; however, it is a stretch to infer that the "Nair" points to a new affiliation to a product for Star since she had no complicity in its placement there. The blatant advertisement for a hair removal product (which was the default background at the time) disrupts her desired self-narrative, even though a visual reading alone would in no way reveal this.

The sunglasses function to obscure the gaze of the avatar, and create a *demand* that is slightly hidden, perhaps shy, or perhaps desiring an element of privacy. The oversized glasses amplify the *demand*. Ironically, this obscured contact with the viewer may be symbolic of the lack of intimate contact between participant and viewer.

The avatar is wearing skates, indicating an affiliation with figure skating. Complicating that detail, however, is a summer background. A reading of the background might also indicate that Star dreams about summer time, or that it is perhaps her favourite time of the year and that it holds some significance for her. However, when Star explains her choices and challenges, a very different interpretation emerges. The discrepancies between my visual reading and her explanations offer insight into the complexities around the choices (or lack of them) the girls had and how easily assumptions can be made regarding images and intentions.

Figureskatingchic[3]

Figure 5.3. Figureskatingchic's two WeeMee avatars.

Attending to the visual grammar in Figureskatingchic's two avatars reveal similarities in colour, attire and backgrounds. Rather than narrate two visual stories, she uses her second avatar to offer a more intimate look at the image she presented the first time. By juxtaposing the two avatars, the altered details become salient. A technique of zooming in on the second avatar indicates a level of confidence in her avatar image and a deliberate desire for a closer social distance than she has constructed the first time as the avatar now occupies the majority of the frame. It's as if she is inviting us to get to know her even better. By removing much of the background she removes any ancillary information and directs the gaze to the image of the avatar alone rather than have the frame cluttered by the winter scene with its cabin and snowmobiles. This focus in her second avatar also makes the hairstyle, lipstick and gold medal more dominant in the representation.

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[3] Figureskatingchic was another thirteen-year-old participant from a small rural community in Eastern Canada. As her name implies, Figureskatingchic's identity in this study is tied intimately to the sport of figure skating. Of the two WeeMee avatars she created, both are figure skaters. Through her contributions to the study Forum Figureskatingchic makes it clear that for her, figure skating is a competitive sport. Both avatars wear a gold medal to indicate not what she had done (though she has won several medals in the past), but as a kind of fantasy representation for the future.

> I put the medal around my neck because I am hoping I will place this year ike last year, and my skirt is the same colour as my this years dress, so I kind of revolved my person [avatar] around this years me.

In this way, the hair and dress are more salient – a point that she confirms with a competition narrative in her online descriptions. The gold medal occupies the centre of the image giving it primacy for her online pose. Figureskatingchic reinforces this notion when she explains that the medal serves the triple purpose of indicating her competitive nature, signifying her past success, and it projecting a hope for her future results in competition.

Shorty[4]

Figure 4.4. Shorty's two WeeMee avatars

Shorty uses backgrounds to provide representational detail about her personality and desires. She explains that she wanted her first avatar to present herself as someone who enjoyed getting out and being busy. She accomplishes this in multiple ways: first, by

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[4] Of the participants in this study, Shorty was the oldest at seventeen. Her rural community in Eastern Canada has about 1000 residents. She describes herself as "outgoing, extremely honest, short, random, and competitive." Shorty has nearly 500 friends on *Facebook* and told me that she used the social networking site approximately four times a week. As one of the participants who contributed only a handful of times, Shorty made her observations substantive, thoughtful and reflective. Though not entirely sold on the idea of making an avatar, she did note that her cartoon identity could do things that a photograph cold not. She was emphatic about the importance of being able to create an accurate image of her. She indicated that if she could have, she would have animated her avatar so it could go through a typical day in her life.

positioning her avatar on a background that calls to mind an old-fashioned malt shop, a site easily recognized for its social function. Then her social narrative is reinforced as she chooses attire for her avatar that suggests what the girls call "being done up" to go out. The avatar's tussled hair, trendy strapless top, and handbag work together to indicate a pose that is out socializing (and not home). Her second avatar reflects the reality that she had returned to school, and to what she describes as more conservative attire and hairstyle. The addition of a book reinforces the back to school narrative.

What might not be obvious from the replication of these two avatars is that the eye colour in the two avatars is not the same. In her first avatar, Shorty has blue eyes, and in the second avatar they are green. The difference might be explained by carelessness or from a hurried construction the first time around. She did report spending significantly more time on the second avatar. It might also highlight one of the challenges ethnographic researchers face; that is, that our participants may not be forthright in their contributions to our research. Since we have never met face to face, I have no way of knowing her avatars are accurate or if they offer a playful invention of her identity. This detail reminds me of the tenuous nature of any online relationship. Ironically, this attention to truthfulness and the dangers of online practices becomes a focus of Shorty's discussions later in the study.

Questionmark[5]

Figure 5.5. Questionmark's two WeeMee avatars

Like Figureskatingchic, Questionmark deliberately employed a technique with her background to position her avatar in sharper focus by removing ancillary information and inviting a more intimate connection between the avatar and its viewers. She describes wanting to put her figure skating avatar on centre ice, but with no rink for a choice she places her avatar on a background of cloud-like swirls suggesting a kind of dreamscape. She explained:

> I liked the background with simple colours and not too much detail so that when people look at my avatar they will notice the background but most of the focus will be on the body itself.

With the second avatar, she uses the school background to locate her self-narrative. A volleyball appears in the bottom right corner which provides an affiliation to that sport and thus reflects the real, the specific and the factual element of a visual grammar (Kress and vanLeeuwen, 1996). What these avatar images cannot reveal, however, is that

[5] At age thirteen, Questionmark was also from a small rural community in Eastern Canada. She describes herself as "independent, loving, intelligent, involved, and unique." She might have also included "self assured" and "confident" to ther list, as these were qualities that were noted throughout her responses. For Questionmark, there was a geat deal of discussion around the meanings of color, and style. In fact, she initiaited a thread of questioning around color on the Forum. As a figure skater (though one who participates at a purely recreational level), Questionmark represented a skating personna at the beginning of the study, and initiated a discussion about her WeeMee's figure skates having pink laces. In her second avatar she positions her avatar in school. An analysis of her avatars and her representations will probe further into her inability to represent the broken foot that she had during the study, and her inability to dress her avatar in school colors or a volleyball uniform.

Questionmark is a member of a school team. Her desire to position herself as such was not possible because she found no sport's jersey as an option. She explains:

> I would have made it black and red for my school volleyball colours, I would probably have had black shorts on with running shoes.

Questionmark also failed to find other desired options (namely a foot cast and crutches) to accurately represent herself. She writes:

> I wanted something that represented me and what I do. I love sports and there was no sports jersey there so I thought about a figure skating dress. I found a ballerina dress that looked a lot like a skating dress, so I added gloves and used that. I also found a pair of skates that made it more obvious that I was wearing a skating dress.

When combined with Questionmark's written descriptions, what a visual reading of these two avatars reveals is that any representation of self is necessarily non-unitary, incomplete and limited by the available signifiers within a given discursive practice.

Princess[6]

Figure 4.6. p rincess's only WeeMee avatar

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[6] Princess was sixteen years old and also lived in a small rural community in Eastern Canada. She contributed to the Forum less frequently than the other girls, however, her postings were substantive. For a period of time during the study she was not contributing, so I attempted to contact her through her *Facebook* page, but it had been taken down. As it turns out, she had been grounded and had lost her computer priviledges. As one of the older participants of the study, Princess created only one avatar which she said represented her physical appearance, her love of drama and her dreams for future travel. Creating an accurate representation of herself was something Princess believed was important in terms of how she and other girls are judged based on appearances. This notion opened up a significant discussion around the profile pictures used on *Facebook* and how they are similar to and different from avatars in form and function.

Employing a visual grammar on Princess' only avatar reveals a reading that is supported by her online discussions. The Eiffel tower included on her background represents a deliberately chosen visual *ideal*, and an aspiration that she has in real life. She explains that even though she has never been there (and wouldn't go until she could pay for the trip herself) she writes: "I would LOVE to go there some day."

Her avatar's deliberate pose also suggests a focus on theater/drama which she later confirms. Princess describes her avatar in third person suggesting a kind of detachment from it that was different from how the other girls described theirs:

> She has the comedy and tragedy masks in her hands. I love acting and performing & I would love to pursue it as a career one day. I am in various other extra curricular activities but when I saw the masks I knew I had to use them :) !

Cherrytree[7]

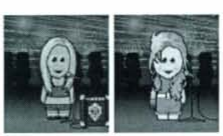

Figure 5.7. Cherrytree's two WeeMee avatars

[7] Chettytree was sixteen-years-old and living in a small rural community off the East Coast of Canada. She described herself as "caring, talkative, very cautious, friendly and funny." From her first Forum comments, Cherrytree presented an avatar that depicted a confident and outgoing singer. She described herself as blonde and proud and wrote that her avatar showed that she likes to perform in front of lots of people. However, she soon expressed a discomfort with the message she believed her first avatar was sending. This prompted her to suggest the idea of making a second avatar to represent her differently. Several other girls opted then to create second avatars, as well. Her written observations about the limits of how identity and personality can be represented in an image started a number of conversations on the Forum. She also initiated discussion around how physical appearance (either in real life or in pictures or avatars) often makes girls targets for others.

Applying a visual grammar to Cherrytree's two avatars reveals that they are similar in nature but markedly different in their intention. Cherrytree explains that her avatar "expresses who I am." The background evokes an image of a stage where a microphone appears in the foreground making it central to her singing self-narrative. Shaded and indiscriminate figures occupy the background and give these avatars (more than any of the others in this study) a sense of depth and dimension with the suggestion of an audience backing her. The details in each avatar reinforce a narrative of performance. The belly top and amplifier in the first suggest a pop/rock genre of music while the dress, hair and absence of the amplifier with the second avatar suggests a more intimate stage. While the avatars give primacy to Cherrytree's identity as a singer, her written postings reveal multiple interests and talents not represented here.

Looking closely, the body of the first avatar appears more shapely and buxom than the second, however, that is by virtue of the clothing that has been chosen. In the second avatar the clothing is more conservative. Considering her first avatar against images of North American pop music where virtually all female artists (whether they are headliners or background singers) are represented using overtly sexualized images (Dines, 2011; Kilbourne and Levin, 2010) and where outfits reveal discourses that present the female body as an object of heterosexual fantasy and desire, what she has constructed hardly locates her among the ranks of Brittany Spears, Christina Aguilera and Rhianna. However, her discussions will reveal a deep concern with the assumptions that might be made by audiences viewing this first avatar. This will be the focus of further analysis in the following chapter.

Ironically, considering the reported care that went into constructing her second singing avatar, Cherrytree's second avatar has no feet. Since the option for bare feet does not exist the failure to choose footwear results in a footless avatar.

Cutie-Pi[8]

Figure 4.8. Cutie-Pi's two WeeMee avatars

As with Questionmark and Star earlier, a visual reading of Cutie-Pi's two avatars, reveals an autobiographical narrative that is inconsistent with her intentioned one. With tinted glasses slightly averting the gaze of her first avatar, we are presented with a limited demand image. The beach, the balloons and the flower accessorizing her hair suggest a festive atmosphere and a tropical location. Cutie-Pi reported being less concerned with an accurate physical representation and instead opted to construct a more generalized self-representation to reflect her happy "vibe" though none of the accessories reflect any special significance for her. In fact, she explained that she does not live near a tropical beach, the colour of her hair is not accurate nor does she own tinted glasses.

[8] As one of the most socially interactive participants in the study, Cutie-Pi was sixteen-years-old from a large city in Atlantic Canada. Cutie-Pi described herself as "creative, kind, intelligent, animal-loving and positive." Cutie-Pi was part of a group of participants who engaged in comments regarding the importance of accuracy as it relates to appearance in both profile pictures and in avatars. This led to a discussion among participants regarding how and why photographs are sometimes edited. In her follow up questions, Cutie-Pi revealed that as a result of these discussions, she had stopped editing her profile pictures.

Cutie-Pi said she spent more time making the second avatar, focusing on constructing it more realistically. It has lighter skin tone, and includes items that make a statement about her interests. The focal point is a black t-shirt which *relays* the words "Team Edward" referring to an insider movement with the fans of Stephanie Meyer's enormously successful vampire novel series: *Twilight*[9]. The shirt serves the dual purpose acting as a kind of new product placement and marks an affiliation with an element of popular culture. Similarly, the shopping bag propped next to the avatar reads, "I am not a plastic bag" symbolizing a fashionable environmental commitment. Both of these articles highlight the cultural politics informing these texts and the double bind of being constituted in and by popular culture's discourses.

Finally, Cutie-Pi also chooses the Paris background which she explains was a nod to her French immersion education and her passion for the French language. In this way, an affiliation with French as a language is an expression of power and privilege. In common sense and popular educational discourses, it is the best and brightest students who are thought to populate French Immersion programs in many locations in Canada. For many, it represents status, commitment to higher education and higher cultural standards. In this way, the Paris background might be conceptualized as a schooled "cosmopolitan" pose.

[9] The book series pits a family of vampires against a pack of werewolves. Two characters challenge for the protagonist's heart. The main character, Bella, must choose between the physically and emotionally perfect Edward, and the free spirited, rebellious Jacob. On the WeeWorld site, both Team Edward and Team Jacob t-shirts were available at no cost.

Butterflye[10]

Figure 4.9: Butterflye's only WeeMee avatar

Butterflye constructed only one avatar during her time in the study. Her avatar was designed to be an accurate representation of her appearance and her personality. She explained:

> My avatar's kind of a blend. It shows what I look like and also what I want to be… It is fair to say that I carefully considered what I wanted it to look like.

The background easily infers her interest in travel. However, her interest in music is less obvious. Although it may be difficult to see on a small copy of her avatar, Butterflye's WeeMee is holding an iPod. Even without a clear brand label, the signature circle-shaped control below the screen makes the brand of the listening device clear for those who know it. She explains that this accessory locates her love of music, however, on another level it also symbolizes a brand affinity, because other choices for music listening devices existed

[10] As a sixteen-year-old French immersion student from one of the largest cities in Atlantic Canada, Butterflye described herself as "friendly, pensive, funny, smart, musical, and kind." She added that her friends might also call her "crazy" (which she explained later means she can be unpredictable and fun). Butterflye was the last participant to join the study having heard about it from a peer group at school. When she contacted me to express her interest in the study she had not yet joined the *Facebook* Avatar Creation Group. As a result, when she made her avatar, her approach was thoughtful and deliberate and considered the purpose of the study more so than many of the other participants had with their first avatars. Butterflye made a connection between how she thought her avatar represented not only what she looked like physically, but also what she wanted to be in the future. She contributed substantively to a conversation about the differences between avatars and pictures as representations of self. For Butterflye, making the right kind of first impression with pictures or avatars was not only a matter of personal preference; it was also potentially a safety issue.

on WeeWorld. Klein (2002) reminds us of the cultural collateral that brand labels hold for young people. She explains that youth often organize themselves into "brand tribes" and describe themselves, in this case, as an iPod type of person. As one of the world's most popular brands, Apple, the maker of iPod, has successfully marketed the image of independent thinkers, revolutionary and creative minds, so this accessory also positions Butterflye within the ethos of the identity of this brand.

Finally, Butterflye has also chosen a background of Paris to represent her past travel (she explains that she has been to France, and hence it is a marker of her world adventures) and she would also like to live there in the future. Her written postings provide insight into her "projective identity" (Gee, 2003) in a way not possible with the image alone. Though she does not make any direct affiliation with her background and her French Immersion program at school, it is possible that for her the Paris background symbolizes a degree of educational and cultural privilege that is referenced above.

