Volume 3, Number 2
Virtual Worlds for Kids
December 2010

Growing Up with Neopets:
A Personal Case-Study

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Abstract

Neopets.com is a popular virtual pet site attracting roughly 44 million players worldwide. As more and more children spend time on sites like Neopets.com, there is debate over whether they are being victimized or empowered by their exposure to cultural products and discourses online. The existing literature mostly consists of observations and interpretations that are made by researchers from an adult outsider's perspective. In this study, I discuss how, in my nine years of membership on Neopets.com, I have developed an awareness of myself in relation to a larger society, and also gained important skills that proved useful to me later in life. I conclude that a virtual world can enable a young person to try on active roles in addition to passive ones in a modern commercial society.

Keywords: Neopets; children; teens; COPPA; virtual world; commercial; social identity

Growing Up with Neopets:
A Personal Case-Study

When it comes to discussing media use by children, we always return to the question of agency: Are the ideas from consumer culture detrimental or beneficial to individuality? Are children passive absorbers or active adaptors to these ideas? What is the best way to protect children while still allowing them enough freedom to construct social identities?

The ongoing debate over how to regulate children's media is a projection of how we view ourselves as members of a consumer society. Theorists like Foucault argue that we are constantly "policing" our identities to comply with surrounding behavior (Willett, 2008, p. 54). For example, when a woman chooses to buy a certain dress, her choice is informed by the ideas of her peers and by the ideas displayed in commercial advertisements. Theorists such as Giddens, however, take a less deterministic view, stressing the agency of the individual in this identity-shaping process. In this view, products and messages from society are resources that we draw upon as we cultivate our personal "lifestyles" (Willett, 2008, p. 55). To take the same example, though the woman's choice is informed by external ideas, her choice is ultimately her own, and she can even mix, match and modify her clothes in ways that were never intended by advertisers. When we live in a consumer society, then, we inevitably encounter ideas that are not our own, whether they are projected by other individuals or embedded in advertisements. If we regard these ideas as detrimental to individuality, then we would want to shelter children until they are mature enough to handle them. If we consider these ideas to be valuable tools for identity development, however, then we would want children to have access to them.

The role of the Internet in this debate is a complex one, because of its highly interactive nature. When children see images in a magazine or on television, it is clear that they are on the receiving end of social messages. When children play in virtual worlds, however, they seem to be contributing messages in addition to receiving them: they seem to be using virtual products as resources for identity expression. Some researchers argue that these children's apparent agency is only an illusion. In their view, virtual worlds are hosts to "increasingly devious marketing strategies that are serving to exploit children" (Willett, 2008, p. 53). For example, when Neopets.com had a deal with Six Flags in July 2010, there appeared in Neopia a virtual amusement park. The virtual wealth generated from this advertisement then trickled into the main Neopian economy. This kind of "immersive

advertising" blends so subtly into virtual world structures that it takes experience to distinguish between advertised content and in-world content. A recent study found that only 23% of a sample of 4th and 5th graders were able to identify advertised content on Neopets.com (Wollslager, 2009). The concern is that, by playing in virtual worlds, children may be absorbing advertised values without realizing that their personal tastes are being shaped by advertisers.

Other researchers argue that, far from being passive, children are actually actively building "alternative economies of status and value" online (Ito & Horst, 2006, p. 1). Unbeknownst to most adult observers, children are engaged in all kinds of autonomous activities, such as buying and selling virtual items, developing their own means of expression, and competing and cooperating with other players – much like adults who work within real consumer societies. Advertised messages sent by adults from the outside world are therefore only a "peripheral dimension" of what children are really doing in-world (Ito & Horst, 2006, p. 6). In this view, the Internet is a source of empowerment for children, and it would be ideal for more children who are not as "lucky" to also have access to the "cultural resources" online (Ito & Horst, 2006, p. 1).

The existing literature in this field mostly consists of observations and interpretations that are made by researchers from an adult outsider's perspective. What I would like to contribute is the perspective of an insider who has had long-term immersive experience in a virtual world for youth. I started playing on Neopets.com in February 2001, and to this day I remain an active member, so the virtual world of Neopia has been an integral part of my journey to adulthood. My personal case-study will address the following issues: whether children have enough protection in virtual worlds like Neopia, whether they are passive absorbers or active adaptors to external ideas, and finally, whether they are adversely or positively affected by exposure to such ideas in virtual worlds.

