



LESSON PLAN

Level:	Grades 4 to 6
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Duration:	60-90 minutes

Avatars and Body Image



This lesson is part of *USE, UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE: A Digital Media Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools*: <http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework>.

Overview

In this lesson students are introduced to the concept of "avatars" and share their experiences creating and playing avatars in video games and virtual worlds. They then create avatars using a program that is intentionally limited in terms of available body types and gender markers, first creating an avatar of their own gender and then of the opposite gender, and then discuss the program and relate it to representations of gender and body image in games and virtual worlds and in other media. Students then create avatars using a much more flexible version of the program and compare that experience to the more limited version. Finally, students use the more versatile program to create avatars that represent how they see themselves and how they would like others to see them online and reflect on the choices that went into creating them.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- Learn the definition of the term "avatar" in a digital context
- Consider and discuss the influence of avatars in games and virtual worlds on identity and body image
- Create a media product that communicates their self-perception and desired representation
- Reflect on the relationship between identity and online representation

Preparation and Materials

- Book a computer lab or otherwise arrange for Internet access for all students
- Arrange for students to access the *Avatar Maker* online game at: <http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/games/avatar-maker/>. If you have trouble loading the game, please try an alternate browser (e.g. Chrome, Safari, Firefox or Edge).
- Prepare to project or share the slideshow *Avatars Online*
- Photocopy the assignment sheet *My Avatars*



Procedure

What are avatars?

Begin by asking students about their experiences with games and virtual worlds. Who plays them? Which are their favourites? What do they like about them?

Ask students if they know the term “avatar”. Make sure students understand the following key points:

- An avatar is a character that they control in a game
- Not all games have avatars (for instance, puzzle games do not) but many do
- Most avatars are human, but some are not even humanoid (the car in a racing game could be termed an avatar)
- Many games and virtual worlds allow students to *modify* their avatar, either at the beginning or later in the game (or both)

Show students the *Avatars Online* slideshow and have them identify which games and virtual worlds the avatars come from:

Slide 1 Fortnite; Slide 2 IMVU; Slide 3 Stardoll; Slide 4 Pokémon; Slide 5 Animal Crossing; Slide 6 Minecraft; Slide 7 Roblox; Slide 8 World of Warcraft.

Making Avatars – Level One

Now have students use the *Avatar Maker* game on Level 1 to create an avatar the same sex as them. The options in Level 1 are limited, so they will need only 5 or 10 minutes to do this. Then have students talk about their experience creating their avatars. What was fun? What was frustrating? How was this similar to or different from the avatar creation in the games and virtual worlds they play?

Have students return to the *Avatar Maker* game, still on Level 1, and create an avatar of the opposite sex. When they're done, have them talk again about their experiences. How was it different from creating an avatar the same gender as you? What was fun or funny? *Why* was it funny? Was it frustrating? *Why*? How were girls' and boys' experiences different?

Avatars and Gender

Now ask: Are the gender differences in the avatars in their favourite games and virtual worlds similar to those in the avatar creator? Do they reflect how boys and girls are often portrayed in other media (cartoons, movies, comics, toys, etc.)? How are characters who are different from these gender types treated in games and other media (e.g., are characters who are different from the standard gender-type likely to be teased or shown as unpopular? Are they more likely to be villains or victims instead of heroes/heroines?)



Making Avatars – Level Two

Have students return to the *Avatar Maker* game but open Level 2. The code is 9999. Tell them now they can choose anything they want -- either gender, any body type and skin tone, any mix of clothes and accessories. Have students share the avatars they created and talk about their experiences and choices.

How was it different from using the Level 1? Did they like it better? What was different about the avatars they created (more fantastic, more like them, etc.)?

(Note: The *Avatar Maker* game does not allow students to print or copy their avatars, so students will need to get a screenshot and then paste it into a graphics or word processing program. For information on how to do this, see www.take-a-screenshot.org.)

Remind students of the last slide from the *Avatars Online* slideshow that showed "typical" male and female characters. Ask students: How do they think having only those choices would make boys and girls feel? How was using the Level 2 avatar different from creating or playing with an avatar in their favourite games and virtual worlds? What limitations did the Level 2 maker still have around gender (for instance, some clothing options weren't available to both, and there is no non-binary option) or body shape (for instance, there is no option to be missing a limb or to be a wheelchair user.) Would they like to have more freedom in creating avatars online? What (if anything) would they like to do differently in the games and virtual worlds they play?

Assessment and Evaluation

Distribute the assignment sheet *My Avatars* and have students use the Level 2 avatar creator to make two avatars: a "realistic" one that reflects how they see themselves and a "fantasy" one that reflects how they would like to be seen online (how different these are is up to the students.) Have them print these two avatars (see note above) and label the choices they made: on the first avatar they identify why these choices reflect their real selves and on the second one they identify how their choices reflect how they want to be seen in games and virtual worlds. Finally, ask them to write a short paragraph reflecting on the similarities and differences between the two avatars.

Extension Activity

For younger students, you may consider supplementing this lesson with the TVOntario Original Series *Wacky Media Songs*. These short videos explore a variety of digital media literacy topics, including advertising and marketing. Here are a few suggested videos and discussion topics:

[Guess Who?](#) Ava's got some special co-stars in her song: the AVA-tars! An avatar is a kind of online mask that can protect your real identity. It gives you lots more privacy and helps keep you safe online. Sing along with Ava and her AVA-tars!

Before the video, ask: Do you know the word "avatar"? If not, what do you think it means? If so, have you made any avatars? How did you decide how it should look?

After the video, ask: Why might you want to use an avatar and a nickname instead of your real picture and name when you're online? What are some ways you could tell the difference between a computer character and another player's avatar when you're playing an online game

[Picture Perfect:](#) Ava wants to be on the cover of a breakdancing e-zine and she wants her pic to look perfect, just like her favourite influencer's pics! But in real life, who's perfect anyway?