Livie[11]

Figure 5.10. Livie's two WeeMee avatars

[11]Livie was a fifteen-year-old living in a large city in Western Canada. When asked to describe herself, she wrote that she is "unique, artistic, honest, considerate, and friendly," and adds that she has been called all of these things. By far the most prolific contributer to the forum Livie revealed that she has a rare medical condition called Tuberous Sclerosis Complex (TSC). The challenge for her was not being able to depict this condition which opened the discussion around the limitations inherent in these kinds of avatar creation programs. Despite this limitation, Livie was clear to represent herself as someone with a social conscience. Her first avatar wore a t-shirt that said "Stop Global Warming." She is a complex teenager who is socially engaged, but refuses to buy into popular trends in fashion, music, or entertainment, yet she is eager to visually tell her story.

Style fashions the body into a 'fluid social text that bridges private and public social space" (Pomerantz, 2006, p. 176). With this in mind, a visual reading of Livie's avatars suggests that she resists discourses of emphasized femininity embraced by the other participants in my study by using her avatar's attire to cultivate a political, or stylistic statement. As the focal point of the first avatar, the t-shirt reads: "Stop Global Warming." The background suggests a city park, but as she reveals on the Forum, there is no special significance to it other than the fact that she likes the outdoors. Each avatar is holding a daisy, which might suggest an element of whimsy. By contrast to the expressions of her "unique style and personality" what Livie's avatars *do not* say is salient. She has not opted to include attire that suggests discourses in emphasized femininity (as the others all have). Juxtaposing the two avatars, the fact that the hair is significantly longer in the second avatar belies the length of time that has passed between their constructions. The *demand* gaze is slightly obscured in the second avatar, not as a result of the glasses this time, but by the hair covering one eye.

As the study progressed, Livie shared details of the social and political nature of how she represents herself in public and private spaces and how she copes with a medical condition that affects her physical appearance. Absent from her avatars are any clues that she has this condition or of the struggle that she faces as a teenager in a world that places such high value on idealized beauty. Her contributions will be analysed in greater detail in the upcoming chapters on how normative discourses are revealed through the production of personalized avatars, and with an examination of the cultural politics present in these constructions.

Negotiating the Discursive Practice of Constructing Personalized Avatars

A feminist poststructuralist position corresponding with a "new socio-linguistics" offers a theoretical explanation for how individuals are "positioned" though multiple "discourse practices" which when learned and employed generate an individual's subjectivity (Davies and Harré, 1990). Originally, the question that framed this research was "who do they think they are?" However, the question failed to acknowledge the ambiguity of the concept of selfhood and fell prey to humanist assumptions that subjectivity or 'who one is' could be defined cleanly and simply. For the girls in this study, the avatars they created were more than physical cartoon replicas of the self. Initially, however, their comments suggested a belief that there *was* a real self to represent, and that they were able to employ an avatar to represent that real self. Comments describing the avatars such as "It's so me!" were frequent and common.

However, as the study progressed, a more complex understanding of their subjectivity emerged as they discovered that, at best, their personalized avatars could only capture a limited self-narrative. The girls' comments indicated insight into how a unitary image, even with its ability to hail multiple subject positions simultaneously, still fails to capture the notion that "[h]uman beings are characterized both by continuous personal identity and by discontinuous personal diversity" (Davies and Harré, 1990, p. 46). Even though forms of identity may be performed and even internalized by the girls, identity remains unfixed. For example, Figureskatingchic understands that the unitary and limited nature of identity made possible with her avatar also silences other self-narratives. She writes:

My avatar represents who I am in real life but not my whole personality…

> the avatars don't tell other people what my personality is, or they don't tell who we hang around with and I hang around with a lot of different people, and [they] don't tell people what stuff we are good at or who we are related to.

The implications for Figureskatingchic are that she has to consider what version of herself she will present in this context as she carefully and creatively constructs her identity here. Similarly, Questionmark explains:

> My avatar shows a part of me but not all of me. My avatar does show that I skate, but it doesn't show that I play other sports such as volleyball. It doesn't show my love of acting, or writing.

Livie reveals that her avatar does not show her "love of music, God [and] family." And Cutie-Pi is not able to represent her love of animals or listening to music. In fact, she observes, "It kind of neutralized us all into a similar person." This observation suggests the kind of discontinuous personal diversity that Davies and Harré suggest above.

The following findings offer insight into how the girls in my study positioned themselves (and were positioned) in terms of available discourses. These findings will be framed by employing compositional categories that variously position them within normative and oppositional discourses. Here, I take direction from Kafai, Fields and Cook (2007) who examined how teens engage the cultural politics of avatar construction in the context of a tween virtual world called *Whyville*. This online site is described as a kind of cyber stage where avatars can be customized within a limited two-dimensional framework and where teens have the ability to represent themselves, or perform by way of their avatar creations similar to the cyber community evolving now on WeeWorld. While it is important to note that in their study, the avatars were not intentionally created to be

"personalized" self-likenesses as the WeeMee avatars are, Kafai et al. found that online avatar identities are negotiated and validated in everyday face-to-face settings where encounters are akin to "staged" performances. The authors found that the online site provides a vehicle for a kind of "identity workshop" or self-exploration and identity play. Here participants have complex and multiple reasons for constructing their avatars as they do. Kafai et al. found that teens listed six reasons for constructing their avatars as they did. On *Whyville,* the teens employed the following compositional categories: 1) aesthetic considerations, 2) to make it like their "real" self, 3) to affiliate with someone or something, 4) to demonstrate something they cannot have in real life, 5) to align with or against a popular trend, 6) or to provide a deliberate disguise. These categories are strikingly similar to categories that my girls used to describe how they constructed their personalized avatars; therefore I will draw from these in order to round out the introductions to the girls, their avatars, and the theoretical concerns that arose during the study[12]. These categories include creativity and style, veri/similitude, belonging, desire, resistance, and posing. While I address the considerations and observations made by the girls in a somewhat linear fashion, it is fair to say that their narrated reflections were anything but linear. This dilemma around how to untangle a complex rendering of identity representation in a format that can be analyzed and categorized in an ordered style represents another challenge for me. I am reminded that I must trouble the confidence that an ethnographic narrative can "acknowledge the differences within and among the stories, how they are told, and what it is that structures the telling" (Britzman, 2000, p. 32).

[12] Categories used by Kafai et al. appear in brackets after my own.

Style (aesthetic considerations)

When avatars are conceptualized as another form of "social skin" (Pomerantz, 2006), or as an online manifestation of a girl's style, then representations of style provide a bridge between private and public space by acting as a fluid social text. Recalling Driscoll's (2002) scholarship on girlhood style, fashion is conceived as not only mass-produced, but also aggressively seeking a mainstream up take. When a girl's style is marked by what is fashionable (in other words, by what is popular), then the trendy fashions linked to designer labels and celebrity popular culture on offer at WeeWorld are theoretically at odds with any expression of individuality. Yet, in the initial descriptions of their avatars, the girls in my study each made reference to the clothes that they chose and how these clothes represented a style consistent to their own in real life.

While the girls attended to details of generalized skin tone, eye and hair colour for their avatars, their considerations around how their avatars were dressed and how they wore their hairstyle occupied a significant space on the Forum discussions. Even in virtual space, style functioned as a powerful social marker (Pomerantz, 2006). In her study of schoolgirl style, Pomerantz (2005) found that "girls carefully and creatively use[d] style as a form of embodied subjectivity in order to negotiate their identities" (p. 176). If avatars are conceived as a text used in the performance of "self-making" (Bloustien, 2003), how they look and, more specifically, how their avatar is dressed reveals that the "art and importance of being cool" is relative (Bloustien, 2004, p. 25), therefore the manner by which they use style to negotiate identity, even in a virtual space, is salient. As the study progressed, seven of the girls created a second (and one constructed a third) avatar in order to provide a more accurate representation of

themselves, to attend more carefully to the details of their representations, or to better reflect their changing life circumstances. For example, Figureskatingchic revealed that her avatar was purposely a representation of the "real life me." When asked what she thinks this avatar says about her, she immediately turns to a description of the figure skating dress she will wear to compete this year. Similarly, Princess describes the dress she selected for her avatar: "it's very me, if I had it I would wear it." Shorty chose to construct an avatar to represent a "regular school day and the kind of clothes I might wear."

In the following chapters, forms of "style" and fashion are analyzed in more detail as they related to normative discourses and the cultural politics of girlhood representation.

Veri/similitude (to make it like their "real" self)

The girls' initial descriptions of their avatars include descriptions of physical similarities to their eye colour, hair colour and style and skin colour. Roxy noted that her avatar's skin tone was not quite accurate. Of the six options available on the WeeWorld site, users must choose a skin tone that will classify an avatar within a pre-existing stylized, racial or ethnic group: Caucasian, Asian, Latino, Indian, Arab and African. The possibility of more subtle or mixed race representations is simply not possible. In other locations within the WeeWorld site, a sliding scale allows users to opt from a range of colours as they choose hairstyles and articles of clothing for their WeeMees. However, no such option exists at this point in the program.

When asked to describe her avatars, Roxy wrote, "I couldn't get the right skin tone, but they are basically all the same anyways." In fact, they are *not* the same—they range from pale white, to deep brown, with shades of beige, yellow and red in between.

From one perspective, this comment could be read subversively in that it denies the real life difficulties of skin colour and ignores the difference it creates. It further indicates Whiteness as a social colour. Weedon (2004) notes, little sense of "whiteness is seldom recognized as an explicit identity by those who live it, except in relation to those it excludes. It is assumed to be natural and the norm" (p. 15). Whether or not Roxy's comment can be interpreted as an assumption of universal whiteness, or a trivialization of non-white racial representations, or an inability to construct a more "exotic" form of representation of self is not entirely clear; it is, however problematic. Throughout the study, all of the girls chose a skin tone lighter than Roxy's, except on one occasion when Cutie-Pi represented herself with an avatar on a beach with a suntan.

While there are political, social and cultural implications for race being so generally (and stereotypically) represented, the fact that ethnicity did not become an issue with the girls might further reflect the taken-for-granted character of White privilege (hooks, 1993). On the other hand it might reflect an expectation that these avatars are *not* real – rather that they are playful, stylized representations. Perhaps the girls had no expectation that skin tone would be any more accurate than if they were using a package of crayons to construct their avatars. Or, as suggested earlier perhaps they were creating a kind of 'dreamscape' which might more accurately position them as "exotic".

Even though Star admits that a personalized avatar can reveal details about a person's physical appearance, she resists veri/similitude, and writes that avatars "don't say a bit" about personality "because it's … not the real you." She refers to the avatar as an online cartoon and resists any notion that the avatar might be used as a vehicle to express her personal interests or aspects of her personality. This perspective might be influenced

by her negative experience trying to construct her avatar in the first place, and/or by the fact that she was missing for much of the online discussion on the Forum. It might also be accurately described as a resistance to the project based on feeling estranged from it.

Belonging (to affiliate with someone or something)

WeeWorld.com's global reach in this form of identity representation is part of what Turkle (2005) describes as a kind of simulated existence embraced by many adolescents. She explains that young people do not examine the cultural creations and cultural constructions underlying virtual worlds and mobile communications. The consumptive nature of their desire to remain constantly connected mobilizes their discursive practices and disavows the complexities of face-to-face relationships while reinforcing the notion that loneliness is failed solitude. Standing by ready to fill that desire for belonging and affiliation are power hungry corporations residing in digital spaces. A global media culture shapes the way youth communicate and it informs how they represent themselves within their social groups. This way, online and digital affiliations are often associated with consumptive behaviours.

In this study, the girls mobilized around several forms of affiliations, the first of which was figure skating. While this affiliation will be analyzed further in the next chapter, four of the girls used figure skates on their avatars to position themselves as members of a community and within a specific discourse. Another notable affiliation is the Paris background chosen by four of the girls. While their written reflections add to an understanding that the reasons for including this background varied for each of the girls, without a commitment to a "discourse of multiplicity" (Freebody, Luke, and Gilbert,

1991), the background might also lead audiences to assume a similar subject positioning for these girls. In this case, the backdrop hardly represents a unified "affinity group" (Gee, 2003).

The cost of making a personalized avatar

As mentioned in chapter 3, many of the virtual items that are offered for embellishing a WeeMee avatar come at a cost. To pay for these virtual items, points must be cashed in. These points may be paid for in advance, or accumulated by participating in surveys, which nefariously collect valuable demographic data on users and about their product preferences. The WeeWorld.com website reports that one in ten Americans purchased a virtual item last year. Projections for 2011 indicate that worldwide sales for virtual goods should reach $1.8 billion (Roush, 2009). More specifically, revenues for virtual items for WeeMee avatars have grown fifteen percent *per month* through the latest economic recession, due in part to the relatively low cost of buying virtual goods (Roush, 2009). Schor (2004) warns that "[c]hildren's social worlds are increasingly constructed around consuming, as brands and not products have come to determine who is 'in' or 'out,' who is hot or not, who deserves to have friends, or social status" (p. 11). All of these indications highlight the power of cultural collateral associated with brand affiliations and the social and political struggle associated with various forms of style. The social costs of using more desirable (and expensive) items on WeeWorld are vast.

In my study, none of the girls were willing to pay for points or participate in any surveys to accumulate points in order to purchase virtual items for their avatars. However, it is fair to say that on WeeWorld, a great many do. Perhaps if they had spent time socializing and communicating with others on the WeeWorld site, rather than just

constructing their avatar to upload to the Forum, they might have felt the social pressure to have the latest virtual styles, and they may have been willing to collect points or pay the necessary fees to have them. The implications for privacy and for how youth are able to construct their personalized avatars within available discourses (not to mention be constructed *by* these discourses, as well) are significant.

Roxy's bag sports the logo for Disney's new boy band, the Jonas Brothers, and Cutie-Pi's t-shirt marks her as a fan of the vampire-hero, Edward, in the popular *Twilight* book series. Neither of these items required points. However, the anticipated corporate spin off for this form of product placement would make these free items worthwhile for the large corporations. Disney and Proctor and Gamble are the biggest advertisers on the privately owned WeeWorld.com, which places the onus of maintaining a G (general) or PG (parental guidance) on WeeWorld. During the time of the study, Disney sponsored themed weeks where avatars could emulate the styles of characters from a popular Disney movie or band. High School Musical and its stars, for example, were featured for several weeks, as were the Jonas Brothers. Also, vampire themed items were offered for no cost around the release of the final book in the *Twilight* saga.

Other examples of girls using their avatars to create an affiliation with something are Livie's Darfur t-shirt and Cutie-Pi's fabric shopping bag. These items help to position the girls through visual statements of political or ecological activism. Theorized another way however, these accessories might demonstrate that "citizenship is at risk of being reduced to consumerism" (Stack & Kelly, 2006, p. 9). The inclusion of Cutie-Pi's non-plastic shopping bag is an example of an environmental cause that has been packaged and sold back to the consuming public. The virtual fabric bag announces an affinity to the

recycling cause, but is also positions Cutie-Pi's avatar within mass commercial culture, as does Livie's t-shirt. Livie wrote that even though she does not have one exactly like it, she believed in the cause and would wear the shirt if she had it. She revealed that she does have a shirt at home that says "Think, Care, Act Save Darfur" which provides insight into her political convictions and commitment to activism. With this in mind her t-shirt might also be conceptualized not just as a political text, but also as a consumer message, packaged and sold as activism. It seems that in these times not even activism can exist outside the marketplace.

Desire (to demonstrate something they cannot have in real life)

At about the halfway point of the study, Figureskatingchic posed a question to the group that provides insight into the manner by which these avatars could represent their desires. She asked: "Does your avatar show who you are in real life, or who you would like to be?" She poses the question in a manner that positions "who they are" against who they would "like to be". Several of the girls (Roxy, Butterflye, Cutie-pi and Princess) explained that they had included the Paris background to reflect their desires for future foreign travel. However, a visual reading of the avatars could do little more than suggest this. Like the affiliations above, this desire for travel could only be revealed through further discussion about their avatars and their intention for choosing that background.

