More Than a Mentor:

Reinventing the Avatar for Memorable Learning Experiences

Digital learning offers the learner the flexibility to encounter various stakeholders and personas in a safe space. In this guide, explore how to implement avatars to facilitate deep learner interactions that encourage discovery.

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Introduction

An Ode to Mentors Past

Remember Clippy, the bendy old Microsoft Office paperclip who helped you out with suggestions and improvements? Clippy was by no means perfect, but perhaps it was those imperfections that immortalized it as a mentor avatar.

Avatars are exceedingly popular in elearning—they're used to guide the learning process and provide helpful feedback to the learner. Unlike Clippy, however, these mentors fade into oblivion once the elearning is complete.
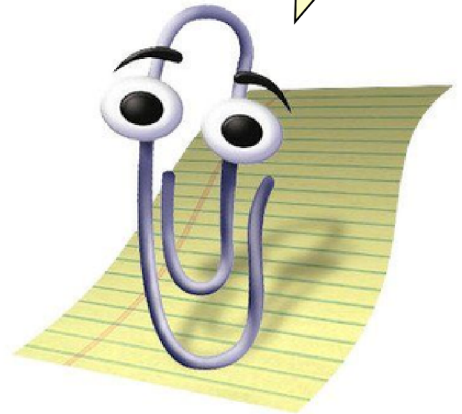
Role of Avatars in Learning Journeys

You might say that this is the nature of the avatar. They are meant to be learning enablers, rather than learning overshadowers. While this is true, often these mentor avatars are textbooks who come to life—they're perfect with their encyclopedic knowledge, eager to usher you onto the right path, and then pat you on the back for answers you got right (even if they made the answer obvious).

These mentor avatars follow the behavioral learning model, in which learners are uncritical sponges who absorb the information provided to them. There is definitely a place for these types of mentor avatars.

But there is also space to break out of the traditional—to explore opportunities where learners can engage with content themselves through their interactions with the avatar. These interactions lead to stories, and stories lead to experiences that solidify the learning in surprising ways. Let's consider three roles that avatars can take on to support learning journeys.

Companions   **Rivals**   **Mentees**

Avatars as Companions

Companion characters are widely popular across all forms of media—from books that idealize fellowships to video games that have you customize your own squad. These companions accompany you on your journey as equal partners. They have strengths and weaknesses that create unique personalities. They perceive the world differently than you, and through them, you catch glimpses that help you weave a new perspective.

So how do we incorporate the companion as an avatar in elearning? Here are a few example scenarios.

The companion avatar can learn in parallel to the learner, making mistakes as they would.

For example…

Just like the learner, Medjine is a security guard at XYZ Security. A new keycard feature has been implemented, and all personnel are expected to familiarize themselves with the new process. Medjine introduces herself to the learner as they go through the training together. Whatever knowledge checks that the learner faces, Medjine must answer as well. She provides insights, but unlike the mentor avatar, she also happens to be wrong on occasion.

Learners must critically reflect on her thoughts and consider the right option before moving forward. If the learner followed Medjine and was proved to be wrong, the overarching story can continue to show the consequences of the incorrect action. Medjine can apologize and provide feedback of what she now knows. Here, the avatar is learning in parallel to the learner.

I don't understand why it's so complicated to get a new keycard. It's not like we're the Pentagon. Just give it to me and move on. It's name, birthday, and code, right? Well, whatever. I'll just wing it.

What about our employee number?

I don't think they need your birthday.

Wait, what code are you talking about?

The companion avatar can make mistakes that the learner can use to guide themselves.

For example…

A finance company's onboarding features an avatar named Andre, a friendly but overconfident analyst who has also just joined the team. While going through the training, Andre assures the learner that he knows what he's doing. He demonstrates his actions, only to face repercussions for incorrect choices.

By analyzing his actions, learners are able to conceive the correct path for themselves. Here, the learner is able to use the avatar not to identify the right answer, but to eliminate the wrong ones and critically evaluate the remaining options.

Hey, no worries at all, yeah? Just a tiny error. Like a speed bump. Not to toot my own horn or anything, but I'm a bit of a wizard at this kind of stuff. Here, this next one is easy.

Whatever you say.

I'm not sure …

Maybe you should be a little worried, Andre.

The companion avatar can anticipate the learner's needs and provide answers.

For example...

In a course on climate change hosted on an LMS, the learner encounters the avatar Faria, a fellow student taking the course. Faria anticipates questions that learners may have about assignments, discussions, or other activities. She poses these questions and is answered by the instructor within the module pages.

Learners know that if they see Faria, they can clarify some expectations. Here, the learner is validated for their real and potential concerns, relieving them of the burden of worrying whether they're on the right track or asking the instructor too many clarification questions. Consider placing the questions in accordions, and nesting the answers within to give learners more control over their inquiries.

Don't panic. I know this next assignment is worth a chunk of our grade so I got the scoop from the prof. Anything you wanna know, ask me!

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Avatars as Rivals

An equally popular archetype across media forms is the rival. Unlike the companion who seeks to provide support to the protagonist, the rival aims to challenge them. In the elearning context, the rival vies for the same attention and approval given to the learner. So how would a rival help the learner? Let's consider a few scenarios.

💡 The rival can provide an alternate path to accomplish the same task.

For example...

