
AVATAR ePORTFOLIO: DIGITAL IDENTITY IN SYNTHETIC WORLDS

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Abstract

This paper introduces the concept of Avatar ePortfolio, which is relevant to answer identity issues in synthetic worlds. Furthermore, this non-proven concept could play an interesting role as vehicle for social mobility among networks in virtual worlds: as identity proof, community voice and individual future identity projections.

Creating identity

Electronic Portfolios have been known and used for more than twenty years in education and academic circles (see Arter, 1992; Barrett, 2005). Since the declaration of the Lisbon Agenda in March 2000 by the European Council to foster the so-called 'knowledge economy' (Ravet, 2007), the idea of ePortfolio was exposed to a larger public. The significance of ePortfolios may increase further with the consideration of synthetic (or virtual) worlds: besides the 'classic' fields of application like assessment and learning, ePortfolios are also suited to craft digital identities.

Well then, what is identity? Very simply formulated, identity is who you are. That's your name, where and when you were born, where you live, what you do for living, your memberships and so on. Identity is also what you like. That can be sports teams, books and magazines, movies and the car you (would like to) drive. That said, identity can change over time – you may have other interests, jobs, relationships. And you may have multiple identities at one time – to be researcher, husband, part time baseball player and citizen of Leeds at one time.

But identity is not only what I say about me, it's what others say about me too. That he is a researcher, husband, part time baseball player, citizen of Leeds, born in 1971, driving a Renault Twingo, writing for several blogs and a self-employed consultant. When others say something about me, this is also called reputation. The voice of others is generally more trusted than your own voice regarding your identity, considered my own opinion to be biased.

The previous paragraphs leave us with the question how identities are created in detail, and different scientific disciplines (e.g. Erikson, 1994; Purkey, 1988; to name a very few) came up with different answers it's impossible to discuss them in this paper. Instead, one aspect of identity creation should be outlined because it is so fertile for the ePortfolio discussion: identity is a result of communication processes. Modern sociology argues that identity is re-created every time during conversation. Therefore, identity can't be seen as something stable or fixed, but changeable (Krappmann, 1993). In contrast to Krappmann, Frey and Haußer argue that identity is the result of a self-reflecting process (Frey, 1987), which is triggered by sensual experience. For George Herbert Mead, identity is a result of a social experience process (Mead, 1973). Thinking about actions of others enables reflective thinking about oneself. The capability of observing my own acting from the perspective of another individual is the precondition to develop an own identity.

In this context, story telling is a very fitting example how communication helps to foster experience, context and involved individuals and, as a consequence, to craft identities. Every day of our life, we use the technique of narratives: we may talk about important experiences or trivial stuff, and we do so very informally among friends or strict formally in a constitutional context (like at the office, with our medical doctor e.g.). Narratives in a broad sense enable us to create continuity and coherence and therefore identity (Straub, 2000). Individuals compare their stories and share their views of the world, as well as they differentiate themselves through their own opinions and points of view from others.

Identity crafting through narratives has an impact on the presenter and the others: the individual re-constructs the past self, and it must apply the story to its audience as well (see also Goffman,

1959). Depending on the audience, different aspects of identity will be ‘highlighted’ or covert (Lucius-Hoene / Deppermann, 2002). Therefore, Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann argue (2004) that narratives of self-experienced occurrences mean “Selbstdarstellung” (or “self-portrayal”) and “Selbsterstellung” (or “self-creating”). Consequently, narrative identity can be defined as the unity of one person’s life like the way his/her stories are experienced and his/her experiences are articulated (Widdershoven, 1993). All events, which are part of a narrative identity, are not only actions of a single individual, but also the actions (answers, re-actions) of others involved in the story (Gergen & Gergen, 1988).

In a digital environment, digital storytelling or narratives engage a wide selection of different media and technical tools to ‘tell the stories’: written text including hyperlinks, images and illustrations, music and the own voice, as well as screencasts and videos. In the digital context, narratives may refer to the self (direct identity) – for example they refer to an account (real person) of a social network system; but they can also refer to a digital representation (the avatar or indirect identity) like in a video game.

ePortfolio, (digital) identity crafting and reputation

Identity creation through ePortfolio

In the context of narrative-created identities, an ePortfolio can be seen as a tool to construct meaning (Paulson, 1991): A process and showcase ePortfolio that tells a story, displaying identity in the digital environment (Barrett, 2006): a collection of linked artifacts, which were produced and stored by the ePortfolio owner. Such artifacts help to re-tell the story to one self as and to others and to form what we call (narrative) identity. ePortfolios can exhibit texts as well as images, either as work in progress or as finished entities.