**Young Players' Engagement with Neopets.com**
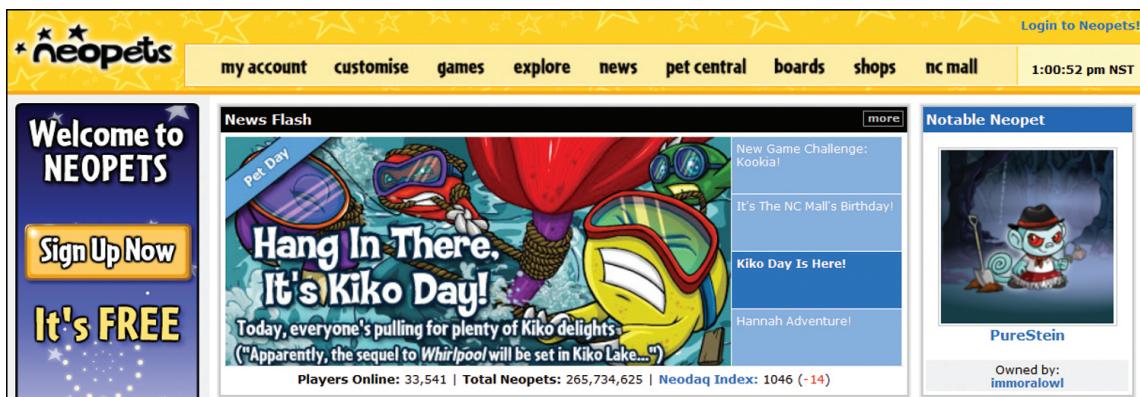
Figure 1. The homepage of Neopets.com, viewed at 1pm (GMT -8) on July 18, 2010.

Neopets.com is a popular virtual pet site where players can acquire Neopets for free and participate in games and events. It was founded in November 1999 by two British students who wanted to create a website where teenagers could have fun in their free time. In early 2000, however, they ran into financial difficulties and began sourcing for ways to keep the enterprise afloat. After American entrepreneur Doug Dohring joined the Neopets venture, they started to shift their market focus toward a younger player demographic, and to experiment with immersive advertising. In June 2005, American media conglomerate Viacom purchased the site for $160 million, and since then Neopets.com has become larger and more commercialized (Kushner, 2005). Neopets cards, games, toys and books made their way into real-world shops. Virtual merchandise such as deluxe clothing for Neopets was also released. This virtual merchandise is priced in terms of Neocash (NC), which, unlike the main in-world currency, Neopoints (NP), can be purchased with real money. However, NC is not exchangeable with NP, and NC items, though collectible and attractive, provide no in-world gameplay advantages, so Neopets.com remains essentially free-to-play. In 2008, Neopets.com had 44 million global registered players. Comscore ranked Neopets.com as one of the most popular game sites for youth, with each visitor spending an average of 2 hours and 45 minutes per month on the site (*Neopets*, 2008).

When I was 10 years old, Neopets.com was a huge fad at my school. All the children in fourth grade had to take a computer class to master basic skills such as word-processing. Although we were not supposed to be in the computer lab unless we had class there, we

found out one day that a custodian always unlocked the lab a few minutes before class, toward the end of lunch break. Fairly soon, all of us were wolfing down our lunches early in order to spend time on Neopets.com before the teacher arrived. When the teacher found out what was happening, she struck a deal with her students: If we paid attention during class and finished our lessons, she would let us spend the rest of class time on Neopets.com. We became very conscientious from then on, and the final fifteen minutes or so of each class were always spent in happy playing.

Neopets.com is attractive to young people because of the following features. Those marked with asterisks, however, are for ages 13 and above only.

Pets

Players may create or adopt their own pets, choosing from 54 species and hundreds of color combinations. Each pet is given a unique name and set of personality traits, can be dressed in various styles, and can be trained to compete with other pets. The most exemplary pets are recognized through spotlights and other contests.