Teens in the study conducted by Kafi et al. (2007) constructed alter ego forms of avatars which might include wings or super-human qualities or desires not possible in real life. While the autobiographical intent of the avatars in my study and the WeeWorld site itself precluded the possibility of including fantastical elements to their personal avatars, the girls did construct avatars that projected dreams, and desires. Figureskatingchic's two

figure skating avatars project her desire to win her upcoming competitions, for example, not to mention her desire to be known primarily as a figure skater (a point that will be taken up in greater detain in the following chapter). In fact, this narrative is so central to her online pose that she does not even consider representing herself in another way even when she has the opportunity to do so. She acknowledges the non-unitary nature of identity at the conceptual level, however she sticks with this carefully staged avatar to present the image that she wants us to see. She reveals: "I don't think my clothing represents my overall style, but it represents my skating style."

Because desire is so tightly aligned with belonging, and more accurately, a desire to belong, I am reminded yet again of the impossible task of pulling apart threads that are so knotted together in these representational images. Often, being 'cool' constitutes and regulates this sense of belonging. And "cool" is for sale in a market keen to provide a gateway to peer acceptance. To that end, I will return to the notion of desire and the manner by which normative discourses are represented, and the cultural politics of representation in the chapters that follow in order to reiterate this complexity.

Resistance (to align with or against a popular trend)

Claiming tastes and preferences enables youth to locate themselves within the larger social order, and while girls are the explicit targets of an aggressive consumer culture that markets fashions from celebrity pop music culture of MTV, it is not fair to position girls only as consumer dupes (Pomerantz, 2006). Girls also carefully and creatively negotiate their identities, at times taking up popular styles and trends and also reinventing them. At times, as a result of negotiating their location in this hegemonic symbolic economy, the girls intentionally took up positions of resistance. Weedon (2004)

notes, "While it is possible to be a subject without identification, identity presupposes some degree of self-recognition on the part of the subject, often defined in relation to what one believes one is not" (p. 19).

Livie certainly possesses a degree of self-recognition and was keen to showcase her "unique style and personality" not only with her avatar, but through her written discussions on the Forum. On a number of occasions she describes herself occupying alternative and multiple subjectivities. When given the choice, she rejects the *Twilight* shirts as a clothing option for her avatars, even though they were enormously popular at the time and even though her friends were big fans of the vampire novel series. In fact, Livie reveals that she is not the kind of person who wants or needs the approval of her friends, and that she would rather have a few close friends who understand her and support her than have plenty who might not be so willing to do so. "I'm not really into the whole pop culture scene." Instead, in this identity defining space, she stakes her claim as a member of an alternative group. She writes: "most of the things I'm interested in are very much out of the spot light and unknown." She writes:

> Well the clothes I'm wearing in my avatar is basically only how I dress on lazy school days other than that I like to dress up a bit, but I still like to look unique, so I love shopping at *Urban Outfitters*.

Here Livie disavows the popular by attempting to carve out an alternative expression of identity via her "unique" style, yet she falls into a consumer trap of embracing a form of fashion that it is nevertheless standardized. While *Urban Outfitters* offer styles that could be described as relaxed, random, edgy and urban, they are a major retail line that caters to the alternative youth. Driscoll (2003) explains that while some girls will eagerly take up

the fashions offered by the industry that seeks to shape them, others will blatantly reject mainstream fashion in favour of a form of "antifashion fashion" (p. 246). She explains that unrecognizable forms of fashion are simply read as bad taste, however, alternative forms like fashions that might be coded as punk, for example, in order to reject the mainstream, manage to produce a recognizable and identifiable style. However, Livie, or any of the girls for that matter, appear to have little or no insight into how the marketplace shapes who they are, what they desire, how they come to accept what they look like.

While her avatar is unable to capture the vibe of her style entirely, Livie's two WeeMees do stand out from the other girls in that they do not include any of the dresses or other trappings of emphasized femininity, other than a flower in her hair. However, Livie's explanation of her style gives this accessory another meaning as she aligns herself against anything popular:

> Ah, yes pop culture:) its not that I don't enjoy it, I mean I know more than I'd like! I just try to stay out of it, and I'm not too sure [why] I don't really subscribe to a label, there are too many out there. I've been called a few things like Modern Hippy, Indie Kid, but I perfer [my own name]. I feel like teens are being clumped into different categories by other teens, like the kids that wear lots of black makeup and wear tutus and fairy wings are trying to stand out and be unique so they're labeled Emo kids, and I don't think that's right because I went through a phase where I dressed like that and I was teased, before that I was another type of teen - the total opposite, a "prep"...I want to be myself ... they don't know what to categorize me as ;) I mean, most people don't know what to do with me!

Livie is a complex girl and she contributes much to this study. Her avatar and her discussions will be the focus of a theoretical discussion based on her medical condition and the cultural politics of representation in the next chapter.

Posing (to provide a deliberate disguise)

Throughout the study, the older girls became acutely aware that their avatars were constructing deliberate poses online. The girls reported being aware that these avatars, especially when used as profile pictures, would become yet another place to be judged by their peer groups. For that reason, they admitted taking great care in how they constructed these avatars – not merely to satisfy their own desire to present an accurate cartoon version of themselves, but to present a version that would have cultural collateral within their social network. In fact, the more threatened they felt by the possibility of being judged based on their avatar images, the more carefully they seemed to construct them.

My initial visual readings of these avatar self images, combined with an analysis of the girls' reasons for constructing them, reveals that they each had multiple, and often conflicting motivations regulating this discursive practice. In the chapter that follows I will explore those motivations and present my analysis of findings around how the girls negotiated normative discourses of gender, ethnicity, class and beauty through the construction of their avatars.

Chapter 5
Findings: Normative Discourses

Introduction: Normative Discourses in WeeWorld

When girls' subject positions are compatible across multiple genres and multiple cultural representations, then these positions are more readily accepted and taken up as normative (Gilbert, 1989). From cradle to grave, corporate media work to shape desire, manipulate wants and redefine needs in an attempt to influence how consumers look and dress (Kenway & Bullen, 2001; Schor, 2004). Advertisements across multiple media platforms (re)produce conventions that can be best understood alongside signifying systems like television soap operas, and magazines. They position young girls within discourse that values a Western ideal of feminine beauty where images of thin women and girls are constructed with flawless light skin, and long, thick, shiny hair (Levin and Kilbourne, 2008). The cosmetics industry markets the ideal of a perfect complexion, for example, as an object of desire, and as something that can be achieved as a gateway to acceptance, love and value. However, social discourses are mixed as they come from competing regimes. MTV and its barrage of sexualized themes promote scantily clad girls and young women as the objects of heterosexual male fantasy and desire, while conservative political agendas remind girls of the virtues of innocence and wholesomeness (Dines, 2011).

Even in a virtual space where representations of self are cartoon caricatures, dominant discourses assign power to notions of idealized beauty, and brand loyalty. Within the symbolic economy of personalized avatars, style serves as a powerful mark of social position and embodied subjectivity. For the developers of WeeWorld.com the

challenge is to offer individuals a platform where users can create fun, personalized content balanced with the company's expressed desire to maintain a family-friendly brand (Kinsella, 2010). While WeeMees are advertised as personalized representations of the self, it is their ability to "travel" to other locations such as email signatures, IM chat and multiple forms of social media that increase the visibility of the WeeMee brand and ultimately bring users back to the WeeWorld site where the advertising and corporate sponsorship reside. WeeWorld draws much of its sponsorship revenue from family brands such as Disney. As one, if not *the* dominant global media conglomerate, Disney uses its multiple media platforms to narrate an idyllic image of innocence to help children understand who they are and who they ought to become. However, Disney has been widely admonished for its privileging of white, conservative, middle class nostalgia at the expense of more culturally inclusive discourses (Giroux, 1998, 1999). Giroux (1999) explains that such a ubiquitous and spectacular media landscape has usurped children's traditional sites of learning. A constant barrage of signifying practices give cultural power and authority to Disney (and others) in terms of how children learn about who they are, and how they ought to relate to others.

It should not be surprising then, to see dominant social discourse of conservative family values outpace the freedom to express desired identity in locations where funding is dependent on advertising revenue. In what might be described as a kind of pre-emptive censorship, the WeeWorld site limits the sexualization of their avatars by controlling the body shape that can be used. Unlike avatars on other platforms, WeeMees make no attempt either to be three dimensional, or to reveal sexualized curves. However, recognizing the consumptive agenda of the site, WeeMees can do "cool" things for a

price. It is worth noting that some of these options infer violence (as with an axe that gushes blood from the avatar's head), and glamorize binge drinking (as with a football hat with two beer cans and two siphons inserted into the avatar's mouth for drinking). In the food and drink category, it is also noteworthy that twenty-nine of the sixty-nine choices are either fast food, junk food or imply alcoholic drinks.

In chapter 3, I noted the number of free articles available on the WeeWorld site versus those that had point values attached. This ratio has increased drastically since the time of my study. Girls choosing to create a WeeMee avatar are positioned in terms of subject positions and discourses that celebrate capitalist consumption, and emphasize elements of heteronormative femininity. The vast majority of items available are popularly read as feminine (or what my participants referred to as "girly"). Since we know that fashion is always changing and offering new ways to conform to what is marketed as a socially accepted and desired "look" (Driscoll, 2003), the most current, and therefore the most fashionable clothes on WeeWorld often had a point value attached, as well. On the other hand, themed virtual merchandise on WeeWorld, which offered a form of celebrity endorsement or brand association, was most often free.

It is also noteworthy that as part of their brand identity, the producers of the WeeWorld site offer an appreciation of diversity with free items such as a pride flag, a menorah, a Chinese dragon mask, a turban, an Indian sari, an indigenous mask, a pink ribbon t-shirt and a wheelchair to allow users to symbolically represent themselves as a member of a non-dominant social or cultural group.

Scholarship in the gendered uses of Internet technology suggests that the entire process of creating an idealized caricature and playing virtual dress up constitutes a

highly feminized activity (Stack and Kelly, 2005). The discursive practice of constructing a WeeMee avatar begins with a user being asked to choose between a male or female WeeMee – a socially regulating selection not unlike choosing a McDonald's Happy meal toy. The choice leads to a bifurcated set of options that take users down the virtual girl aisle or the boy aisle[i]. "Like structure of meaning in language, identity is relational" (Weedon, 2004, p. 19). We employ polar binaries to define ourselves in relation to others. We define ourselves often by what we are not. On the WeeWorld site if a female body is picked, the avatar automatically appears with breasts and the user can choose from three different sizes.

Makeup equals beauty

Commonsense discourses tell us that femininity and masculinity are natural and occur through reception (Weedon, 2004). However, these avatars might be conceived more accurately as products of a performed feminine discourse than expressions of it. The reiterative and citational practices that exist in the creation of an avatar contribute to normative or emphasized femininities; a discourse that produces the effects that it names (Butler, 1990). Seen this way the discourse of constructing an avatar further produces performances of femininity.

Makeup choices are presented next to those constructing female avatars (but not males). There is an assumption that girls raised in a discourse of emphasized femininity will choose at least one makeup option. While the choice of a makeup option necessarily signifies, the effect intended can never be guaranteed; even so, makeup is conceived as a site of sexual political struggle (Weedon, 1989). Girls as young as four years old are familiar with this discourse which bombards them with images in mainstream and

commercial media, on television, in advertisements and with dolls (for example, Bratz and Barbie) where the message is clear: girls are more beautiful when they wear makeup (Levin and Kilbourne, 2008). When WeeMee avatars are conceived as a constructed and performed identity influenced by society's dominant discursive practices (Butler, 1990) we might point an implicating finger at the media's preoccupation with appearance to explain how notions of gender are learned culturally and performed socially. Stern (2007) notes, "The media's world of adolescent girls is often characterized as particularly feminized – a world where physical beauty, sexual attractiveness, and product consumption (often that supplants both beauty and sexuality) supersede intelligence and creativity" (p. 2). The beauty industry with its far-reaching tentacles stretches into nearly every site where girls are present. It finances popular discourses that perpetuate the myth that without makeup to augment their appearance, girls are simply not good enough (Kenway and Bullen, 2001). Seen as a form of commercial and social conditioning, this gendered discourse positions girls as always and ever flawed only to be saved by a lifelong dependence on cosmetics. The message on WeeWorld site is clear; girls are encouraged to position themselves according to discourses of consumer culture, and emphasized femininity.

In the early days of the Forum discussions, the girls were asked to describe their avatars and the self-narratives they were attempting to reveal with them. It became clear right away that many of the girls were taking up or resisting normative discourses of gender and beauty. The first set of discussions the girls had on the Forum centred on representations of figure skates and figure skaters. This became a rich source of data to analyze how each of these girls negotiated codes of a symbolic gendered economy and

assumptions of class within a youth culture. Soon after, in another discussion thread, a couple of the girls noticed that they were unable to represent "flaws" with their WeeMee avatars. This finding became fertile ground for examining how symbolic omissions might perpetuate the illusion of a beauty myth in yet another site on the media landscape. Finally, one girl changed her avatar to avoid being positioned negatively within a popular discourse that implies girls are both "in trouble" and "out of control" (Pomerantz, 2006). Her postings offer insight into how the anticipation of audience interpretation at times influences how girls (re)position themselves within normative discourses. In what follows, I will draw from the above examples to present my findings as they relate to normative discourse.

Figure Skating WeeMees

If belonging to a school team carries a high degree of cultural currency in youth social circles, especially at school (Kelly, et al., 2005), there is also social status in privately funded sports like figure skating. Belonging to a figure skating club, for example, is notoriously expensive, so membership there has the potential to function as a mark of social class. In this way, the inclusion of figure skates on several avatars locates these girls as members of the same social group. If schools are found to be environments where girls passionately enact identity and subjectivity in an effort to belong socially (Pomerantz, 2006), then online social networks that connect girls to members of their school communities might also be sites where elements of schoolgirl style are politically driven statements of identity and belonging. Four of the ten girls in this study identified themselves as figure skaters by putting skates on their avatars, and they each reinforced

this affiliation by mentioning the skates and figure skating several times in their discussions.

As mentioned earlier, I worried that their prior association to me through figure skating might have influenced the way they represented themselves here. In this way, recalling the multiple and conflicting nature of identity, I conceive these affiliations theoretically as a sort of "pose" designed to impress me, but also where belonging to an identifiable group holds social currency, status, and power. It is both a manifestation of how they are represented within discourses of emphasized femininity, sport, competitiveness and style, and how these discourses bear on how they might represent themselves (Hall, 1996) that guides my analysis. On another level, considering the multiple readings available, it is also possible that simply including skates on an avatar reveals more autobiographical detail than a pair of shoes might. Skates indicate an affiliation to a sport in the same way that a team jersey might. Roxy, Star, Questionmark and Figureskatingchic each constructed an avatar (or two) representing this affiliation. In each case, though, the skates were problematic for the girls because they had pink laces. The issue of the pink skate laces generated a great deal of discussion on the Forum, not only among the girls who identified as figure skaters, but also by others.

