LESSON PLAN

Level:	Grades K to 3
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Duration:	60-90 minutes

Representing Ourselves Online

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 talk about dressing up and taking on identities that are similar to or different from them. They are then introduced to the idea of *avatars* as a kind of "dressing up" inside video games and consider the ways in which the technical, generic and aesthetic limitations on avatar creation and customization affect their choices and their ability to represent themselves online.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- consider that media products are constructions and do not necessarily reflect reality
- learn about the use of avatars to represent people in virtual environments
- reflect on the relationship of virtual identities to personal identities
- become aware of the ways in which technological and commercial factors influence avatar creation and reflect on their effect on identity

Preparation and Materials

Prepare to project the overhead *Introduction to Avatars*

Photocopy the handouts *Avatar Outline* and *Avatar Options*

Procedure

Dressing Up

Begin by asking students to raise their hands if they wore costumes on the most recent Hallowe'en. If any students don't raise their hand, ask if they've played dress-up at other times – at school or preschool, at a museum or community centre, etc. Ask students: What is fun about dressing up? Affirm all the answers the students give, but make sure the following points are raised:

- It's fun to pretend to be someone that I want to be like (e.g. a firefighter who is brave, a clown who is funny).

- It's fun to pretend to be someone that is very different from me (e.g. a monster or an alien).
- It's fun to pretend to be something that I like or know a lot about (e.g. a dog, because I love dogs; a dinosaur, because I know a lot about dinosaurs).
- It's fun to pretend that I'm part of something that I really like (e.g. a character from a TV show, movie, comic, game, etc.).

Have students draw themselves wearing their costume. When they have finished, ask them to think about ways in which the costume character is *like* them and the ways in which it is *different* from them. Give an example of a costume that you once wore and model the reflection on similarities and differences, helping students to consider both *physical* characteristics (e.g. "When I dressed as Snow White she was like me because we are both girls, but different because she's a grown-up and back then I was a little girl") and *character traits* (e.g. "Snow White wasn't much like me because in the movie she's always shy and quiet and I liked to be noisy and make people laugh.")

Have students reflect on and (for older students) write down similarities and differences between themselves and their costume character. Have students form pairs and share their findings; their partners should help them if they have not identified at least two similarities and differences.

Introduction to Avatars

Now project the overhead *Introduction to Avatars*. Ask students if they recognize any of the characters on the screen and identify any that they aren't able to name: "Steve" from *Minecraft*, Nina from *Pocoyo World*, a player avatar from *Pokémon Go*, and a player avatar from *Animal Crossing*. Ask students how these characters are like each other and how they are different. Affirm all the students' answers but make sure that one key similarity is mentioned: all of them are characters whom you control in a computer game.

Introduce the term "avatar": a character that stands for you in a computer game. Point out that an avatar is something like a game piece in a board game, such as *Monopoly* or *Snakes and Ladders* (since it's how you "move" and do things in the game) and also something like a Hallowe'en costume (since you get to choose what you look like.) An important difference between avatars and costumes, though, is that when we see someone in a costume we usually *know* who they are and what they really look like: when we see someone's avatar in a game, that's usually all we know about them.

Making Avatars

Distribute the handout *Avatar Outline* and tell students to use it to draw an avatar they might use in a game or virtual world. Tell them it can be anything they want, as much like or different from them as they like (if they want to draw something not even human-shaped they can use the blank side of the paper) but remind them that *this is how other people will see them in the game*.

When students have had time to draw their avatars, have them form pairs and discuss the choices they made. How is their avatar like them and how was it different? What do they like about their avatar? (Older students can write answers to these questions next to their avatar.)

Now ask students who made their avatars. (They did.) Distribute the handout *Avatar Options* and tell students they're

going to draw another avatar, but this time they *have to* start with one of the outlines on the handout. When they're done, have them reflect on the choices they made:

- Which outline did they pick and why?

- How is this avatar different from the first one?

- How was *making* the avatar different when you had to pick from just a few outlines to start with?

- Which was more fun?

- Did any boys use one of the female avatars, or vice-versa? If so, why?

- Did anyone *want* to use an avatar of the opposite sex but decide not to? If so, why not?

- What did you *not* like about making the second avatar?

- If you wanted to make an avatar who was like *you*, would it be easier with the first handout or the second one?

Now ask students who made their second avatars. Explain that there's no easy answer to this: they did some of it, but the person who created and chose the outlines (you can identify yourself as the author if it's simpler) was also part of "making" them. Point out that it's the same in most games: in some games everyone starts with the same avatar and you can learn or buy the ability to change it (as in *Minecraft*), in others you get to pick from a limited range of pre-made avatars (as in *Pocoyo World*) and in some you get to pick what your character looks like, but only from the options the game gives you (as in *Animal Crossing and Pokémon Go*). Sometimes that's for technical reasons (it costs more money to give you more freedom in creating your avatar), sometimes it's to make the game easier to play (so you don't have to spend a lot of time making your avatar and can just start playing) and sometimes it's to make sure that all the avatars fit in the "world" of the game (like in *Minecraft* where all the characters have the same look, but you are still given the most freedom among examples to choose from*).*

Assessment and Evaluation

Have students draw an avatar that has all the characteristics they *like most* about themselves. (Remind them to include both physical characteristics and character traits.) Have them reflect (orally for younger students and in writing for older students) on the choices they made and the ways they represented them in the avatar.

Extension: Avatar Mask Making

Depending on the availability of supplies and time permitted, you may have older students (grades 2-3) make masks out of plaster of Paris, papier mâché or construction paper. (If you want students to make more complicated masks, do a Web search for "how to make a plaster mask" or "how to make a papier mâché mask," which will bring up many excellent websites with step-by-step instructions.)