Before the video, ask: Why do you think actors or influencers use computers to change how they look?

After the video, ask: Why is it a bad idea to compare how we look to pictures online or in other media, like movies or ads? Where else do we sometimes see “perfect” pictures? (A lot of social networks and photo apps have filters that make you look “better.” Your kids might have older siblings or even some friends or classmates that are already using them.)

What are some ways besides computers that people make “perfect” pictures? (Pictures can be posed and lit carefully to look good. Also, people sometimes take lots of pictures and then choose the one they like best. For a photo shoot for a magazine or an ad they might take hundreds of pictures before picking the best one!)

[You Do You!](#) Girls don’t always have to be pink princesses and boys, blue superheroes even though that’s often what we see in the media. We’re all different and unique, and we can avoid stereotypes by just being ourselves. You do you!

Before the video, ask: What are some ways that people who make toys, movies or games make it seem like some things are just for boys or just for girls?

After the video, ask: Why do you think advertisers use stereotypes? (They save money by only advertising to the people they think are likely to buy something.)

How can stereotypes change how we see ourselves or other people? (Make sure your kids understand that there isn’t anything wrong with girls liking princesses, or boys liking superheroes. The problem is if girls don’t think they can like superheroes and boys think they can’t like princesses.



My Avatars

For this assignment, you will use the *Avatar Maker* game on Level 2 to create two avatars:

- a "realistic" one that **reflects how you see yourself in a real life**
- and a "fantasy" one **that reflects how you would like to be seen online**

How different these are is up to you!

If you are doing this assignment at home, you can access the game at: <http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/games/avatar-maker/>. If you have trouble loading the game, please try an alternate browser (e.g. Chrome, Safari, Firefox or Edge).

When you have finished making your avatars, print them by taking a screenshot and then pasting it into a graphics or word processing program, and then print the document. For instructions on how to take a screenshot on different platforms see the website www.take-a-screenshot.org

On your printed avatars, label the choices you've made:

- on the first avatar, identify **how your choices reflect your real self**
- on the second one, identify **how your choices reflect how you would like to be seen in games and virtual worlds**

Finally, write a short paragraph about the similarities and differences between the two avatars. As well as *listing* them, explain the choices you've made about how you represent yourself online.



Avatars Online



Female ninja (Fortnite)

Avatars Online



Custom avatar (Imvu)

Avatars Online



Custom avatar (Stardoll)

Avatars Online



Female avatar with selection options (Pokémon Go)

Avatars Online



Default avatar with selection options (Animal Crossing)

Avatars Online

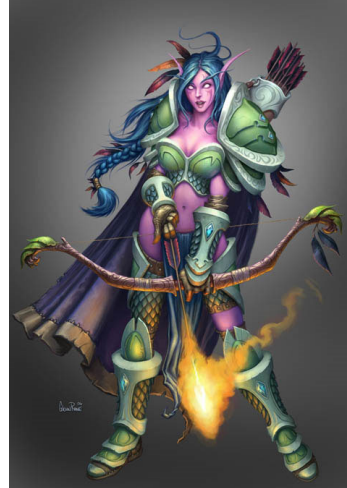


“Steve” and “Alex” (Minecraft)



Default male, ungendered, and female avatars (Roblox)

Avatars Online



Male and female Night Elves (World of Warcraft)

Assessment Task: Avatar and Reflection

	<i>Learning Expectations</i>	<i>Achievement</i>
Use Skills and competencies that fall under “use” range from basic technical know-how – using computer programs such as word processors, web browsers, email, and other communication tools – to the more sophisticated abilities for accessing and using knowledge resources, such as search engines and online databases, and emerging technologies such as cloud computing.	experience oral, print and other media texts from a variety of cultural traditions and genres select and explain preferences for particular forms of oral, print and other media texts explore the use of information technology in an appropriate, safe and responsible manner	Insufficient (R); Beginning (1); Developing (2); Competent (3) Confident (4)
Understand Understand includes recognizing how networked technology affects our behaviour and our perceptions, beliefs and feelings about the world around us. Understand also prepares us for a knowledge economy as we develop information management skills for finding, evaluating and effectively using information to communicate, collaborate and solve problems.	examine the various factors that influence body image; e.g. culture, media, peers, role models, weight loss industry examine how health habits/behaviours influence body image and feelings of self-worth identify and communicate values and beliefs that affect healthy choices demonstrate understanding how the media can play a powerful role in shaping our ideas about girls and boys use overt and implied messages to draw inferences and construct meaning in media texts express opinions about ideas, issues, and/or experiences presented in media texts and give evidence from the texts to support their opinions	Insufficient (R); Beginning (1); Developing (2); Competent (3) Confident (4)



	<i>Learning Expectations</i>	<i>Achievement</i>
Create Create is the ability to produce content and effectively communicate through a variety of digital media tools. It includes being able to adapt what we produce for various contexts and audiences; to create and communicate using rich media such as images, video and sound; and to effectively and responsibly engage with user-generated content such as blogs and discussion forums, video and photo sharing, social gaming and other forms of social media. The ability to create using digital media ensures that Canadians are active contributors to digital society.	use own experiences as a basis for exploring and expressing opinions and learning apply existing knowledge to generate new ideas, products, or processes using digital technology communicate ideas and information in a variety of oral, print and other media texts, such as short reports, talks and posters create original digital works as a means of personal or group expression identify conventions and techniques appropriate to the form chosen for a media text they plan to create produce media texts for specific purposes and audiences, using a few simple media forms and appropriate conventions and techniques	Insufficient (R); Beginning (1); Developing (2); Competent (3) Confident (4)