Pink is perhaps the most obviously gendered female colour within popular discourse and its inclusion is one that allows gender to be offered as a subject position on WeeWorld. How the girls took up specific gendered positions can either confirm or challenge gender status quo. Pink is the colour that represents the ultimate in girl-toy, Barbie, and it is the colour of the ribbon that has come to symbolize breast cancer, a predominantly female disease[ii]. Therefore, to colour an article pink is to overtly

constitute it as a form of distinctly feminine gendered performance. Admittedly, figure skating is a sport dominated by girls; however, it is not exclusively the domain of girls. For some of the girls in this study, the laces represented a code that they described as "girly" – a code they were eager to dismiss. All four of the girls were dissatisfied, to varying degrees, with this detail and felt it positioned them within a particular discourse without their consent. The conflict for the girls was whether to include the skates and have themselves identified as figure skaters or resist the label that the pink laces implied but then silence one of their desired self-narratives and membership in a figure skating community. What happened as a result were varying degrees of suture where the girls took up the skates with the pink laces that at once gave them social visibility and was a less than desirable, status quo subject position. Because the girls were unable to change the colour of their laces, the inclusion of such a stereotypical subject position disavowed alternative subject positions. Instead, the girls who wish to represent themselves as being affiliated to figure skating must also be willing to write themselves (and as a result, be written) into discourses of patriarchal normalcy (Gilbert, 1989).

What seemed to bother the girls most about the pink laces was that it was an inaccurate representation of figure skates. Questionmark was the first to be conscious of the mixed signals that this detail might send. She cast an inquiring lens on the issue by asking the others, "What do you girls think when you see pink laces on my avatar??" At first she avoids the gendered assumption that the pink laces make, and frames her dissatisfaction as a matter of personal preference. She wrote,

> I personally don't like that the skates have pink laces because unless your dress is pink then it doesn't match, and also, I really don't like that colour.

As a non figure skater Cutie-Pi, responded to Questionmark by addressing the notion of representing figure skaters stereotypically. However, in so doing, she reproduced another gendered binary within her own language. Cutie-Pi positions the figure skating avatar simultaneously on both sides of a gendered binary. Of the figure skating avatar she writes:

> When I first saw it, I thought of a pretty, figure skating girl. I know you have to be very strong and well balanced to be a good figure skater and in no way did I make the assumption that she is a girly-girl.

The contradiction here is that she reads the avatar as both "a pretty figure skating girl" but (versus) "strong and well balanced" and "not a girly-girl". The complexity of this reading reveals the instability of language in both its alphabetic and visual form, while reproducing a hegemonic discourse that privileges masculine qualities over feminine ones. The complexity of this negotiation manifested itself in a variety of ways with the four girls. In my study, the girls used the term "girly-girl" several times in much the same way as Connell (1993) and Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie (2005) use "emphasized femininity" to imply a form of gendered subjectivity that is the opposite of hegemonic masculinity. At first, Cutie-Pi constructs the figure skating girl as "pretty" by using language that some feminist lenses would read as patriarchal. Her intention may have been to refer to Questionmark in a positive and friendly manner given the social nature of the Forum, and to frame her response in a way that was not judgemental. However, she also attempted to disrupt her own language by assuring Questionmark that she did not assume she was a "girly-girl" (a negative connotation), but strong and well balanced

instead. Here the implication is that "girly-girl" is undesirable whereas "strong" and "balanced" is valued and admired thus reproducing patriarchal binaries.

Questionmark was later keen to disavow the gendered assumption that her avatar's pink skate laces implied. Besides revealing that she does not identify with the color pink, she says: "Skates with pink laces say that figure skating is a girly sport, but it isn't." Again, the separation of figure skating from a "girly" connotation implies and reproduces hegemonic assumptions.

When Roxy wrote (in pink text), "I was okay with the pink laces, but wished there were a few more colours to choose from," I asked the girls to speculate what it meant to have skates with pink laces. Roxy explained that she had noticed skaters with coloured laces before, but she preferred white laces. She wrote:

> I think it is because they are figure skates, I have also noticed a few actual skaters who have pink laces. It may want to show…. the more feminine side of figure skating.

Roxy's reference to the "feminine side of skating" again suggests a binary relationship that those involved in figure skating are accustomed to hearing regularly. While this assumption is more often felt by male figure skaters, it would be unfair to say that girls are unaffected by it. In popular discourses figure skating as a sport has historically been situated as an overtly feminized sport. Its focus on artistic impression and musicality and its early affiliation with ballet and dance has carried the residue of homophobic associations for decades. In the 1980s and 1990s, openly straight figure skaters like Kurt Browning and Elvis Stoijko were courted heavily by the media who portrayed them in masculine poses playing hockey, racing motor bikes or doing marshal arts all in an effort

to give male figure skating a "better reputation" (Adams, 2011). Only recently have media representations and coverage of openly gay male figure skaters begun to shift this paradigm and celebrate athletes for who they are.

Picking up on Roxy's comment that she has noticed skaters with coloured laces, at the recreational level, it is possible, but still quite uncommon, to see a skater with pink skate laces. In over thirty years of involvement with figure skating, I have *never* seen a serious figure skater wearing pink laces in her skates. I read the pink laces as a hyper emphasized femininity, which could be compared to a little girl wearing a sparkling crown with a party dress. On the other hand, young girls who play hockey with the boys will often put pink laces in their hockey skates so that they can be identified as girls on the ice (an identification which is not always evident, or desirable under all hockey gear, for it often means being ignored by the boys and excluded from the play)[iii]. In a still predominantly male oriented sport, girls have deliberately sought to claim a political space by embracing such gendered forms of representation.

As one can infer from her username, Figureskatingchic not only employs her avatars at the visual level to identify with figure skating, but she claims this representation in her user name, as well. The connotations of the second part of her username cannot be ignored either. As the shorthand for "chick" (girl), "chic" also infers a nickname that has been co-opted by popular culture to refer to elements of girlhood culture as in chick flicks or chick lit. On the topic of pink laces she wrote: "I was not liking that the laces were pink, they could have been white or black." While no one commented further on the mention of black laces, the gendered association with black laces (read: male) might have been problematic for the girls as well. Both of

Figureskatingchic's avatars were dressed in skating dresses, and her entries on the Forum often referred to her time at the rink as she wrote about her dreams for the upcoming competitive season.

> My avatar shows who I am in real life because I am in figure skating, I love skating, I like to wear my hair up a lot, and I love to have dresses that stands out from the other skaters, and the first place medal around my neck shows what I work so hard for.

The images of the skating attire she constructs serves as a visual "coalition of affinity" (Thomas, 2004) with the other girls who identified as figure skaters. It also acts to suture discourse and subjectivity. With a reciprocal movement, she allows the social world to transfer something of itself on to her (discourse), while simultaneously transferring something of herself to her online social network (subjectivity). With the avatar image and her written discussions, Figureskatingchic uses the visual (and repeated) symbol of the gold medal on her avatars to serve as a kind of symbolic currency to construct a pose that deliberately sets her apart from (and above) the other figure skaters. Her identity is shaped by desire expressed through both language and image (Thomas, 2007). In what might be interpreted as a "hyperbolic performance" (Butler, 1997), Figureskatingchic's posts are selective and keep returning to her real life figure skating identity. As if to alleviate any doubt about how serious she is about the sport, she writes that she "lives at the rink", and she skates "24/7". In actual fact, she skates twice a week for less than four hours per week during the winter, and three times a week in the spring and fall. For her, the avatars present an exaggerated pose that represents a fantasy, traced over with desire.

Within a gendered economy of hetero-normative culture, "Women more than men

are negatively sanctioned for over competitiveness" (Currie and Kelly, 2006, p. 168). While the overt competitiveness of Figureskatingchic's remarks are not addressed directly in the Forum, by contrast, Questionmark describes having quite a different relationship to figure skating. Her first preference was not to present her avatar in skating attire at all. In fact, her first choice was a sports jersey and sneakers. However, when she could not find those options, Questionmark went looking for a second choice to depict another of her sports. She makes reference to Figureskatingchic's comment by writing, "I don't skate 24/7 but I do skate very often." For her figure skating is:

> A way to express yourself, a way to meet new friends, a fun way to get rid of extra energy [and] something to keep me busy in the winter because I live in a pretty small town with not much to do.

For her, figure skating signifies multiple things. While she settles for this form of representation, she laments what she assumes is a unitary narrative around the figure skates:

> If there is only once choice for skates, then there isn't much room for me to express myself using my skates differently [from] the other people with skates on their avatars.

Her frustration is furthered when she describes how she wanted to construct her figure skating avatar. When she was not able to find a skating dress among her choices on WeeWorld, she decided to improvise and use a "ballerina dress." At first this appears to be another example where identity has been sutured by the available discourse, however, Questionmark reveals that it actually mirrors her past, and real-life experience. As a recreational figure skater, she explains that she does not own a real skating dress, and has

in the past "altered" fancy dresses by hiking them up and pinning them so that they look like a skating dress for events such as "fun" competitions and ice shows. While the ballerina dress might not appear to be a figure skating dress, the addition of figure skates to her avatar leaves little doubt to those who view/read this avatar, that the person who created it wants to be represented as a figure skater. At this point she describes an avatar that would represent a real life desire:

> If I could have made a custom skating dress for my avatar it would have some sparkle and maybe a little less poofy. If I could have any background I wanted, it would be in a skating arena, at centre ice.

Here she reinforces a discourse of emphasized femininity by desiring sparkle on her dress, but disavows the same discourse by wishing that the dress could be "less poofy".

Star was the fourth girl to represent herself as a figure skater with her only avatar. Early in the study, she was troubled by negotiations she was forced to make:

> I had trouble finding different backgrounds because I have skates on in the summer and I would really like to change my background to winter.

Her dissatisfaction was that she could not put her avatar on a winter background or on an ice rink echoed a dissatisfaction that Questionmark stated, but it also highlighted technical challenges that she had throughout the study and a general inability to negotiate the WeeWorld site with ease.

No Flaws Allowed – The Beauty Narrative Prevails

The following presents an analysis of my findings as they relate to how the girls could not represent what they called "flaws" with their avatars. These flaws ranged from the benign (teenage acne) to the profound (tumours). The most obvious examples were

how Livie's medical condition could only be represented with freckles, and how the lack of cast or crutches prevented Questionmark from representing her broken leg. This inability to represent these and other "flaws" reinforced a notion of staged perfection (or what Cutie-Pi called "imperfection-less") indicative of representations in other domains of popular culture. Mainstream magazines, newspapers, television programs, music videos and movies are regularly criticized for not including representations of "real" bodies. In an ethos of carefully manipulated self-images, highly staged computer altered images of real bodies have become the norm (Kilbourne, 2010). However, there has been a growing public backlash to these images and to the false ideals they represent. When this is considered, the girls' expressions of disappointment around their inability to represent their flaws might also point to their resistance to these idealized images and to their commitment to this backlash.

Symbolic signifiers of social/cultural resistance such as tattoos or body piercing can be found on alternative sites, but are still rare in mainstream locations. Such symbolic forms of resistance were noticeably non-existent as options on WeeWorld, as were signifiers of visible disability such as a cast, crutches or wheelchair (though the later two options exist now). Indeed, the option to construct a "fat" avatar did not exist either (aside from the small belly option that male avatars could choose), confirming observations that Cooper (2007), and Thomas (2004) have made about the absence of real body types in cyberspace. In this context it makes sense that "fat" avatars were not possible, because being overweight represents a pathologized social and cultural taboo within Western discourse. What the absence of fat avatars tells us reflects a wider discourse within health and media models. Driscoll (2002) tells us "Health models are

highly visible in late modern everyday life, from educational systems through changing medical standards to media dissemination of diet and weight-loss narratives and advertisements" (p. 253). Perhaps creating idealized representations reflect the desire to represent the self in an idealized form, or it may reflect a social reality that is mirrored in commercial and entertainment culture. It might also reflect a desire to reject/turn away from images that do not conform to those of their major corporate sponsor, Disney.

What about Live?

Livie's early comments on the Forum did more than reflect a desire to construct an identity that resisted discourses of emphasized femininity and popular culture. Her short cropped hair, jeans, t-shirt and béret all work to mobilize a carefully constructed subjectivity not caught by the commercial trappings of girlhood style. In one of her first comments she describes herself in terms that set her apart from her peers:

> I really feel like I'm not like most people in my very small city. People tend to follow trends to be accepted and have tons of "friends", but I'd rather be myself and have 3 good friends than 15+ who secretly don't like me.

At first the subtle reference to being different to others sound similar to claims of uniqueness the other girls made throughout the study. However, after investing a significant amount of time introducing herself and her avatar to me and to the other girls on the Forum site, Livie revealed that she has a medical condition that could not be expressed using the language of the program. She writes:

> I also want to add freckles but not because I have freckles but because they would be the closest thing to looking like the angiofibromas on my face from having Tuberous Sclerosis complex or (TSC)[iv].

However, rather than choosing freckles on her first avatar, she makes a decision to include eyelashes instead. This choice involves a complex negotiation of the language of the avatar site and the normative discourses of beauty and femininity. At first she claims to be dissimilar from her peers, and dresses her avatar in a manner that *is* quite different from the other girls in this study (who each represent themselves at least once in a style that can be coded as overtly feminine). Then, noting that her first avatar has short hair, she explains that her desire to share her medical condition with others was initially trumped by her desire to look like a girl, or more accurately, "so my avatar didn't look like a boy." This decision reveals the regulating power of gender as a performance. When I asked her to elaborate, she wrote:

> I was happy about the choice I made with the eyelashes at the time. I felt it would be the best thing to go with, [be]cause I hadn't decided if I would even have a reason to talk about my TSC, but I decided to share with you!

Later, Livie confided that she did not suffer from any of the severe symptoms of TSC; however, she did note that it had left tumours on her face and it has affected her organs. In real life, her appearance is profoundly affected by the condition, as her tumours truly do set her apart from her peers. When I consider her negotiating the turbulent world of girlhood culture, her comments here lend insight to her claims of difference and individuality. Livie does not just want to be different. She is different. However, looking at her avatars alone would belie that. While Livie's initial decision to include freckles on her avatar might have served as an opportunity to represent her medical condition, it is likely that audiences would not have picked up on her intended symbolic

representation. This inability to symbolically represent a "flaw" profoundly silences this self-narrative.

Some might argue that according to their Sanskrit definition, avatars (descended from the gods) should be conceived as "hyperbolic representations" (Butler, 1997) of subjectivity, thus representations of idealized bodies should be anticipated. Moreover, *The Boston Globe* also reported that avatars tend to be more adventurous than their real life creators in that creators will try on identities in a virtual environment that might be more risky and perhaps more revealing than what they are willing to be in real life (Jackson, 2007). However, WeeMee avatars, as their name implies, are *intended* to be an autobiographical "wee" me. This kind of avatar is more closely associated with the kind that one participant in Thomas's (2007) study describes: "it's me, but minus the things I don't like about me" (p. 9). With WeeMee avatars there is some expectation that one might be able to represent the self in a manner that is physically (if not stylistically) accurate. When one is unable to represent the self accurately, as Livie and Questionmark found out, the social and cultural implications to consumer girlhood should not be surprising. There will be something to purchase to help fill the void.

My Avatar May Come Across as "Skanky"

Recalling my commitment to follow the girls' discussions and make salient their concerns and observations, I move to an analysis of findings that came from Cherrytree's lengthy Forum postings. Rather than use her second avatar to produce a different self-narrative as some of the girls did, she opted to refine, in subtle and not so subtle ways, the visual signifiers that worked as statements of her identity. Cherrytree initially seemed pleased with the autobiographical nature of her first avatar. Like others, her description

relied on physical features and visual signifiers to symbolize what she describes as her personality and her interests. She wrote:

> It says that I am a singer; it says that I am unique; it says that I am blonde & proud. My avatar shows everyone who I am. I love to sing in front of people & I guess you could say rock out sometimes. The only thing different between my avatar & me is that I don't always wear that little of clothes, hehe.

Cherrytree's comments reflect an understanding of the cultural connotation of being blonde, however, she resists the negative discourse that ridicule blondes for a lack of intelligence and common sense by refusing the dominant subject position. When asked to describe their avatars, most the girls in this study provided detailed compositional details about their avatars' attire. Even though no one commented on how her first avatar is dressed, in her posts on the Forum site she asked if she could make a new avatar. Accompanying her second avatar were lengthy written descriptions, which urged readers/viewers to see beyond the visual semiotic cues and the social assumptions they implied.