Tell students, "Today we are going to make masks to represent your online avatars." Tell them that their mask can stand for:

- what they like most about themselves

- how they want people to see them

- things that they like or that they are interested in

Avatar Role-Playing

Once students have made their masks, have them mingle and introduce themselves to one another in character as their avatar. Once they have done this, instruct them to return to their seats and initiate the following discussion:

- Let's talk about your avatar. Is its personality similar or different to yours?

- How did you feel when you were going around the room as your avatar? Did you behave differently than you would have if you had just been going around the room as yourself?

- For those of you who have used avatars on the Internet, is your avatar like you or different?

- What kinds of things does your avatar do that are like you?

- What kinds of things does it do that are different?

Explain that avatars are lots of fun, but sometimes, wearing an online "mask" can make kids behave in ways that they wouldn't in person.

Extension: Wacky Media Songs

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?

Let's Connect! Just like in real life, when we connect with online friends, it's important to show respect. Let's keep a positive attitude and not be rude! Make sure you feel safe and treat others well, and the fun will never end!

Before the video, ask: What are some ways that talking to people online is different from talking to them offline?

After the video, ask: Think about a time when something that happened online was misunderstood – either by you or by someone else. How can we avoid hurting people's feelings by mistake? Since we can't see people's facial expressions or hear their tone of voice online, what can we do to find out how they're feeling? How can we be more clear about how we're feeling?

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? (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.)
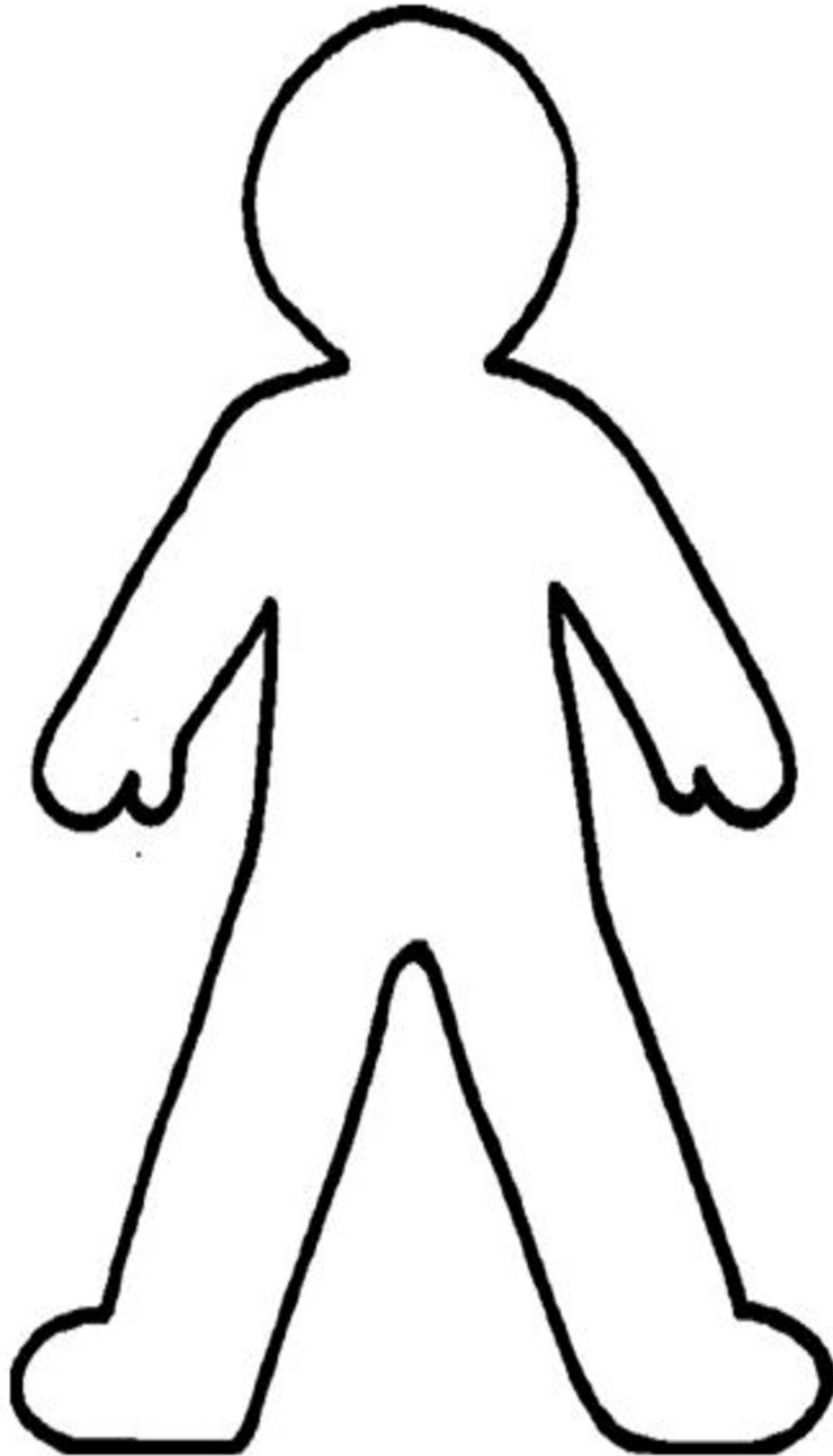
INTRODUCTION TO AVATARS

AVATAR OUTLINE

Avatar Options