Reflection is another important functional aspect of ePortfolios. This can be done in form of explicit (recorded, written) story telling. In the context of narrative identity, we need narratives to craft our identity and the identity of others. As oral narratives are a valid possibility in the real world, we are strongly dependent on digital recordings in a digital environment. In real life, we present our identity with our physical body (which can’t be negated), but in the virtual spheres, we need a vehicle for our story to be manifest: a website, a profile, an avatar. In this sense, an ePortfolio is a process and a showcase portfolio, displaying our story and identity in the digital environment. Identity is portrayed and crafted through an ePortfolio to an audience that is partly known (my social network) and partly unknown (a potential employer, e.g.).

Besides that, identity is not only self-constructed, but also the result of interaction with others. Through the articulations of the audience, identity of Ego is reflected, similar to a peer review in a scientific or pedagogic environment. Such an expression is a credential to the reputation of a natural person or a digital representation (avatar).

Avatars, identity and reputation

In virtual worlds like World of Warcraft, where players fight for game points, virtual identities in the form of avatars play the main role. The user can define avatar attributes, which mirrors not only the user’s personality or a part of it, but also determines the social role the avatar will inherit in the specific game. The avatar represents the user in all actions – talking to other avatars, trading, fighting together or against others, planning, educating and so on. The status of an avatar is framed into the rules of the game, for example the more experience points an avatar have, the higher its prestige in the community. Such systems, which may be very elaborated as a set of success, power and experience indicators, are used widely (e.g. <http://www.ctprofiles.net>) and have the advantage of being ‘incorruptible’ as the game software generates them. These profile masks rely mostly on hard facts (number of killed monsters, e.g.), but sometimes they reflect also remarks from guild leaders about the attitude and skills of a fellow avatar.

In social network systems (like Facebook, MySpace, Flickr, to name a few), reputation is not based on hard facts. First, normally social networks don’t deal with avatars, but with real persons. Second, social networks don’t have a final goal like in a game - there is no winner. So how do we evaluate success, power, social status and experience of other users? The main principle here is trust. We have to trust the credentials offered by others to verify their achievements, their

behaviour, even their identity (see Kollock, 1999; Diekmann / Wyder, 2002; Chesire / Cook, 2004). But trust must be based on something valid, and there have been many answers to this question. Most of them come as a technical solution attaching the real identity to the virtual one through third party credentials, one-time authentication with biometric data and a network of partners, which rely and exchange the same technical and organizational standards.

The disadvantage of such authentication systems is obvious: they don't provide any security when we deal with soft facts like "my experiences in this or that field", my stories, my achievements, e.g. Additionally, we're not interested if the person behind a virtual identity is really Mr. / Mrs. X, but if the person behind a virtual identity can help us to solve a problem, to be interested in a future project or to be a promising applicant for a job offer. We want to have a proof of the identity, but as it is self-portrayed in a social network profile.

Of course, information found in a social network profile may be complete fraudulent or fiction too, as there are no or low hurdles to prove any provided information. The creation of a new virtual identity is a matter of minutes and almost at no costs. Besides any legal and ethical implications, it seems that identity fraud is easy to accomplish and cheap to get away. Answers to this threat are reputations systems, which are based on hard facts (e.g. rating in eBay). Obviously, people find out how their algorithm works and achieve potential workarounds to corrupt the system. A more secure solution should not rely on algorithm but on qualitative assessment.

During a qualitative assessment (let's call it a review), our first check would be to find out one identity's social ties. Can they lead us closer to the truth (=validation) about a specific content? The best method to deal with fictitious information in profiles is peer review in a broader sense. As described above, identity is created through a narrative process of self-portrayal and self-creation. But the story itself consists not only of actions of a single individual, but also of the actions (answers, re-actions) of others. These actions must be visible (recorded, written e.g.) to be valid confirmation of a self-portrayed and self-created identity. To be sure, single individuals or even organized groups could set up a network of social ties and mutual confirmations of their fraudulent stories. Besides the improbability of such an undertaking due to the extreme heavy workload to set up such a net of linked identities and complete stories, a social network system should be able to put the reputation of all involved identities at 'risk' – once a story is proved to be a 'complete fantasy', reviewers would lose a bit of their reputation too. If the involved agents (the reviewed identity and the reviewers) want to have choices to make in the future, they must consider the consequences on their future reputation (Wilson, 1985).