In her posting below, Cherrytree makes reference to the stereotypical assumptions others outside the study have about girls who wear midriff baring clothes. While she vigorously defends her avatar's clothing (and by extension, her) against a misreading, she provides insight into the high stakes that such cultural codes and hegemonic assumptions have in youth culture.

> My avatar may come across as "skanky" because of the belly top,
> but that is not what my avatar is saying about me.

> It says that I can wear clothes like that & still have respect for myself & my body, Sometimes people judge others because of things like that.
>
> Although the avatar is supposed to represent me, there are still aspects of me that you have to look outside the box to see.

Her use of the term "skanky" is consistent with a label that Pomerantz (2006) observed popular girls using to classify a more promiscuous thus "lower" class of girls in school. The classification was "a way of forming (dis)indentifications, [for] they also used the label to diminish the power of the less popular girls" (p. 180). It is a look that includes tight revealing clothing and an abundance of dark eye makeup and lip liner. Cherrytree's use of the label "skanky" is in reference to the cropped belly top and revealing bare midriff, which suggests a similar negative connotation. Kenway and Bullen (2001) explain that more recently, young girls have exploited their own sexuality as a performance of empowered personal identity by embracing and even flaunting notions of femininity within mass consumer culture. While reading/viewing the first avatar, one might make an assumption that Cherrytree is exploiting her sexuality, her written postings make it clear that she is eager to disassociate herself from the undesirable social code of the "bad girl" image implied by the belly top.

Pomerantz (2006) notes that a moral panic around girls' style feeds into a broader public discourse grounded in images of girls wearing "inappropriate outfits" as a way to act out their low self-esteem and draw males' attention. In their research on girlhood agency and empowerment, Currie and Kelly (2006) found that most adolescent girls were "acutely aware that girls are judged by their looks…and their reputations can be 'ruined' by sexually-demeaning labels" (p. 170). It is not merely how girls represent themselves

physically that matters in terms of how they define themselves in their social discursive spaces; rather what girls do, what they wear, what they believe, value and know all contribute to how they see themselves and how they struggle for social and cultural significance (Kelly et al., 2005). Though the ways girls actively take up and shift subject positions suggest that the moral panic exists more within the girls' social sphere than it does in wider society, it does exist nonetheless. Cherrytree was worried that she would be positioned within a narrative that suggests that she has performed her girlhood identity incorrectly and that she might be seen as one who willingly leads boys astray. A subsequent posting describes the conflicted position in which she finds herself and how others might misread her avatar's "revealing" look.

When the avatars are conceived as a form of visual conversation where autobiographical meanings are constructed by the user and discursively interpreted by the audience, it is nearly impossible to have any sort of conversation where two individuals hold shared positions (Davies and Harré, 1990). Upon closer reflection, Cherrytree acknowledged that the message her first avatar was sending was not consistent with whar she intended. Her concern about what others would think about her avatar, and by extension, about her, also sheds light on how important it is for these girls to be able to construct what they believe is an accurate self-representation. It also suggests a strong sense of self "as is". The possibility for mixed messages is extreme.

Not long after defending her choices of clothing, Cherrytree created another avatar positioning herself this time as a "good girl". She explained that she wanted to show what she would be like as a performer. While she explained that she sings a number of genres including classical (in several languages), musical theatre, pop and rock and

country, Cherrytree did not seem to mind the overgeneralization. In fact, she seemed more focused on her avatar's clothing and hairstyle. By positioning herself as someone who is "schooled" in singing and performing multiple genres, she claims a space (at least with her written description) not unlike what Figureskatingchic does with the gold medal and her skating dress.

> I did want it to dress more like I dress, especially when I'm performing.
>
> I always like to get done up & wear my hair up.
>
> I love to wear belts & I thought this outfit best suited me.

Cherrytree's explanation highlights not only the partial nature of these avatars but also the notion of identity as constantly shifting. And within the complex adolescent world that depends so profoundly on peer acceptance, where image and appearance mean cultural capital or social banishment, accurate presentation and representation can be costly. Her rationale for changing her avatar sheds valuable light on the social pressures Cherrytree feels. In this reflection she refers to both the styles girls wear in real life and the ones they use to construct their avatars.

> I think that knowing you may be judged by what you wear defiantly influences the things you wear, that's why most of the time people wait to see what others are wearing & wait until it becomes popular before wearing it themselves,
>
> probably because even though they always liked it,
>
> they didn't want to be the one judged for wearing it.
>
> When you see that others are wearing the things you like,
>
> you feel more comfortable wearing those things because you know that it is "normal" or "cool"

> Even though you should be able to wear what you want & not care what people think, it is hard sometimes when people in society are cruel & make fun of others or make assumptions about the type of person they are.
>
> I think this may apply to people when choosing the style for their avatars because you have to choose something that is an average you,
>
> because unlike in real life, your avatar doesn't change its clothes everyday.
>
> I guess you have to think really hard about what it is that you want to represent you. That's why I changed mine. I felt it wasn't a good representation of the real me, but I really like my new avatar now.

It is difficult to say if her initial avatar was made in haste. Perhaps Cherrytree produced the more sexualized image to have cultural currency with her peer group and a more conservative avatar was conceived after she knew we would be scrutinizing it on the Forum site. As much as I attempted to construct an online environment to mirror that of a social network in this ethnographic study, in this case I questioned my influence on her responses. Perhaps she had figured out what to say to gain my approval (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 1994). On the other hand, this might illustrate the challenge of trying to pin down a unitary self-narrative against the impossibility of locating consistent choices within one discursive practice. However, what is clear is that it shores up the high stakes of representation in any and all contexts in terms of how style impacts social ranking/class within a peer culture. By drawing attention to the belly top on her first avatar and then constructing another more conservative avatar, Cherrytree signals that attire serves not only as a mark of personality, but of social status. If the first avatar is described as looking "skanky" then the second one will be read against this first

interpretation. Davies (1989) notes that we have learned to define ourselves in a manner separate from the social world, yet we have not been "taught to be aware of the way in which the taking up of one discursive practice or another (not originating in ourselves) shapes the knowing or telling we can do" (p. 230).

As the study progressed, the girls revealed even more about the pressures they felt in terms of how they represented themselves in online spaces, how their self-images were the subject to constant scrutiny, and how they were conscious of the complex and at times conflicting messages that their avatars revealed. The take up (or rejection) of normative discourses of an idealized beauty suggests that there is nothing straightforward about narrating the teenaged self in a social context, even in the context of a cartoon self image. Negotiations of gendered codes of colour, makeup and style are conflicted, and political. In the following chapter, I will analyze my findings around the cultural politics of girlhood identity and representation in online spaces where the girls tell me just how much is at stake.

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[i] Since the study was first conducted, there are fewer differences between girl choices and boy choices.

[ii] The colour pink can also be co-opted as well, as in a Pink Triangle. Originally the downward pointing pink triangle was used by Nazi's to identify male prisoners as homosexuals, the symbol, turned upright has more recently been appropriated as a symbol of gay pride.

[iii] It should also be noted that at the time of this study, when constructing a male avatar on the WeeWorld site, figure skates were not an available choice. Hockey skates are now available to female WeeMees.

[iv] Livie posted the following explanation about her condition as well as referred the other group members to a Facebook site created to bring awareness to this condition. "Tuberous Sclerosis is a multi - system genetic disorder that can cause tumours to form in all organs of the body; Brain, Heart, Kidneys, Lungs, Eyes and Skin. In some cases Tuberous Sclerosis can cause neurological damage causing individuals to have severe seizures, some form of disability as well as can cause kidney failure. Tuberous Sclerosis Complex (TSC) is a congenital genetic disease characterized by certain skin abnormalities and birthmarks, tuber-like growths in the eyes, the brain, and other internal organs, and varying in 6000/10,000 persons in the population. It is often difficult to recognize as it manifests itself differently from person to person."

Chapter 6
Findings: The Cultural Politics of Representation

Introduction

In the previous chapters I focused on the take up of (or resistance to) discourses found in the personalized avatars constructed by the girls in my study. For years, scholarship in girlhood identity has found that brand possession and girlhood style have the potential to act as currency in the market of peer acceptance, therefore iconic associations are integral to their constructed identities (Driscoll, 2002; Jiwani, Steenbergen and Mitchell, 2006). Writing about the world of instant messaging, but I believe equally relevant to my study, Stern (2007) reminds us, "Online identity construction and manipulation appears [sic] to be an enormous consideration…among adolescents" (p. 8). Furthermore, there is great cultural currency in online sites that promise the opportunity to construct a unique self-representation. That which is considered 'cool' is often manifested as an object of desire, which can be purchased as a gateway to peer acceptance and belonging. And "cool" is often marketed as the ability to express a unique look - the infinite humanist promise that individuality *can* resides in spaces where subjectivities are claimed and represented. Davies (1989) explains, "Out of the magnitude of competing and often contradictory possibilities, each person struggles, then, to make themselves a unitary rational being, whose existence is separate from others and yet makes sense to others" (p. 238). As a result, despite a belief that they have the capacity to represent themselves through forms of individual creativity, the girls in these spaces become victims of a kind of identity conformity.

Considering a theoretical perspective of identity that concedes power to the avatar production site, Kolko (1999) found that markers of identity such as gender or race are not within the sole control of individuals creating the avatars. Drawing on Kress and vanLeeuwen (1996), Kolko argues that the author of an avatar is masked behind the producer of the program that allows its construction. On one level, this relationship gives power to the designers of the avatar-making program in terms of what can or cannot be represented in the same way that they might be limited by the fashion choices in a particular store when they go shopping for an outfit. By limiting the possibilities of how the avatar can be created, there is a "denial of agency encompassed by this dynamic" (Kolko, 1999, p. 184). However, this perspective fails to address the power that regulates the designers of these sites and the socio-cultural parameters of choice. Commercial, corporate sponsorships and market trends all play into the cultural politics that ground the production of these sites and the options and choices users will get in the first place.

The double bind of popular culture

When asked to describe their avatars, the girls in my study all relied heavily on physical descriptions that almost always included claims of being unique. However, the notion that these avatar representations are unique is at odds with Weedon's (2004) observation that "the meaning of the visual is not at the disposal of individuals but is overdetermined by the history of representation" (p. 15). Therefore, when the girls claim an identity, it is defined by a popular culture that limits their options of self-expression. What this means is that while the girls make an avatar with the desire to express their identity as unique, normative social discourses often inform the reading/viewing in a

manner that at times supersedes the author's intent. They (and we) are not in control of the meanings of who we are.

Politics of Identity and Subjectivity

The WeeWorld site positions users as the authors of their personalized identity, designed to be a form of digital image signature in their online interactions. The girls in my study initially held the illusion that they were constructing their own version of subjectivity. However, what is on offer on this site is a highly contrived, socially constructed and commercially influenced version of girlhood. As the post-industrial Western world becomes more fragmented and individualized (Trend, 2003), young people are growing up in an increasingly multicultural and heterogeneous society. Buckingham (2003) explains that this shift has had a significant impact on identity formation. Despite the illusion of choice provided by contemporary consumer culture, he argues that, in many respects, this new society is "more unequal and more polarized than those they appear to be replacing: identities and lifestyles cannot be freely chosen by all" (p. 311). Theorized this way, identity is socially and culturally assigned, made available and made possible with language and through media discourses, which increasingly includes social media. Weedon (2004) explains, "a wide range of social practices come into play in recruiting subjects to identify with identities on offer" (p. 6). This phenomenon is seen in the very limited choices available on the WeeWorld site when users have no points accumulated or if they are unwilling to pay for the virtual items. The highly valued (and heavily promoted) items the girls could choose for their avatars extol the virtue of owning more things, as part of an ever-changing fashion market that values the latest trends, even online. On the WeeWorld site, users are encouraged to update their

avatars on a regular basis as content is constantly changing and themed weeks promote new styles. Scholarship in girlhood culture tells us that girls are already schooled in the expectations of shopping for clothing, trying on outfits, and discussing styles (Driscoll, 2002; Levin and Kilbourne, 2008) in spaces where girls forge bonds of friendship and connection while experimenting with fashion in real life spaces. There is also an understanding that these kinds of practices might allow for taking risk and trying on clothes that would never be worn in public. When those behaviours are theoretically conceived within a virtual space, WeeMee avatars allow for a virtual reproduction of these girlhood practices. Perhaps Cherrytree's first avatar with its "skanky" belly top could be understood as an example of risk taking that she eventually reconsidered.

Pomerantz (2006, 2007) argues that nowhere do girls feel the social repercussions of style more acutely than in school. "For girls-particularly in school-social visibility depends upon style; girls' identities are contingent upon it" (Pomerantz, 2006, p. 176). The girls in my study told me that they feel this pressure just as strongly in online networking spaces, and especially where they use any kind of self-images. The mobilization of already sanctioned codes (e.g., clothing styles, hairstyles, make up, and body piercing) work to signify compliance or resistance to normative discourses in pursuit of girlhood identity (Driscoll, 2002). More than providing a visible code for identification in real life locations, they also exist in the symbolic economy that governs their digital spaces where group membership is defined, and where girls can be included or segregated as members of particular groups in online spaces (Thomas, 2007). The role that style plays for girls might theoretically position virtual representations of style as a "bridge between public performance and private thought, between action and emotion,

between the body and the mind, between the self and the social" (Pomerantz, 2007, p. 66). The company information of the WeeWorld site suggests that the creators of WeeWorld are ready and willing to exploit the connection between girlhood and fashion. They explain that while most girls will never be able to afford the kind of "girl couture" fashions featured in *Vogue*, WeeWorld offers girls an affordable opportunity to have a virtual kind of "girl couture". Furthermore, celebrities from the world of pop music, like Selena Gomez (*Wizards of Waverly Place*), or The Pussycat Dolls, for example, are regularly featured "sharing" outfits and signature styles with WeeMees.

These avatars do not actively recruit or hail members to hegemonic or patriarchal discourses. They work in ways that are much more subtle. They prey on a desire to belong, to be "cool" and to be one of the crowd – at the same time promising the effect of being able to produce a one of a kind unique WeeMee. In many locations in popular culture, girls are positioned as ever flawed, while simultaneously being compared to images of perfection and ideal beauty. Marketers hope this positioning will result in life long relationships with beauty products that promise belonging and fulfilment. Multiple cultural narratives tell of a beautiful girl who is the object of desire versus the ugly girl who is to be reviled and admonished (until she has a chance to be made over to reveal the beauty within). While girls in this study are caught in this theoretical double bind, the WeeWorld site does not position them as ugly or lacking, in fact – it does the opposite. It removes the possibly that they can be positioned as imperfect, lacking or ugly, and offers them the opportunity to present themselves as ideal. Economic barriers that might exist in the real world are removed in this virtual site with a promise to represent the "real" self. It is the lure of an idealized identity that is so compelling.

Like the girls in Pomerantz's (2006) study on the *power and politics of schoolgirl style*, the girls in my study used style as a readily available, malleable form of embodied subjectivity. In her study, girls were categorized, ranked and classified by style, and I found evidence of that kind of political ranking based on style evident in online spaces as well. In a similar manner, the girls in my study explain that representations of style mobilize girls within subject positions and position them within social categories, even in online social spaces. The girls in my study reported that style dictates how girls are seen in school; but it also offers a way for them to negotiate that seeing. Such is also the case online, where the older girls were cognizant of the implications of this "fluid double movement between discourse and subjectivity" and of the "suturing of these two complex social processes in girls' understanding of themselves" (Pomerantz, p. 177). Yet, one of the key ideological ploys of identity is that we are coaxed into claiming a singular identity. "This process involves recruiting subjects to the specific meanings and values constituted within a particular discourse and encouraging identification" (Weedon, 2004, p. 19). Even the name of the personalized avatars used in this study, WeeMee, implies a unified little self. However, identity is always partial and impossible to capture within the limits of an imperfect language. This holds true with visible forms of language as well.