Stories

Neopets.com is set in a parallel world with its own fantastical histories. Neopian lands include the underwater village of Maraqua, the desert kingdoms of Sakhmet and Qasala, the snow-capped towns of Terror Mountain, the volcanic city of Moltara, and more. Each land has its own origin story, whether it is the fall of a despotic ruler or the erasure of an age-old curse. Staff and players are constantly adding to this rich collection of stories.

Games

There are hundreds of mini-games on Neopets.com, ranging from arcade classics to puzzles to advergames, all of which give out NP, the main in-world currency.

Creative outlets

Players may express themselves in a variety of areas:

- *The "user lookup," which displays such details as account age, pets, and trophies.
- *A "pet lookup" for each pet, which displays such details as statistics and awards.

- *A "petpage" for each pet, which is an open web page that is not necessarily related to the pet. Common petpage topics include milestones, wishlists, and guild events.
- A Neohome, which can be furnished according to the player's own design.
- A shop to sell items, and a gallery to display items, both of which can be *customized.
- The *Neopian Times*, Storytelling Competition, Poetry Contest, Art Gallery, and Random Contest, which showcase original work contributed by players.
- *A profile for use on discussion boards.

Figure 2. Creating a Neoboard profile.

Events

Every now and then, a large-scale event takes place. For example, during this year's Altador Cup (a Neopian version of the World Cup), players chose to join one of eighteen teams representing eighteen lands in Neopia. The game scores they submitted over the course of a month determined how well their team did in the Cup. There was also a staff tournament, with players rooting for their favorite staff members. Everybody received prizes for their efforts.

Collections

Players may accumulate NP in virtual bank accounts. They may also build up virtual wealth in the form of cards, stamps, trophies, items and avatars, which are images that players use to represent themselves on discussion boards.

**Social spaces*

The Neoboards are public discussion boards where players chat about site events, advertise items for sale, help one another with Neopian goals, and more. Some players have established "Neoboard chat groups" with focused interests, such as writing for the *Neopian Times*, or training pets to fight in the Battledome. There are also more private groups called "guilds," which have their own, separate "guild boards."

There are many ways to summarize this section. From one perspective, Neopets.com is luring players into a web of interactive entertainment for the sole purpose of making money off them. The attachments that players develop for their pets, possessions and social networks keep them coming back, thus enabling the company to sell their attention to advertisers. The site events also fuel huge fandoms to which the company can market all kinds of real and virtual merchandise. From another perspective, however, Neopets.com is providing players with resources which they can use in autonomous ways. Children can develop interests and skills by participating in the contests and games, and by cultivating their own virtual pets. They can experiment with finances by opening a virtual bank account, running a virtual shop, and using their hard-earned NP to fund their own collections. Later, they can also create web pages, join a guild, and even collaborate with other players. Just as the woman in our introductory example can be seen either as succumbing to commercial advertising or as adapting a cultural resource for her own purposes, there is more than one side to children's activity in virtual worlds.

Now that we have taken a glimpse at how players are engaged with Neopets.com, let us look at the protections that they are subjected to, in order to evaluate how safe this playground is as a space in which to learn and grow.

The Protective Measures of Neopets.com

By default, children under the age of 13 do not have access to all the features listed in the previous section. In accordance with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), children under 13 may not use the communication features that I have marked out with asterisks. An exception can only be made for a child in the case that her parent or legal guardian contacts the company to express written consent (*Parental Consent Form*, 2010). In my case, because my reference group comprised other 10-year-olds as oblivious as I was, I did not know what I was missing out on, so I did not experience any desire to upgrade my junior account. My early playing experience was therefore very sheltered.

I was a member of the virtual world to the extent that I contributed to its economy, but at the same time I was excluded from its social aspects. For example, if I wanted to buy an item from a player-owned shop, I would go to the Shop Wizard, which is a search engine that finds the best prices for any given item. After arriving at a shop via the Shop Wizard, I would simply click on the item I wanted to buy and acquire it for its listed price. Selling items was just as straightforward. I would put items into my shop, list them at competitive prices, and check my shop later. If someone had made a purchase, there would be NP left in my "shop till" and an item taken from my "shop stock," and that would be the end of the transaction. I never had to exchange a single word with another player. As other researchers have observed, this sheltering has the effect of protecting children from "harassment" while still allowing them some autonomy in virtual worlds. There is debate about "what degree of presence is optimal," (Bleumers, Van Lier, & Jacobs, 2009), but at present, COPPA is a U.S. federal law that affects all websites with an American audience.