Synthetic worlds: Reputation transfer through ePortfolios?

As I tried to show, reputation is becoming more and more important in the so-called network society, a trend that is even more valid in virtual worlds, where indirect identities (avatars) are used for interaction. Not for nothing we call reputation also "social capital". In this context, I want to show that Avatar ePortfolios could be a valid tool to provide identity, credibility and finally reputation transfer among different social groups and networks.

Barton and Collins (1993) point out that the most important step in setting up an ePortfolio is to define the purpose for the ePortfolio. When we discuss identity crafting as the general aim of an ePortfolio usage and seek reputation as a desirable outcome, therefore we have to define what identity and reputation in this context means and which elements are essential to be met. I would suggest distinguishing this type of ePortfolio from other existing forms (assessment, showcase, learning) and call it "Personality ePortfolio".

1. Personality ePortfolios tell the story of the user (real person) or avatar, create identity (process as proof of growth or history) and collect artifacts as showcases of achievement.
2. Personality ePortfolios add other voices to the story to enrich and validate identity and the story told. Personality ePortfolios in virtual worlds are nodes of a giant web of digital communities. Other voices are like proofs of existence.
3. Personality ePortfolios include projections into the future: my goals and dreams, my view of the world and my environment. In the digital context of virtual worlds, they could include references to my other representations and the metaverse they exist.

Furthermore, the purpose of a Personality ePortfolio would be to determine how users or avatars

(in this case “Avatar ePortfolio”) acted, played and improved their social skills and ties. It is an integrated part of the quest for reputation transfer and social mobility. It provides feedback to players, mentors, avatar owners and the public about the growing social network of avatars.

Reflection, as a main functional character of ePortfolios, is embedded twofold in this new type of ePortfolio: first, in the classical way of recounting my own story, actions and their consequences for future activities and plans. Second, reflections serve not only to think about my actions, but also about actions of my social network. It is a social act to communicate via an ePortfolio about shared stories, and it is a political act to evaluate and to plan collective undertakings. This type of ePortfolio answers several difficulties of other potential identity management solutions:

1. ePortfolios in general are not site-centric and can be used for all environments without limits. This said, an identity is not stored in one specific application, but serves at a meta-level. Embedded in other social networks, such ePortfolios serve “life-long” (Brown, 2002).
2. ePortfolios enable to display qualitative results rather than quantitative. Profiles in virtual games lack this characteristic. First, this means that results can be reviewed in a different way than ‘just pure statistical numbers’. Second, numbers in one game are not useful in another surrounding (“What does they mean?”), but should be explained.
3. Personality ePortfolios are hard to fake due to the ‘review through others’ component. Showcase ePortfolios normally don’t provide such functionality. Remark: there are no studies to confirm this argument, but it seems obvious, that the amount of investment increases dramatically when credibility is (partly) achieved by a credible amount of voices.
4. Personality ePortfolios can be applied to virtual worlds: to describe and to craft avatar identity. Typical social networks don’t focus on identity management issues because their user accounts are tied to real persons. Real persons authenticate themselves by a picture, an individual e-mail or birthday. Avatars are indirect identities and are not identified by the biometrics of their agents.
5. Personality ePortfolios collect artifacts (“traces”) of an avatar identity from many virtual worlds, where lifestream services are focused to collect digital objects from real individuals across the web sphere. Standards like the Google Social Graph API is not suitable here because they are designed as facilitators of social networks and therefore link to real persons.
6. Personality ePortfolios focus on the aspect of roles (Goffman, 1959) and offer pure Avatar ePortfolios for role-playing, avoiding any connection to the direct identity of their agents.

As said, in the digital sphere, we can use reputation twofold: as a strategy to manifest reliable identity proofs and as a way to break-up site-centric concepts of social networks. The avatar ePortfolio, which would be applied outside of any specific virtual world, is based on the own told (hi-)story, composed of own achievements, and validated through credentials created by others’ reviews. Reputation is an important outcome of such a tool.

Conclusion

This paper tried to show the importance of ePortfolio for a concept called avatar identity. Furthermore, it should play an interesting role as vehicle for social mobility among networks in virtual worlds. Indeed, ePortfolios are not widespread outside of the educational context yet and no studies are available about their potential to create / to craft (narrative) identities as argued in this paper. They don’t even exist in the sphere of virtual worlds.

The main advantage of Avatar ePortfolio would be the combined functionality of providing identity and reputation for social mobility in synthetic worlds. Future research must look deeper into the process of avatar identity creation to adapt ePortfolios to this special need.

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