Cherrytree articulates this best. By opting to represent herself as a singer, a number of other self-narratives are not possible:

> My avatar doesn't show that there are other things I love besides music & clothes, such as, family & friends & theatre & movies & more.
>
> It doesn't show that I enjoy school, & that I'm an honour student.
>
> It doesn't show that I am very soft-hearted, & would do anything for my family.

It doesn't say that I am stubborn at times, or that I worry a lot.

It doesn't show that I'm a people person, & very good with kids.

There are many things that the avatar doesn't show, but it's just like me.

If you look at me, you probably wouldn't be able to see these things either.

Her observation demonstrates a keen awareness that what you see, whether in person or in avatar form presents a limited image of identity. It also demonstrates that Cherrytree is not willing to buy into her WeeMee as a unified self-image.

Suture

The notion of suture has been central to my understanding of identity and how the girls in my study stitched together the way they have been positioned by others and the effect that positioning has had on how they represented themselves (Hall, 1980; Pomerantz, 2006, 2007). As something always in progress, dependent on context and forever relational, I found that performances of identity relied at times on what Davies (1990) called "forced choices". On several occasions, financial restrictions (the result of having no points accumulated) and the limited options on the WeeWorld site combined with popular culture's normative discourses to serve as structural restraints to shape the way the girls constructed their identity with personalized avatars. Cutie-Pi articulated the challenge that the girls experienced when they could not find the attire, accessories or objects of affiliation that they wanted: "We try to express it as best we can but are confined to the options that the program offers." At times, the girls found that by choosing to represent themselves with one sutured identity, another self-narrative would be silenced.

Theoretically, with style conceived as a kind of social skin and as an embodied subjectivity, it can also be understood as a form of agency for the girls. Pomerantz (2007) explains:

> Agency is related to the decisions we make and actions we take *within*, and not outside of, discourse's effect. In other words, girls make decisions within a range of possibilities. This way of thinking about agency suggests that girls' choices of style are not without limitation; they are not entirely "free" choices. (p. 66)

Questionmark explains her navigation through the process of finding the desired clothing for her avatar in a way that demonstrates this kind of agency. Her self-representation is limited, but still within a range of other possibilities:

> I had trouble choosing the shirt because I had seen a plain shirt with a white blazer over it, **but is cost 500 points, which I didn't have!** When I chose a different shirt that was free, I had trouble choosing a colour. It took me a long time to choose shoes, because **the checker flats that I wanted also cost points, and I didn't really like any of the other shoes.**

For some, it might not be a big deal if a girl cannot find the shoes she wants for her avatar. In terms of identity creation, it is not, by itself, a significant factor. However, when taken in combination with other socially limiting discursive practices over multiple media platforms and in a vast majority of media genres, the effect over time is significant as it contributes to a larger hegemonic, cultural ethos. This time, the struggle is to find the shoes she wants for a price she can afford. Next time, however, Questionmark's self-narrative is silenced in a more profound way. Questionmark explained:

> I broke my leg :(I tried to find crutches or a cast for my weemee but they had none :S

Because of her broken leg, she would not be playing volleyball or figure skating, yet this self-narrative is impossible, and she opts instead to represent herself in a manner authorized by the WeeWorld site. The absence of options such as a cast or crutches (or wheelchairs, for that matter) functions as a semiotic restraint by limiting her represented identity. In her quest to construct an accurate representation of herself, Questionmark's second avatar is dressed neatly, standing at a school locker with a volleyball at her feet. Questionmark reveals that she did not get to share her interest in acting, writing or in other sports. Even though she had to settle for a makeshift skating dress, no sports jersey and no crutches, she was satisfied enough with this example of a sutured identity. She concluded that it was a good representation of whom she thinks she is, and perhaps more importantly, of whom she wanted the rest of us to think she is.

Agency also enables individuals to transform social practices and the power that informs them in order to realize the political interests and the social implications of discourses. However, since the subject is constantly constituted by multiple discourse positions, agency, like subjectivity, is never fixed. Trying on and cultivating different styles might see girls as both seeking *and* claiming power in their lives. Pomerantz (2007) demonstrates that a girl can use style as a form of agency to position herself differently. It is also possible for multiple subject positions to reside in one avatar. Princess is at once written as a sophisticated dresser, a would-be traveler, and an actress. Cutie-Pi is a *Twilight* Fan, a "green" shopper (fabric shopping bag) and a student. Creating multiple avatars allowed the girls an opportunity to occupy multiple subject

positions. Questionmark, for example, can be seen as a figure skater, not just a volleyball player or student. Shorty can represent herself as a student, not just someone interested in socializing with her friends. However, these alternative self-narratives might also be conceptualized as a suturing of identity.

Recalling Livie's earlier postings, her subjectivity is sutured when she initially wants to use freckles to represent her angiofibromas then opts instead for eyelashes so that her avatar will not look like a boy. Her choices might be theorized as claiming agency by not only positioning herself differently, but also she is also actively attempting to achieve some control over the structures that are beyond her reach. However, she might also be seen as conforming to the regulatory discourses that are beyond her conscious grasp. The most common form of power that girls can assert is against forms of emphasized femininity and female sexuality (Pomerantz, 2007). By disavowing the feminine styles that are preppy and popular, and opting instead to dress her avatar in pants and a simple shirt, what results for her is a performance of gender that gives her a sense of power and temporary agency. Her postings speak to a significant investment of time cultivating and reinventing her identity. She has worked hard to ensure that her self-representations are believable and do not appear posed. Pomerantz (2007) might describe Livie as: "Using style to craft an image [that] enables a girl to inscribe herself, rather than simply being inscribed by others—to use her own voice to speak back to how she has been spoken to" (p. 66). When Livie chooses eyelashes over freckles, however, the double bind of normative discourses suture her identity.

Perceiving Audience: Being Judged on Style

North American girls are under constant scrutiny. The ubiquitous nature of online social networking places girls (and their images) into the surveillance culture, where, like living in the Panopticon (Foucault, 1977), they become the objects of the gaze "of boys, other girls, security guards, sales people, teachers, school administrators, and parents" (Pomerantz, 2007, p. 67). While this gaze may not fall directly upon them, girls often feel its effect as a result of having to internalize its ubiquitous presence. As a result, girls eventually regulate their representations according to the discourses of that gaze until eventually they begin to participate in discourses that invite it (Foucault, 1977). The consequence is a constant insecurity and questioning of their bodies, their clothing, their complexions, their hairstyles, and their sex appeal. In the anticipation of the gaze they regulate their representations. However, given the cultural currency and pervasive nature of digital and social networking, the girls in my study suggest that the structures of social media also contribute to this labelling with posted pictures. Butterflye explains:

> I'd like to think that people don't judge us based on our looks, but I know that it happens often. That's why I think it's important to choose a picture that represents you, not what society says you are.

Cherrytree was even more specific about who was applying the social pressure. She wrote: "A lot of girls judge other girls by what they wear." Livie's comments also revealed that she felt the pressure of the regulatory discourses of the Western beauty myth. She remarked: "Sometimes I feel like I don't want people to see the marks on my face." Instead of conforming to those pressures, she told the group on the Forum that she

would not use her avatars for her profile picture on Facebook for any length of time citing a desire to be judged for who she is and not for what she looks like.

Cutie-Pi also wrote about how audience perceptions added pressure to present an image that conformed to social expectations. She makes reference to feeling pressure from "the whole school society", and admits to constructing her online self-images in order to gain social approval from her peer group. Cutie-Pi felt she would need to change her avatar if she was going to use it as her profile picture on Facebook:

> I used my avatar as my profile picture for a while but as Livie said, I prefer photographs. Yes the avatar can show a close representation of who you are but it's more fake than an actual human being. I do not have a perfect complexion nor do I have a "perfect" body shape…For both photographs and avatars: we are only judging appearances, a picture can't show what a person is really like.

She refers to the perfect body of the WeeMee avatar – which when examined closely, is short, it has no nose, no hands, and no eyebrows. Furthermore, the avatar's head is nearly the same size as the combined body and legs and the entire figure is about half as wide as it is tall. Borrowing from Grosz (1994), Thomas (2007) describes avatars as literally being rewritten or traced over by desire. What Cutie-Pi is describing here corroborates the notion of the cyber body as "a clean fluidless body offered up as ideal" (p. 128). It also supports the notion of an idealized "personalized" identity on offer on WeeWorld.

As at School, So it is Online

The older girls in my study (Cherrytree, Princess, Butterflye, Livie and Shorty) all described the social scene at their schools and revealed the existing tensions and complex negotiations around peer groups, popularity, symbolic meanings and social power. Much

of the tension they felt surrounded the clothing they wore and how they anticipated being judged based on audience. As discussed in the previous chapter, Cherrytree's comments reflect Currie and Kelly's (2006) argument about how school culture contributes to the moral panics which identify girls as 'problematic' and thus labels, and classifies them accordingly. She explains that in real life: "Knowing you may be judged by what you wear definitely influences the things you wear." While Princess acknowledges the power of this symbolic economy, her comments suggest that she refuses to be positioned by others much less marginalized, despite not conforming to popular trends. She explains:

> Sometimes, and it's a shame, people judge you by the way you look. Most times people don't want to get to know you before [they] decide if you are a nice or good person or not, they just look at your outfit [or in this case a picture] and if you don't look like someone they would be friends with, then they just pass you in the hallway. I, myself, think that I am a good person, I have many friends and I am involved with many extra curricular activities and the people who accept me for who I am and not what I wear are the kinds of people who I like having as friends. This way I don't have to worry about wearing the latest thing in fashion trends.

With these comments, Princess also revealed the depth of the regulatory social practices that deny membership and belonging based on appearance. While she appeared to give this kind of superficial judgement little currency, there is an indication that she has personally felt the sting of exclusion. She explained:

> It is common today, to be automatically judged as something just by the way you look. Some people make comments and I'm like, "you don't even know me, how

> could you make assumptions like that?" snap judgments are made everyday, and it's hardly fair to start off a relationship badly just because of an appearance.

Avatars as Profile Pictures

With social pressure being felt in their online spaces and considering the constant negotiation of identity that social media espouses, the girls engaged in a debate around whether they preferred to use avatars or photographs as profile pictures on Facebook. At issue was the importance of posting something that would not only be an accurate self-representation, but also a public statement of identity. Most agreed that with an avatar they could project their wishes, dreams or fantasy lives, more so than with a photograph. Given the pressure that came from gaining social acceptance in their peer group, the girls told me that stakes where high in terms of the first impressions these representations would make. Making a wrong first impression could be a disaster.

Butterflye explained:

> Profile pictures should reflect who you are, not who society tells us you should be. First impressions are everything, and if someone gets the wrong impression of who you are, because of your avatar or profile picture, it can be everything from embarrassing to downright dangerous.
>
> I'd like to think that people don't judge us based on our looks, but I know that it happens often. That's why I think it's important to choose a picture that represents you, not what society says you are.

Butterflye's comment suggests that in the process of constructing such self-representations a deliberate negotiation of subjectivity, at times, requires resistance to hegemonic expectations. She also alludes to the safety concerns born of a moral panic

that circulates regarding Internet stalking and luring. Not long after, Shorty added another dimension that considers the unintended audiences of these avatars or other forms of self-representation:

> I agree with Butterflye about first impressions. They are very important and you only get to make them once. The way we represent ourselves on the Internet may seem harmless until a teacher or a future employer stumbles across your Facebook page and some inappropriate photos…I think accuracy is important and you should represent yourself truthfully but you don't need to display every part of your private life.

When I asked the girls to comment on the different functions of photographs and avatars as a means to represent their identity in social networking spaces, most girls said they preferred to use photographs, though they nearly all thought that avatars did a better job representing their interests and personality. The reasons they cite for giving primacy to photographs corroborates findings from other research in girlhood culture where appearances regulate group membership and belonging (Pomerantz, 2007, 2006; Driscoll,2002). Roxy weighed in on the question by privileging the citational properties in her avatar:

> I think that the difference of having an avatar as a profile picture is that it can reflect your personality a lot better because you can actually add what kind of clothes you want on it, and different hairstyles, etc. I think it shows more of who you are than a photograph.

Livie's response was similar. She wrote:

> I think that the difference of having an avatar as a profile picture is that it can reflect your personality a lot better because you can actually add what kind of clothes you want on it…I think it shows more of who you are than a photograph.

Later, regardless of what she has written here, she tells the group that she would not choose to use her avatar on Facebook. Instead she explains that the photographs she prefers are not necessarily ones that depict her, but instead portray things like flowers or scenery.

Overall, the girls expressed a general lack of enthusiasm for using their avatars as profile pictures, and with that emerges an apparent contradiction. The girls observed that their avatars were able to represent them accurately with the exception of a few (albeit sometimes significant) limitations. Yet, when asked if they would be willing to use these avatars as their profile pictures on their social networking sites, they all agreed that they preferred to use photographs. Perhaps this contradiction reflects the conflicting and complex nature of girlhood and the cultural politics of representation in these sites. Another consideration is that the girls are used to using photographs in their social networking sites. In fact, digital photographs have currency in their world. They value the cameras, cell phones, computers and photo editing programs they have to take, alter, house and display their images. Social networking sites, in many ways depend on the uploading and sharing of digital photographs. WeeMees, on the other hand, are something new to these girls.

While the rapid up take of non-gaming avatars in Korea might indicate a global trend toward personalized avatars as a form of online identity representation, and even though WeeWorld has an interest in becoming the standard in personalized online and

mobile identity creation in North America and Europe, these avatars have not yet become common currency in a youth market here. The girls told me that they fear being judged based on their looks and based on their representative images online. So, simply put, the girls might prefer photographs because WeeMee avatars aren't "cool" enough. Posting an avatar as a profile picture for these girls might require taking a social risk that they are not yet (or ever) willing to take. As well, the girls may be indicating an unexplicated knowledge of and comfort with the conventions their Facebook community in which avatar use is uncommon.

It is possible that my findings would have been different had the girls been members of a WeeMee fan club or other such site where they congregate based on a common interest in this form of avatar construction. However, my girls shared no such "coalition of affinity" (Thomas, 2004). Instead, for the girls in my study, using WeeMee avatars in place of their profile pictures on Facebook was simply not worth the social risk. What is clear from this contradiction is that explanations of how and why these girls represent themselves as they do are anything but simple.

If you had to use your avatar...

I posed a hypothetical question to the girls and asked what (if any) changes they would make *if* their avatars were going to be used as their profile pictures for a period of time. Adding further support to the power of appearances, Livie responded: "If my avatar were my profile picture I might change the clothes!" Roxy's response was similar: "I'd change the clothes and update the looks a lot." In each case, clothing and style remain the primary concern in terms of positioning their identity in a social space. Questionmark was more explicit and said she would consider the time of year:

> For example in the winter I might use my current [skating] avatar and in summer I might make a new one with a new background and different clothes, I might also consider what I like to do in that season.

Later, Questionmark admitted that she actually did use her avatar as her Facebook profile picture for about two weeks. "One of my FB friends commented on my avatar, they said they liked it." Given the choice, however, she said that she still preferred to use photographs. Butterflye, on the other hand said that she would leave her second avatar:

> If my avatar were my profile picture, I don't think I'd change it much, if anything. I created it to reflect my personality, my general mood and my style, so I like it the way it is.