Neopets.com enforces COPPA by hiring a team of moderators to watch the Neoboards 24 hours a day. These moderators watch for, among other things, behavior that suggests a child is chatting online without parental consent. Depending on the strength of the evidence available, moderators may reset the accounts of those children whom they suspect of using fake birthdates. Of course, it is not difficult to imagine children resisting these shelters by creating multiple accounts, or by enlisting the help of older siblings and friends. This issue is shared by other virtual pet sites. As the parent information page on Powerpets.com states, through staff will do anything that is "humanly possible" to protect young players, "you need to take the responsibility to educate your child" (*Privacy Policy*, 2010). Staff and parents therefore have a shared responsibility to ensure that children are safe in virtual worlds.

Beyond COPPA, Neopets.com also has other rules in place:

- Players may not disclose any personal information about themselves, such as photos, telephone numbers or email addresses.

- Neoboard filters prevent players from using profanity.

- Discussion of real-world topics like politics or religion is not allowed on the Neoboards.

- All user-contributed content is screened by staff for any mentions of violence, romance or other mature subject matter.

- Offsite links are strictly prohibited.

- Any discussion topics that are found in violation of the rules are promptly removed by staff. Players can also "report" a topic to bring it to the attention of the nearest moderator.

- Offenders who do not respond to warnings may have their accounts disabled or their IP addresses blocked, or both.

- Finally, children are advised to "always follow your family's rules for the Internet," and to talk to "Mum, Dad or a responsible adult" in case of any doubt (*Safety Tips*, 2010).

These protective measures are similar to those adopted by Club Penguin, another popular virtual pet site. Club Penguin also has filters and moderators to control what players can or cannot say. The main difference is that, whereas children under 13 are completely excluded from the discussion boards on Neopets.com, they may chat through "a predefined menu of greetings, questions and statements" in Club Penguin (*Parent's Guide*, 2010). However, this difference may be due to the fact that Neopia is predominantly based on a static interface, which allows for a greater degree of shielding than Club Penguin's animated, real-time-chat interface.

The Neopian Economy: What Can A Child Learn?

Wrapped within the messages and rules designed by adults is a vibrant virtual society composed of young players. The currency of its economy is NP, which players generate for their own use by participating in the site's events and games. Inflation is controlled by daily limits on games and by the constant introduction of new items through contests, giveaways and computer-owned shops. Real money cannot be legally exchanged for NP, so this economy is purely virtual.

"While Neopets.com is a massive site that supports a wide range of engagement including different forms of gaming, collecting, authoring, and socializing, the underlying engine of Neopets engagement is economic activity. Just as in our capitalist real world, wealth is generated through labor, investment, and commerce. In turn, capitalist exchange drives endless diversity in consumption, identity production, and social distinction."
(Ito & Horst, 2006, p. 3)

Ito and Horst did not emphasize, however, what I feel is an essential difference between a virtual economy and a real one. In the Neopian economy, commercial activity is driven by esteem needs – such as the need for achievement and the need for respect – and not by subsistence needs. The drive of players to earn virtual wealth is not as urgent as that of real-world workers, who provide food, shelter, and other necessities for themselves and their dependents. In Neopia, you can "get by" perfectly fine without a single NP. Neopets thrive equally well whether they are fed free food – which is always available – or rare, expensive dishes. Even if you neglected to feed your pets, they would not die, but would simply remain "dying" until you cared to feed them again. Players feed their pets, then, mainly for personal enjoyment and social status. A well-fed pet has a happy face, which not only makes you feel rewarded, but also reflects positively on you when other players browse your pet's lookup. If you are a very indulgent pet owner, you may even earn your pet a Gourmet Club award. To generalize from this example of pet-feeding, anything you can purchase with NP goes toward the fulfillment of esteem needs. While there are class distinctions in Neopia, as I will explain in the next few paragraphs, these distinctions do not have the human rights implications that they have in the real world. This economy is therefore a simplified version of a real commercial economy.