In a regular refresher on policies, experienced realtors expect a shorter route to complete the training. Surya is an experienced realtor avatar who bets the learner that he'll fare better than them. If they choose to accept his challenge, they'll be completing a series of questions.

Should they make a mistake, Surya teases that they need more practice before being on his level and encourages them to review by suggesting topics to revisit. Here, the rival provides the route through which an experienced realtor can complete the same training at a pace that fits their expertise.

Hey, not bad! You'll probably want to brush up on a few topics, but I can definitely say you're not the worst to come through here.

Guess I need to review Financial Controls.

Alright, I'll review Risk Management.

I'm ready to best you at your own game, Surya.

The rival can provide opportunities for the learner to justify their choices as an engaging knowledge check.

For example...

Like the learner, a rival avatar named Mubarak undergoes the same training to evaluate the quality of a product. He bets that he's able to identify more errors in the processes than the learner. This interaction can grow even more complex; should the learner come out with a higher number of errors, Mubarak can dig his heels in and say that they simply chose the most number of items without justification, leaving the learner to prove why their choices were indeed errors. In this way, the avatar guides the learner to think critically rather than reflexively.

There's no way.

You purposefully fluffed up those numbers to get the best of me, didn't you?

So what?

If it helps you feel better, I can explain.

Worry about yourself, Mubarak.

The rival can provide critical feedback and bring to fore alternate considerations.

For example...

In a training to help leaders create working environments that prevent burnout, the learner encounters the rival avatar Simone. She's developed her foolproof strategy of preventing burnout that she assures is better than any strategy the learner can put together. When learners are given different scenarios and asked which strategies to implement, Simone pokes holes in their choices by presenting devil's advocate arguments.

The learner has the option to change their strategies, but Simone has an argument against each one. Rather than defending their choices, the learner begins to see the drawbacks for each strategy through Simone's critical feedback. Here, the learner nuances their understanding with considerations that may otherwise not be covered by a wholesome mentor avatar.

Sure, a lighter workload might seem like it's helpful, but you may lead your team to feel like they're not doing anything. Feeling you contribute positively is essential for keeping burnout at bay. Maybe you should consider other strategies.

00:00

I'll stick with it.

You're right, maybe I should change...

You have something to say for everything, huh?

Avatars as Mentees

We've considered avatars as fellow learners, but now let's consider another role. Rather than having to be guided through the learning by a mentor, this time, the learner becomes the mentor.

Here are some ideas.

💡 The mentee can provide a space where the learner can emulate expertise.

For example...

Throughout the training, the learner must prevent their pupil avatar, Faida, from falling prey to phishing scams. As their descriptions of what a phishing scam is improves, and as their explanations of consequences get more elaborate, Faida retains the information and is able to identify the scams and select appropriate safeguarding actions.

Different epilogues show the effectiveness of the learner's instruction; learners are able to see Faida 3 months after the training and whether she's adequately prepared to face phishing scams. The inclusion of multiple endings for Faida also serves as a motivation to learners to perfect their own knowledge.

Why would anyone try to fish scams from me? I don't have any fish. I don't even like fish, actually.

It's phishing, not fishing.

... Let's start with the basics.

Even without any fish, you'll need to stay safe.

The mentee can provide an opportunity to update the learner's understanding—reverse mentoring.

For example...

Gavin is a mentee avatar the learner encounters in a training on microagressions. He's hyper-aware of the new terms and jargon that may be new to the learner. In the training, the learner is walking Gavin through company policy—successfully bringing him up to speed will end the training.

As the learner presents the necessary information to him, Gavin asks numerous and increasingly complex questions. While the learner acts as an expert, they are fueled by the mentee's questions to discover the answers for themselves in the company resources provided. This use of the mentee doubles as a knowledge check, as well.

So what's the actual process if there's a harassment complaint? Does it just end at HR? And how is the company going to protect the one who made the complaint, to ensure they feel safe?

Better to take matters into your own hands.

You don't need to worry about that.

Good question, I'll have to check.

The mentee can provide a chance for the learner to take up responsibility.

For example…

For a course on hazardous materials, the learner encounters Nicholas, a new lab tech, who has mismanaged the lab. The learner needs to correct the lab prior to the arrival of the inspector. Each time the learner identifies an error, there is a chance to explain to the mentee why it is not the correct procedure. Failure to identify the errors, or using poor justifications, will result in consequences when the inspector finally arrives.

The inspector emphasizes the critical role that the learner played in the state of the lab. In this instance, the learner's mentees stand in for potential employees whose actions they may be responsible for.

> I don't understand. I just stepped out for a little bit. Why's that a big deal?

You left the samples out.

Did you properly decontaminate?

Let's walk through the process together.

Conclusion

Avatars have the potential to enhance elearning by creating engaging and interactive learning experiences. They provide valuable interaction to the otherwise solitary experience of elearning. These interactions blossom when paired with storytelling, relatable characters, and actions that put the learners in scenarios—both familiar and foreign.

While traditional mentor avatars can be helpful, there is also space for avatars to take on new roles as companions, rivals, and mentees. By weaving avatars into the learning journey, learners can gain new perspectives, eliminate incorrect choices, and defend their strategies using the principles explored in the training. With unconventional avatars, elearning has the potential to create immersive and memorable learning experiences that solidify the knowledge gained in surprising ways.

Avatars, like people, need not be perfect. In fact, their imperfections lend to opportunities that the learner would otherwise not experience.

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