She believed the critical difference between having either a real picture or an avatar as her profile picture on Facebook depended on the available avatar options. For her the WeeWorld site could be conceived as providing both opportunities for agency and limitations that suture her visual self-representation. She explains:

> Creating an avatar, in my opinion, gives you more freedom than a photograph in some ways, and less freedom in others. For instance, you can change the background of your avatar; change the clothes, the mood, the hairstyle, pretty much whatever you want to change. However, you can also do this by simply taking a different picture, or uploading a different picture. And with a photograph, it's YOUR face that's in the picture, not a computer generated version of you. Photographs can be more accurate than avatars in some ways.

However, Butterflye believes that avatars have the ability to project future dreams in a manner that gives them an advantage over photographs.

> I think you can accurately represent yourself with both photographs and avatars, if you know what you're doing. With avatars, you're limited to what the site selects for hairstyles, clothes and interests, but with photos, it's harder to show what you'd like to be in the future. Both have their limitations and both have their advantages, and it's really up to the user to decide which one to use…With avatars… it's not your own face in the picture, it's a generated image of you, almost a caricature. However, with avatars, it's easier to show your aspirations.

In the end, however, when asked if she used either of her avatars as her profile picture on Facebook, the answer was "no".

The manner by which these identity negotiations were conscious and "in progress" reflect an understand that "the knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly" (Haraway, 1991, p. 193). Shorty's observations draw on this non-unitary nature of self-representation. She explained that she would not change her avatar if she had to use it as her profile picture because she thinks it represents her as closely as she can with a cartoon. She explains:

> I made my avatar just for this group and I only had it on my Facebook for a couple of hours so I didn't get any comments. I think pictures are just a second of your life represented. With avatars you can represent who you are more generally [but] I prefer pictures.

She understands that pictures are only capable of capturing a moment in time, and with that is the indication that while possible, agency is only temporary.

The Cultural Politics of Class

The girls in my study are surrounded by popular media discourses that afford social status to those who wear trendy clothes and who own lots of material possessions. From the time they are young, girls are schooled by the notion that they are what they wear. Such notions have colonized their play for generations. For over 50 years young girls have learned that Barbie's identity is defined by what she wears and what she owns (Steinberg, 2010). More recently the discourses of idealized Western beauty have been complicated by the popularity of Bratz dolls. These dolls do not abide by the standard notions of Western beauty, but that does not matter because they have sexy clothes and accessories to demand attention (Levin and Kilbourne, 2008). In both cases clothing and style suture identity to discourses of femininity and material wealth. Walkerdine (1997) found that the promise and desire for upward mobility in class led young girls to believe in narratives that promised fame and riches. Today, even in their early forms of play, girls are bombarded with that same promise. A similar illusion can be conceived on WeeWorld where girls are able to mobilize common signs and symbols that signify wealth even though they do not have the economic means to do so in real life. They can still have virtual designer clothes and handbags; they can position their personalized avatars at exotic locations and they can be affiliated with objects of their desire. In a consumer culture spending and possessing material things lends to the illusion that one belongs in a class where such items are readily accessible.

The addition of highly valued virtual material items (or what the girls called "bling"), combined with the positioning of avatars on exotic backgrounds (like Paris or a tropical beach) provides the girls a kind of virtual, cultural capital that might not be

available in their real lives. Kelly et al. (2005) found that girls who came from lower working class homes or communities lacked the cultural capital to belong to high status groups in school or in the community. Weedon (2004) reminds us

> Class signifies differences that imply inequalities that can be variously understood as necessary and inevitable or social and undesirable; either way class remains a highly politicized concept. Moreover, class as a form of identity is significant in many social contexts; it shapes, for example, the meanings given to particular ways of speaking and dressing. (p. 11)

Recalling the pressures the girls felt to dress their avatars according to an accepted social and code within girlhood, the politics of class was significant to my findings. Several of the girls in my study came from working and lower class communities; however, it was the older girls from these locations (especially Princess and Cherrytree) who reported being judged harshly on their appearance or on their clothing style in real life. As a result, and perhaps an indication of an emerging class-consciousness, the older girls were acutely aware of how they represented themselves with their avatars. Princess resists by positioning her avatar's outfit as "sophisticated" and Cherrytree spent a great deal of time rewriting her first avatar to disassociate it with the "skanky" image implied by the belly top. In both cases, they deliberately (re)positioned themselves socially and politically.

The social pressures associated with style and material possessions seemed to have had a minimal effect on the younger girls from these communities (Questionmark, Star, Roxy and Figureskatingchic). Recall, however, that these girls all represented themselves as figure skaters at one point during the study. I suggest that just as affiliation with school sports has been found to provide young people with a sense of belonging and

privilege, figure skating gave these girls a similar sense of belonging and social power. It might also be conceived that they were not yet of the age when the politics of girlhood culture and the pressures associated with style and belonging were paramount social negotiations, or where class was so conscious.

Conclusion

There is a vast difference between a poststructuralist understanding of identity as multiple, shifting and positioned by discourse and theories and those from early in the last century in which it was not uncommon to talk about identity as something "forged" (Turkle, 1995). In fact, the metaphor of an "iron-like solidarity captured the central value of a core identity" (p. 179). To assume multiple idenities was akin to putting yourself in the company of con-artists, bigamists, Jekyll and Hyde and split personalities. However, the social discursive practices enabled by technology and expected in social networking sites see users regularly updating their status and photographic self-representations. Pomerantz (2006, 2007) argues that nowhere do girls feel the social repercussions of style more acutely than in school. "For girls-particularly in school-social visibility depends upon style; girls' identities are contingent upon it" (Pomerantz, 2006, p. 176).

The girls in my study told me that they feel this pressure just as strongly in online networking spaces, and especially where they use any kind of self-images. The mobilization of already sanctioned codes (e.g., clothing styles, hairstyles, make up, and body piercing) work to signify compliance or resistance to normative discourses in pursuit of girlhood identity (Driscoll, 2002). More than providing a visible code for identification in real life locations, they also exist in the symbolic economy that governs their digital spaces where group membership is defined, and where girls can be included

or segregated as members of particular groups in online spaces (Thomas, 2007). The role that style plays for girls might theoretically position virtual representations of style as a "bridge between public performance and private thought, between action and emotion, between the body and the mind, between the self and the social" (Pomerantz, 2007, p. 66). As a teenager, I would have found it nearly impossible to create an avatar that was not a figure skater, though I too would have struggled with skates that had pink laces, as some of the girls did here. Taking on the same project years later, I would have abandoned the skates in favour of a pile of books, or perhaps, for a period of time, even a diaper bag. Despite the vast and varied forms of representation my imaginary avatar might have taken over the years, the girls demonstrated a more immediate need to represent themselves in ways that kept pace with their always shifting, always evolving and ever constant project of self-making. The literacy practices of the past have given way to new literacies, and identity is now also negotiated in virtual spaces and cyberspace. Writing, or creating an avatar image as a form of language expression that says, "this is who I am", commits the individual to a particular subject position – but only temporarily. Often times these subject positions are sutured by the only discourses that appear available – those of the hegemonic kind.

Another kind of suture

On the day of my car accident 36 years ago, the wounds I sustained on my neck were jagged and messy. When my father arrived at the hospital, the doctor told him that closing the wound was like trying to put hamburger back together. It's a graphic image. And it had to be a difficult task. Suturing together a frayed wound left inevitable scars, but those scars meant that I could go on being in the world. They served as a reminder to

me and to others that I had been both unlucky and lucky, wounded and saved, scared and restored. The scars I have are far more than a physical reminder of going head first through a window in a car crash. They set me apart as different, wounded and flawed. There were periods of time when I was highly self-conscious of the marks on my jaw, and there were times I learned to forget they were even there until someone noticed and asked what had happened to me. Eventually, I had surgery to try to remove the scars. Twice they were removed, and twice, new, less noticeable scars were left in their place. Because of sutures that left those initial scars, I survived a dreadful accident and I could be almost the same as others. I could continue to skate, eventually become a coach, a teacher, a mother and a graduate student. I learned early that a person's worth should not be measured by outward appearances, and that I wanted to be known for being more than just a girl who had survived an accident. The scars meant that I could experience and share life with an understanding that we don't always get to choose how we will be perceived by others, and we certainly cannot control how we will be judged. But one thing is certain: the patriarchal discourses that existed in my youth continue to regulate girls (and girlhood), and unless they are questioned with a critical lens, these discourses become normalized.

Gilbert (1989) argued that when patriarchal discourses are not questioned, or challenged, then gendered subjectivities that are read and left untroubled find their ways into gendered forms of writing and representation. In the final chapter, the notion of questioning regulatory discourses that inform subjectivity, and the ethical responsibility educators have to include such critical literacy practices will be discussed as I consider the pedagogical implications of an evolving project of literacy.

Chapter 7
Conclusion

In other words, education might be recast, not so much as helping people to know what they don't know, but as noticing what they have not noticed.
Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler, 2008, p. 35.

Loose Ends

Any project that requires stitching also leaves loose ends that need to be tied. In the chapter that follows I attend to what I conceive as the dangling threads that leave me with questions, and I suggest how these questions might point me, or others, toward more work that might be done. When I began this research, I had hoped that my findings might be a panacea to inform a more thorough understanding of identity and subjectivity within a broader context of language learning and critical media education. I had hoped that my findings might have implications for evolving public school literacy curricula. And I had hoped that by asking students to construct avatars and then reflect critically on issues of power and the constitutive effects of popular culture, what might emerge would be some basis for a more ethical pedagogy in English language arts, one based on a serious inquiry into the cultural politics of all representational forms. Instead, I am left with findings that provide insight into the cultural politics of girlhood identity, through comments on school practices and a need for further study precisely directed at such possibilities. For, as my study came to a close, I confronted the realization that a vision for transforming schooled literacy is both "a very broad and narrowly specific issue" (The New London Group, 1996, p. 18). A project of literacy and language learning that relies on visual images to capture an epistemology of pluralism in its readings, is quite simply not an easy sell and, while this is suggestive of some practices which may be adopted and

adapted within school-based literacy education, its particularities and possibilities are outside the scope of this present study.

Near the end of the study, I posed a series of questions to the girls asking them to reflect on what they had learned and on what they thought the construction of a personalized avatar might offer to their own study in English language arts. What they revealed was that this literacy practice was quite different from those of school. By positioning these avatars as autobiographical fragments, and recognizing that they are visual expressions of not only physical appearance, but also of experience (or projected experience), we all saw that what counts is rarely obvious or uncomplicated. It is, however, always political. I had expected that with all the literature supporting the pedagogical importance of exploring notions of identity, representation, culturally situated texts and the media messages that bombard youth through popular culture, an exercise such as this one might, even in a small way, find its way into a place in the classroom. Perhaps that belief was shaped by the same doctoral student optimism that comes from being immersed for several years in a body of scholarship in critical media education. For that reason, I asked the girls if they had ever done similar work in school, and their responses were strikingly similar. Butterflye wrote:

> The closest thing to an autobiography I've ever done in school was last year, when we wrote speeches in my French class to describe ourselves. As for visual representations, I've done nothing of the sort, but I think it would be a great idea for an English project. Maybe I'll suggest that to my teacher... I'm not sure whether or not any of my teachers would ask me to visually represent myself in order to tell a story, but, as I said, it would be a great idea for a project.

Even while recognizing the potential that such an activity might offer, Butterflye senses her teacher would be reluctant to engage a visual form of language in the classroom. This belief speaks to a more common reluctance of teachers to recognize the value of using popular texts in the classroom (Coiro et al., 2008; Lanksheare and Knobel, 2006; Morgan, 2000, Nixon, 2002).

Cherrytree added:

> I think it would be so cool to do something like this for an assignment in English, but I don't think many teachers would ask students to represent themselves in a visual way…it could be considered too easy. But I guess if you answered a bunch of questions & wrote an autobiography to go with it…It would be really interesting to see how everyone [saw] themselves & if the way their avatar looks is the way everyone else sees them…in real life. I think it would be really cool.

Cherrytree's response speaks to the perceived notion that visual text, especially ones from popular culture, lack an academic value or rigor. The fact that Cherrytree saw the exercise as valuable *only* when a written assignment was included speaks to a lack of understanding of the complexity of visual representation, the pedagogical power of the visual image, the constitutive character of popular culture, and the insidious nature of the discourse that trivializes the pedagogical value of such texts (Coiro, et al., 2008; Morgan, 2000). While superficially these personalized avatars might be regarded as simplistic, the act of autobiographical construction might also embody a complex synthesis of what Luke (2003) calls "an expanding grammar of semiotic imagery and codes" (p. 400). Placed in a discourse of fun and playfulness, creating a cartoon self may not at first appear to be a process of conforming to hegemonic discourses, claiming agency, or

resisting power structures. However, upon closer examination, considering the social and commercial nature of the sites that enable the production of these avatar selves, using the semiotics tools of these avatar programs often means making representative choices that are governed by structuralist dualisms, like male/female and hierarchal codes like shades of skin color, as well as numerous other significant stratifications. These normative discourses not only shape how individuals represent the self, but also shape how others read these representations. Cherrytree captured this later nuance. By rewriting her avatar without the "skanky" belly top, she had learned the way her avatar looked was not necessarily the way everyone else saw her.

Cutie Pi added further consensus to the discussion that the exercise of constructing a personalized avatar would be worthwhile in English class:

> I've never had to do anything like this for a school project, even though it would make a very interesting assignment. I think that each one of the avatars tell[s] a story, when you think about each aspect of the avatar was chosen for a specific reason…it's kind of like a puzzle to figure out what the story behind it is. A possible English project would be for everyone to create an avatar anonymously, and the teacher could post them on the wall and have a sort of guessing game to figure out who owns each one. Looking at certain characteristics represented in the avatar - I'm sure it would be a challenge.

Despite recognizing the value of constructing and examining their personalized avatars, the girls felt it was unlikely that any of their teachers would take up the project of visual representation as something legitimate within an English classroom.

However, Questionmark's response offered insight into the potential such an assignment might hold:

> I think that when an assignment like this is first assigned you think that it is easy marks and it will be really easy, but as you get into it you find out about yourself and you want to know more. A project like this will get you to find out a lot about yourself and find out who you are.

This comment gives me hope for the potential of this kind of work within a frame of literacy and languge learning that further research could directly address and inform.

The Ties that Bind

At this point, a parallel might be drawn between the perceived reluctance to include popular and visual texts in English language arts curricula and an apparent contradiction that I observed during the study when despite their confidence that an avatar could represent who they are accurately, the girls would not use one for their *Facebook* profile picture. When seen together, both of these situations speak to the broad and narrow challenge of reforming literacy practices. I suspect that the girls' preference for photographs over avatars might speak to the cultural currency that digital photographs have on *Facebook*, not to mention the social risk implied by such a risk. Similarly, when print forms of literacy are still valued in public school at the level of accountability in the exam hall, therefore, a teacher embracing a new form of visual language and social literacy practice would also, quite likely, be seen as taking a risk. While print-based online forms have some currency in the public classroom, through blogs for example, the self-narrative of creating a personalized avatar is positioned as something "too easy", as Cherrytree suggests, as something that requires the validation of written autobiography in

order to make it substantive and perhaps even legitimate. The message from these students is clear.

Coiro et al. (2008) remind us that in order to build a larger conceptual picture of what might be possible within a framework of new literacy practices, we must find ways to connect smaller pieces of research literature (such as the one offered here) to larger conceptual frameworks that bring together not only specific components, but also substantial dimensions as they relate to macro concerns. By working with the project of constructing visual identity, youth have an opportunity to see how media construction works. Buckingham (2003) regards such media production as a means and opportunity for students to reflect upon their own fluid perceptions about and within a media culture. Creating autobiographical avatars, would quite comfortably, I argue, be accepted as a form of textual production, which Buckingham argues, also encourages a "space for play, in which unspeakable desires can be spoken and totalizing discourses transgressed and undermined" (p. 325). In this sense, when students are encouraged to reflect upon their productions, an opportunity arises to see that both play and rationality are not necessarily opposed to one another. He adds that by accepting the existence of such texts in the classroom the often institutionally silenced desires and experiences are given a legitimate space in the classroom. Further study on the specific practices already in place regarding visual grammar conventions and the attitudes of teachers and students as they relate to using personalized avatars as expressions of visual autobiography within English language arts curricula might be helpful and ultimately provide a piece of scholarship that could inform future programming to this end.