Labor Class

I am borrowing the idea of "salaried labor" from Ito and Horst to describe how NP is generated. Each of the hundreds of mini-games on the site typically takes a few minutes to play and dispenses up to 1,000 NP per play, up to three plays a day. Most players earn NP this way. Some games are arcade classics that challenge hand-eye coordination, some are puzzles that test logical and verbal skills, and a few are advergames. More sophisticated games include investing in virtual stocks, whose rise-and-fall patterns are determined by a computer program. Each player may buy up to 1,000 shares per day, ranging from 15 NP to over 100 NP each, which he can then sell at any time. No matter which games they play,

however, "salaried laborers" tend to follow an individual routine after the fashion of office workers.

Creative Class

For these players, their main income is in the form of items rather than currency. There are roughly 100 computer-owned shops in Neopia that "restock" every few minutes, meaning they fill up with items for purchase. With a fast reaction time and a memory for item values, "restockers" snag the most valuable items at cheap purchase prices. Other sources of items are contests, such as the Art Gallery. Generally, members of the Creative Class spend as much time socializing as they do earning. While they are waiting for a "restock" or working on a contest entry, they chat, earning no NP at all. When they do win an item, however, they can often sell it for more than what a "salaried laborer" can earn from hours of gaming.

Merchant Class

While the Labor Class introduces currency and the Creative Class introduces items, the Merchant Class redistributes this wealth by buying items from the Creative Class and "reselling" them for profit. Their customers may come from any class, whether it is a "salaried laborer" going on a splurge, or a rich collector adding to a gallery.

These classes I've defined are by no means exhaustive, but they do provide a glimpse into how players are actively using the resources on Neopets.com to build their own alternative society. The overarching framework of NP generators (games) and item generators (contests, giveaways and computer-owned shops) was set in place by adults, but within that framework, players are entirely autonomous in their acquisition, distribution and consumption of wealth.

When I was a child, I played an isolated role in the Neopian economy. Because I was shielded from all social activity, I was content to follow a simple routine of earning a few thousand NP each day from my favorite games. At this stage, perhaps the most important lesson I learned was the value of persistence. The more I played the games, the better I became at them, and the better able I was to earn NP from them. I put most of my NP into my virtual bank account and spent the rest of it on making my virtual pet more "intelligent." While I was aware of the existence of other players from whose shops I bought "books" for my pet, I did not understand that I was part of an enormous economy. My early playing

experience revolved around just me and my pet; all I cared about was earning NP for my personal satisfaction and for the well-being of my pet.
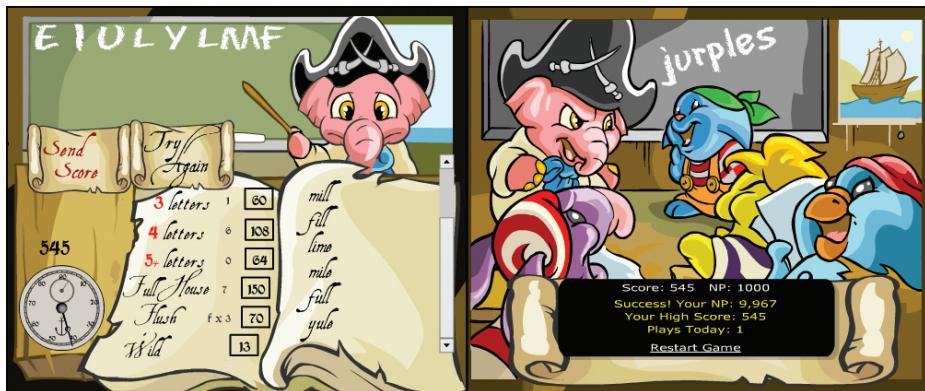
Figure 3. Playing an anagram game and earning 1,000 NP from one play.

After I gained full communication privileges, however, I became more involved in both the social and economic aspects of the virtual world. My first story for the *Neopian Times* was published in January 2007, when I was 16. Soon after, encouraged by the feedback I received from readers and by the virtual items I won, I began to participate in more writing contests. One writer who inspired me went by the username Schefflera. She was a frequent winner of the Storytelling Competition and had a humorous writing style. After exchanging a few Neomails with her, I joined the *Neopian Times* Appreciation Guild and met more young people who loved writing as much as I did. We chatted about everything from writing to schoolwork to gameplay strategies. Later, I also took on leadership roles such as organizing writing events and keeping a petpage record of the guild's history. I developed an awareness of myself as a member of a complex society. What I did in Neopia had consequences beyond just me and my pet. What I earned and what I consumed affected the circulation of the economy, and what I wrote on discussion boards, petpages and competition pages had real impacts on my readers.