Opportunity for Future Study

The English language arts curriculum in Atlantic Canada includes an expanded definition of literacy to include those expressions besides print text, which extend the conceptual landscape of meaning making. Existing curricula, despite preoccupations with standards, and learning outcomes, offers some opportunities to seize upon the questions and practices raised in this study. Hammett and Barrell, (2002) laud the work being done in public schools in terms of rich literacies that prepare students for a digitized world, as they point to such practices as online publishing and broadcasting as ways that students are representing their knowledge. However, they also suggest a need for even more expanded literacy practices in public schools. The research presented in my study offers a way to consider expanding the space of what is possible within English language arts and how that too might become a site for further research. Further research into the space of teacher education (and what happens therein) must also address the need for evolving and multimodal literacy practices in public schools.

Perhaps the most poignant observation regarding the power of this exercise came from Questionmark who was clear about what the process of creating and critically analysing her avatar did for her:

> This opportunity was amazing and it helped me find out more about myself by thinking about all of the questions on the forum. It has taught me about identity because when I looked at the other girls avatars I almost made a puzzle in my head and thought that by looking at an avatar that they made, I knew who they are, but when I read their responses to some of the questions, I realized that some

people see themselves differently than others see them. This isn't a bad thing in my opinion, just something that I never really thought about before.

While this study is in no way positioned as a grand narrative for all teenaged girls, it does provide a glimpse into what the interrogation of constructed identities can offer to the fields of new literacy and autobiography. Share (2004) asks, "how does school, a public and social space, become a more hospitable place for self-writing? Where can students talk to each other about the ways in which they use writing as a support through the struggle of adolescence" (p. 82)? It is not the actual creating of these autobiographical avatars that makes them significant inclusions to an English pedagogy. It is the analysis of how the avatars were created, the consideration of what was said or not said, and what they were forced to say when their options were limited that is salient. Echoing a theme that emerged from Kelly's (2006) work, Share (2004) finds that such "writing offers a safe place where students can take apart the culture and come to know themselves" (p. 82).

However, questions remain regarding how established pedagogical and discursive practices underwrite the construction of autobiographical avatars. Only when self-writing exercises such as these find their way into regular classroom practices as valid and valuable will educators have an opportunity to create a hospitable place for students to understand how their own identity is constructed, located and situated within a broader cultural frame. Against a backdrop of ever-emerging technologies of representation with ever-increasing public online spaces of communications and at a time when youth are most concerned about matters of self and belonging, it is crucial to work with them as they struggle within their complex and often conflicted world. When their global

sensibilities are emerging and their awareness of multiple discourses and alternative perspectives are coming to life, educators would do well to embrace this natural curiosity and seize these opportunities for self-reflexive pedagogies. When educators focus only on methods and strategies demanded by the kinds of accountability sought through standardized testing and the narrow notions of literacy education that often accompany them, then we miss the opportunity to connect literacy (in all its established and emerging forms) to social and cultural change on a broader level. To realize this larger vision, educational spaces are needed wherein students can engage in the critical relocating of their stories. The girls in my study reveal that they have never been asked to do this, but in every case they thought it would be worthwhile.

As educators we must foster a willingness to embrace a more complicated reading process that moves "beyond the myth of literal representations and the deceptive promise that 'the real' is transparent, [and] stable" (Britzman, 2000, p. 39). Weedon (2004) explains, "the speaker is never the author of the language within which s/he takes up a position. Language pre-exists and produces subjectivity" (p. 13). How that happens in a complex, hypertextual world should be a central component of education within modernity. Applied to this visual language, what emerges with these avatars is a language of the image that pre-exists and produces subjectivity. As Butler (1990) reminds us, "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results' (p. 25). Here discourses of femininity repeatedly produce what they name until these discourses appear as natural, internalized and part of a lived subjectivity. Not only did the authors of WeeWorld.com offer choices that reproduced gender discourses, but these authors were also influenced by larger discourses of femininity, for

example, from popular culture, fashion, and celebrity culture, as they worked from within the boundaries of a market economy and commodified culture.

Postscript

As a young girl, long before I had education and scholarship behind me to help articulate what I thought I knew, I had a sense that claims of individuality or uniqueness were in some way incomplete, faulty. In graduate school, as I neared the end of my program, the term poststructuralism appeared in literature I was reading for a course on *Teaching and Reading Popular Culture* with Dr. Ursula Kelly. Because this area of study was nothing I had encountered in courses on educational leadership, I remember asking Dr. Kelly if she could tell me more about what it was and what it meant. With a long vertical line bifurcating the chalkboard, she began with structuralism's binaries, and truth effects that reflect what has been taken up by a humanist agenda to seek order through rationality, the hierarchal power of language that produces binaries, and discourses that privilege similitude over difference. As the course unfolded, the power of popular culture as our primary pedagogue (Dolby, 2003; Giroux, 1998) illuminated a once foggy and gray idea, and the constitutive nature of our ubiquitous commercial media took root in me. I began to learn a language to articulate something that already made sense.

Years ago, I heard a man from Trinidad being interviewed on a radio program. The content and context of the program have long since abandoned me, but his explanation of why he believed in his philosophical orientation lingers. He explained that in his village there is an expression to explain how a person just knows something…it is: "me blood take it." That phrase captures how I felt about poststructuralism and how language in its constructed, ventriloquist form avows how and why we do what we do.

I believe that the promise of reading and writing ethnography differently offers a pedagogical experience that provokes a different way of thinking for educators and students. And perhaps here in this study, it offers "an ethic that refuses the grounds of subjectification and normalization and…worries about that which is not yet" (Britzman, 2000, p. 39).

In many ways, the work presented here is like a frayed scar – it represents multiple disciplines stitched together using multiple and, at times, conflicting intentions. Stitches, or sutures, are eventually removed or they dissolve when the wounds they join together are healed. What remains, though unified, is an imperfect, flawed space – a reminder of a wound that needed (or received) the intervention of another to join it together. As with identity and discourse, there is a time when a scar might be evident as a reminder of the wound. But eventually scars fade and become part of the fabric that constitutes. I am reminded that just as culture is not only in the polished representations of elite classes, canonical literature, or distant lands, neither is research always neat or linear. Sometimes it is like stitching hamburger together.

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MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY

Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR)

Office of Research
St. John's, NL Canada A1C 5S7
Tel: 709 737 8368 Fax: 709 737 4612
www.mun.ca

May 28, 2008

ICEHR No. 2007/08-125-ED

Ms. Connie Morrison
Faculty of Education
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Dear Ms. Morrison:

Thank you for your submission to the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) entitled *"Who do they think they are? A descriptive case study of avatar design by teenage girls"*. The ICEHR is appreciative of the efforts of researchers in attending to ethics in research.

The Committee has reviewed the proposal and we agree that the proposed project is consistent with the guidelines of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS). *Full approval* is granted for one year from the date of this letter.

If you intend to make changes during the course of the project which may give rise to ethical concerns, please forward a description of these changes to the ICEHR Co-ordinator, Mrs. Eleanor Butler, at ebutler@mun.ca for the Committee's consideration.

The TCPS requires that you submit an annual status report on your project to ICEHR, should the research carry on beyond May 2009. Also, to comply with the TCPS, please notify us upon completion of your project.

We wish you success with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Lawrence F. Felt, Ph.D.
Chair, Interdisciplinary Committee on
Ethics in Human Research

LF/bl

cc: Supervisor – Dr. Ursula Kelly, Faculty of Education

MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY

Appendix B:
Amendment to Participant Description

Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR)

Office of Research
St. John's, NL Canada A1C 5S7
Tel: 709 737 8368 Fax: 709 737 4612
www.mun.ca

August 1, 2008

ICEHR No. 2007/08-125-ED

Ms. Connie Morrison
Faculty of Education
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Dear Ms. Morrison:

The Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) has reviewed the proposed amendment as outlined in your email attachment of July 30, 2008 for the project entitled *"Who do they think they are: a descriptive case study of avatar design by teenage girls"*, and is pleased to give its approval for you to broaden your participant population base and to extend the timeframe in which to collect your data.

If you should make any other changes either in the planning or during the conduct of the research that may affect ethical relations with human participants, please forward a description of these changes to the ICEHR Co-ordinator, Mrs. Eleanor Butler, at ebutler@mun.ca for further review by the Committee.

Your ethics approval for this project expires May 2009, at which time you must submit an annual status report to ICEHR. Also, to comply with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement on the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS) please notify us when research on this project concludes.

The Committee would like to thank you for the update on your proposal and we wish you well with your research.

Yours sincerely,

E Butler
for Lawrence F. Felt, Ph.D.
Chair, Interdisciplinary Committee on
Ethics in Human Research

LF/emb

copy: Supervisor - Dr. Ursula Kelly, Faculty of Education

MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Education

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Appendix C: Informed Consent: Participant

Dear Research Participant:

I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University. I am conducting a study of teenaged girls and their practice of creating avatars for use in their online social communication practices. You have created an avatar on the public forum, Facebook, and have expressed an interest in participating in this case study.

By agreeing to participate, you will join a discussion forum within a password protected on-line site, similar to a closed on-line course. Your participation is completely voluntary. You will be asked to "register" using a pseudonym in order to protect your identity. As the investigator, I will observe you and others chat among yourselves using your pseudonyms. I will use minimal guiding questions to initiate conversations about your avatars. Questions will be similar to: "Can you talk about your avatars?" or "How did you decide to construct your avatars to look like they do?" You may also post anonymously on the forum. Participants will also have an opportunity to communicate and bring comments or concerns to me privately through an e-mail feature on the site

All information gathered in this study is strictly confidential and at no time will any individuals be identified. You may decline to participate in the discussion forums at any time, and you are free to leave the study at any time. The closed on-line forum will last for a period of approximately four weeks. After I have conducted my analysis, you will be given the opportunity to withdraw your data during a post analysis briefing.

You should be aware that with any on-line forum, there is a potential for bullying or stereotyping. However, since the researcher will have direct email contact with each participant, such issues will be discussed and worked through if necessary. The improved understanding to youth culture may outweigh the potential for risks in such cases.

The proposal for this research has been approved by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research at Memorial University. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 737-8368.

In order to further protect your identity, all transcriptions from the online discussion forums will be stored in password-protected computer files, and when printed for analysis will be held in a secure, locked location to be destroyed five years after the completion of the study. Also, all files pertaining to this research will be kept on a computer that does not include any file sharing programs. The findings of this study will be published in a thesis and in journal articles and/or conference presentations, but you will never be named.

If you agree to participate in this study, please sign below and return one copy by mail to the above address. Or you may return this signed letter by fax at 738- 2988. If mailing or faxing is a problem for you, please advise me on how you would prefer to handle this correspondence. Please keep the other copy for your records. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me a Memorial University at 737-6927, or at home at 738-0283. If at any time you wish to speak with a resource person not associated with the study, please contact the Associate Dean, Graduate Programs at 737-3402.

Yours sincerely,

Connie Morrison
Doctoral Candidate
Faculty of Education
Memorial University

I, _____, (your name), agree to participate in a research case study being conducted by doctoral candidate, Connie Morrison, from Memorial University's Faculty of Education.

I understand that I will be participating in an on-line forum to discuss how I created an avatar. I understand that my name will never be used and that my identity will be protected. I also understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time, and that if it is my wish, any data relating to me will be withdrawn as well.

Signed: _____

Print Name: _____

Date: _____

MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Education

St. John's, NL Canada A1B 3X8
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Appendix D: Informed Consent: Parent/Guardian

Dear Parent or Guardian:

I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University. I am conducting a study of teenaged girls and practice of creating avatars for use in their online social communication practices. Your daughter has created an avatar on Facebook, and has expressed an interest in participating in a case study to discuss how she created her avatar. I am requesting your permission for your daughter to take part in this study.

By agreeing to participate, your daughter will join a discussion forum within a password protected on-line site, similar to a closed on-line course. Your daughter's participation is completely voluntary. She will be asked to "register" using a pseudonym in order to protect her identity. As the investigator, I will observe your daughter and other teenage girls chat among themselves using their pseudonyms. I will use minimal guiding questions to initiate conversations about their avatars. Questions will be similar to: "Can you talk about your avatar?" or "How did you decide to construct your avatar to look like it does?" If the choose, participants may post anonymously on the forum. They will also have an opportunity to communicate and bring comments or concerns to me privately through an e-mail feature.

All information gathered in this study is strictly confidential and at no time will any individuals be identified. Your daughter may decline to participate in the discussion forums at any time, and she is free to leave the study at any time. The closed on-line forum will last for a period of approximately four weeks coinciding as much as possible with summer vacation. After I have conducted my analysis, participants will be given the opportunity to withdraw their data during a post analysis briefing.

You should be aware that with any on-line forum, there is a potential for bullying or stereotyping. However, if this does occur, it will be dealt with and worked through via direct email contact with participants. The potential for improved understanding of youth culture may outweigh the potential for risks in such cases.

The proposal for this research has been approved by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research at Memorial University. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 737-8368.

In order to protect the identity of participants, the transcriptions of the online discussion forums will be stored in password protected computer files, and when printed for analysis files will be held in a secure, locked location to be destroyed five years after the completion of the study. Also, all files pertaining to this research will be kept on a computer that does not include any file sharing programs. The findings of this study will be published in a thesis and in journal articles and/or conference presentations, but your daughter will never be named.

If you consent to having your daughter participate in this study, please sign below and return one copy, by mail, to the above address. Or you may fax the signed consent form to me at 738-2988. If mailing or faxing is a problem for you, please advise me on how you would prefer to handle this correspondence. Please retain one copy for your records. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me a Memorial University at 737-6927, or at home at 738-0283. If at any time you wish to speak with a resource person not associated with the study, please contact the Associate Dean, Graduate Programs at 737-3402.

Yours sincerely,

Connie Morrison
Doctoral Candidate
Faculty of Education
Memorial University

As parent/guardian, of _____(child's name), I give my child consent to participate in a research study being conducted by doctoral candidate Connie Morrison from Memorial University's Faculty of Education.

I understand that my daughter will be participating in an on-line forum to discuss everyday literacy practices. I understand that my daughter's name will never be used and that her identity will be protected. I also understand that my daughter may withdraw from the study at any time, and that if it is my wish, any data relating to her will be withdrawn as well.

Signed: _____

Print Name: _____

Relationship to child: _____

Date: _____

Date: Tue, 18 May 2010 09:52:01 -0230
From: "Noseworthy, Elizabeth" <elizaben@mun.ca>
To: conniem@mun.ca
Cc: ukelly@mun.ca
Subject: RE: MUN Ethics Clearance ICEHR No. 2007/08-125-ED

Ms. Morrison:

Thank you for your response to our request for an annual status report on ICEHR Proposal No. 2007/08-125-ED entitled "Who do they think they are? A descriptive case study of avatar design by teenage girls" advising that your project will continue without any changes that would affect ethical relations with human participants.

On behalf of the Chair of ICEHR, I wish to advise that the ethics clearance for this project is extended until May 2011. The Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS) requires that you submit an annual status report to ICEHR on your project, should the research carry on beyond May 2011. Also, to comply with the TCPS, please notify us upon completion of your project.

We have also noted your current working project title.

We wish you well with the continuation of your research.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Noseworthy

Secretary, ICEHR

E-mail: elizaben@mun.ca

CENTRE FOR NFLD. STUDIES
JUL 18 1978
MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY
OF NEWFOUNDLAND