The recognition that I could be an active participant in society was both illuminating and empowering. When I earned my first paycheck from a work-study job in the real world, I understood that my income, though small, was part of a much larger system. Its significance went beyond how I could use it. I began to pay attention, therefore, to how taxpayers' dollars were used, how society was governed, and other socioeconomic issues. I began to contribute my voice to real-world publications in my school and in my community. When I cast my first

vote, I did so in the knowledge that I was aggregating my volition with millions of others, all working within an overarching framework, but all active, all thinking, and all free.

Identity Formation in Neopia: Shaping Oneself, and Being Shaped

Just as members of real societies use cultural resources to display and tailor their identities, so do members of virtual societies. In the real world, you judge and are judged based on the clothes you wear, the house you live in, the vocabulary you are accustomed to using, and so on. Neopia as a virtual society is just as intricate. Let us now look at how players express themselves using the resources available on Neopets.com.

User lookup

A player's "user lookup" is his main profile page. It is the first thing you look at when you are getting to know another player. The real-world equivalent of the user lookup would be the résumé: it gives you a glimpse into the person's interests, skills, experience and personality. Indeed, when Neopets.com has job openings, it asks applicants to submit not only their real-world résumés, but also their Neopian usernames if they have one.

Neoboard profile

When you chat on the Neoboards, people form an impression of you based on your profile. As I have shown in Fig. 2, this profile displays your username, title, account age, avatar, active Neopet, and signature. There are default avatars that anyone can use, but there are also "secret avatars" that can only be unlocked by fulfilling certain requirements. The avatar in Fig. 2 became available to me only after I was published in an anniversary issue of the *Neopian Times* (NT). Therefore, I had to earn the right to be known as an "NT Writer."

The criteria for evaluating Neopets are complex enough to require another list:

Species

Most Neopets, such as the Shoyru, can be created at any time. Some Neopets, however, can only be created on special days or through special means. For example, Poogles can only be created on September 19th. An even rarer species is the Draik, which cannot be created at all. To obtain a Draik, you need to hatch a Draik egg, which is worth several millions of NP. Rare pets are therefore a great source of pride for owners.

Figure 4. A Shoryu, a Poodle and a Draik.

Name

Due to the nature of the computer system, each Neopet has to have a unique name. One-word names are therefore very precious: a pet with a name like "Terror" would be much more highly regarded than a pet with a name like "_pretty_butterfly_" or "Bob145927."

Color

All Neopets, with the exception of the alien species Grundo, are created in one of four basic colors: red, yellow, green or blue. Grundos can also come in white, brown or purple. To turn a pet into a rarer color, you can either purchase a "paintbrush" or invest in the right to access a "lab ray." Some colors can only be obtained from the lab ray. However, pets that are zapped with the lab ray also run the risk of turning into another species.

Figure 5. Four colors for the species Aisha: blue (basic), rainbow (300, 000 NP), royal (1,750,000 NP), and alien (lab ray).

Statistics

Pets can be sent to training school to gain stat boosts in strength, defense, movement and hitpoints. Reading books to them gives them intelligence points. These statistics are used in combination with weapons to compete with opponents in the Battledome.

Awards

There are many awards that a pet can win for excellence in different areas, such as tasteful attire, gourmet eating, and book reading, to name a few.

Clothes

A player can customize his pets using any combination of virtual clothes. Some clothes come with an expensive paint job, such as Royal or Desert. Other clothes are purchased separately, and can range in value from less than 100 NP to several millions of NP. A third category of clothes is bought with NC. However, it is not necessary for a pet to wear NC items in order to stand a chance at winning a customization award.

Figure 6. The author's favourite pet, Yinna, dressed up as a warrior.

Pet lookup

The quality of the graphics, descriptions and coding reflects a player's skills.

In such an atmosphere of capitalist competition, one must always find a balance between one's personal values and the values of society. When I was younger, my pet was, for me, simply a pet, not a status symbol or a way to assert my identity. There came a time, however, when I became aware of how she was judged by other players. I lamented the fact

that my pet's name, Yinna802, contained numbers. But there was nothing I could do about it, apart from replacing her with a better-named pet – and I could not possibly take that drastic action, because of the emotional value that she had in my eyes. It was with Yinna that I had begun to play in Neopia, and it was on Yinna that I had spent my first NP. No other pet could ever replace her. What I could change, however, and did change, was her appearance. As a child, I had created Yinna in the form of a yellow Wocky (Fig. 7) . As a teen, I was no longer satisfied with a beginner's pet.

Figure 7. A yellow Wocky.

I was not sure what species or color I wanted Yinna to be yet; I simply wanted her to look more impressive. So I invested in the lab ray and decided to keep zapping Yinna until she assumed a form that I liked. In the meantime, I also acquired more pets, all with expensive species-color combinations. (Currently I have eight pets, all of whom I have kept for more than half a year. The largest number of pets I owned at one time was 12. In total, I have created, adopted, and abandoned at least 30 pets.) I wrote a short story called "Experimenting with Identity," using Yinna's lab ray adventures as a metaphor for identity formation. About a year later, after Yinna had gone through many species and color changes, I finally settled on a form for her. She became an orange Grundo, as seen in Fig. 6.

I chose to let Yinna remain a Grundo because I realized that I admired the understated courage of that species. Even though Grundos can be obtained at any time, they have an origin story that distinguishes them from other species. The first Grundos had been created by a mad scientist who wanted to take over Neopia, but when his plot failed, many Grundos later broke free. I had the financial means to make Yinna into a Draik or some other more elite pet, but I chose not to. What had begun as a search for social recognition turned into an unexpected personal discovery. Looking back on Yinna's journey, I wrote a short story called

"Reflections in the Night," which was published in August 2008. The *Neopian Times* editor even chose a sentence from my story to feature as the Quote of the Week: "Grundos were very special Neopets – brought into being by Dr. Sloth's plans, yet somehow managing to create their own destinies." Getting the Quote of the Week was a wonderful moment in my Neopian life, marking the beginning of a period of personal confidence after intense identity experimentation.

In addition to cultivating my pets and writing about them, I also explored my social identity in other ways. There was a time when I was enthusiastic about collecting the secret avatars on Neopets.com. Because secret avatars require expertise to unlock, when you see a player wearing a particular avatar, you immediately know that he must have completed some task to unlock it. When I chat on the Neoboards, other players treat me differently depending on what avatar I am wearing. If I wear the "NT Writer" avatar from Fig. 2, any writers or readers present will greet me warmly, but members of other groups will not have much interest in me. If I wear the "Super Attack Pea" avatar, which is symbolic either of immense virtual wealth or of connections to wealthy players, traders will not attempt to take advantage of me, but I will also risk appearing obnoxious. And if I wear a default avatar which can be used by anyone, I will not attract much attention at all. Over the years, I have unlocked more than 300 avatars, each with a different story behind it, whether it is owning a rare pet, winning a contest, or participating in a site event. I use different avatars depending on whether I want to reminisce, trade, help a newcomer, or blend in. My favorite avatar, however, is "NT Writer," because it is the closest to who I am, even though it is not the most highly valued avatar by the majority of Neopians.

Growing up is full of these kinds of conundrums: how to reconcile the need for social acceptance with the need for individuality. It is the concern of many parents and researchers that some young people succumb mostly to the former, thus becoming victims of such forces as peer pressure and advertising. Due to my experience in Neopia, however, I was able from an early age to view social messages from both sides. Apart from absorbing ideas projected by my peers and by advertisements, I was also able to express my own ideas – through my pets, avatars, stories, web pages and artwork. When I was in my second year at university, my roommate, Katherine, said to me, "You know one thing I like about you? You're very sure of yourself." I did not mind being different from other people. In the winter, I noticed that most of the people around me were wearing gray, black and white, but I decided to wear a red coat with bright, tiger-themed earmuffs to express my own creativity.

My social interactions in Neopia have also equipped me with valuable life skills. I learned to receive and respond to criticism from my readers, although it was not easy at the beginning. After the publication of my Neopian story "Reflections in the Night," for example, one reader by the username of Micrody commented that although he could see "all the emotion" in the dialogue, he thought the characters sounded "unnatural." At the time I was rather discouraged by his comment, but I did recognize that he had a valid point. In the story, I had written the following line as part of Yinna's dialogue: "I want to make up, in some small way, for the bossy and thoughtless things I did in the past." If I were to rewrite it, I would certainly use a more natural phrasing, such as: "I'm really sorry for all the bossy things I did." However, what has been published has already been published. I re-read my old stories with fond remembrance. These days, when I write fiction, I pay much closer attention to dialogue and other stylistic devices, and I am still working to improve my skill all the time. My ability to take criticism has also served me well in my later ventures into academic and journalistic writing. I have maintained an A- average thus far in university, and contributed several pieces of art and writing to my university's student newspaper.

I am not the only young person who has benefitted from participating in a virtual society. In the 454th *Neopian Times* editorial, one player by the username of Oodlesafnoodles wrote in to say that she owed her current skills in artwork and web coding to the social support she found on Neopets.com. "The things I've learned on Neopets are what adults call 'Transferable Job Skills,' and I've enjoyed the whole thing!" she said. Most of the players I know are still in high school or university and are too young to boast of successful careers, but I do know one player, Nimras23, who has found some success in the academic field. She is the head of the *Neopian Times* Appreciation Guild, and she enjoys writing Neopian stories set in the medieval land of Meridell. In real life, she is working on a history degree, and some of her research has been accepted for publication in history museums. Another player I know, Frostcrystal, has developed interests in computer programming, and is currently doing a programming internship. She also has a webcomic called Catalyst, and often exchanges criticism with her fellow artists online. The benefits of online social interaction are beautifully represented in a short story by one of my online friends, Reggieman721. "Kthxbye" was published in the *Neopian Times* in September 2007, and is structured as a series of letters between a fan and an established Neopian writer. The fan's Neomails evolve from childish chatspeak to mature, articulate vocabulary, showing the positive influence of a mentor on him. Reggieman721's story reminded me of my early correspondence with

Schefflera and how I myself later became a role model for younger players. The real stories of all these players suggest that virtual worlds like Neopia provide young people with a space in which to explore their social identities.

Conclusion

Developers of virtual worlds for children must abide by laws, and they have protective measures in place to shelter young players. However, participation in any community, real or virtual, always entails some risks, no matter how much effort we put into designing protective measures. When you take children on a shopping trip, you are exposing them to advertisements, and when you allow them to play with other children, you are exposing them to peer pressure. While it is natural for us to be concerned about the effects of external ideas on children's identity development, it is unrealistic to try to shelter children from all sources of potential harm. Instead, as good parents know, allowing children to explore while providing them with care and guidance is the best way to help them become confident and happy adults.

As the Internet becomes a more integral part of the social fabric, it is increasingly important for children to learn to interact with other global citizens and to express themselves using cultural resources. In today's era, our notion of the self is a connected, not a secluded one. We adopt products like virtual pets as our own and imbue them with our individual characteristics. We buy clothes produced by commercial manufacturers and make them part of our personal wardrobes. We ingest ideas from external sources such as large companies and governments, and adapt them for our own purposes. Advertisers may try to sell products and messages to consumers, but consumers are also actively projecting their identities all the time. To enter into this network of shaping and being shaped is part of what it means to be a member of modern society.

In this personal case-study, I have reflected and ruminated on my nine years of experience in Neopia. Although it is not for me to judge whether my life would have been better or worse without Neopets.com, I do feel that overall, the friendships, values and skills I formed there have been beneficial to me and have enriched my life. Hopefully, my work will be of value to researchers who have never had the opportunity to consider a virtual world from an insider's perspective.

As a research method, a personal case-study has its natural limits, because it relies on subjective, anecdotal evidence. Possibilities for future research include more objective and comprehensive assessments of how today's young people are doing identity work through online social interaction. Recognizing that children can be not only passive absorbers, but also active adapters to ideas they find on the Internet is an important step toward making our societies – both real and virtual – better environments for children.

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Additional note

All screenshots were taken by the author during her adventures on Neopets.com, much as a journalist would take photographs while traveling.