

Chapter XXXV

Visual Analysis of Avatars in Gaming Environments

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ABSTRACT

A better understanding of virtual character avatars is needed in order to explore the underlying psychology that the avatar represents to the user. In addition to providing an overview and introduction to massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), this chapter provides an introduction to visual ethnographic analysis of character avatars in video game environments. The chapter details an example of mixed methodology for conducting visual analysis research specific to Linden Lab's Second Life and details some of the methodological challenges that researchers will encounter when engaged in this type of investigation.

INTRODUCTION

A volume of research has developed in a relatively short period of time effectively legitimizing the study of video games in the academic world. Led by the work Gee (2003), Turkle (1995), Yee (2006), Gredler (1996), Kafai (1995), Prensky (2001), Squire (2003), and Castronova (2005), video game researchers have delved into areas

ranging from the economic systems that evolve in immersive gaming environments to learning outcomes associated with game-play.

Few would argue that video games have emerged as a mainstream form of entertainment in today's popular culture. Recent advances in graphics and home networking technologies have allowed gamers to step outside of their living rooms and interact with other gamers who could be half a world away. A new form of game, the

massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), is networked, persistent, online, real-time, and expansive. These games allow hundreds and even thousands of gamers to interact with each other in synchronous virtual environments. Millions of gamers now participate in these evolving virtual worlds simultaneously over the Internet.

Several studies have investigated the concept of the social self online, with particular attention paid to the MMORPG genre and its predecessor, the multi-user dungeon (MUD). Turkle (1995) and Yee (2006) explored this phenomenon from both the perspective of gamers and from that of the average Internet user. The Internet provides us with the opportunity to, at times anonymously, interact and represent ourselves to other Internet users, effectively giving us the opportunity to assume new roles and identities when engaging in online interactions.

In order for a player to interact within MMORPGs and many other forms of online game-play, a character must be created. This character personifies the physical representation of the self in virtual environments (Turkle, 1995; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Known as avatars, they have become icons that represent much more than the physical in-game features of the character. The avatar has become an in-game alternative self (Castronova, 2003). The avatar represents an evolution of the alternative identity, an evolution that began with authors creating pen names under which to write works and proceeding to the creative user names adopted by Web forum members. "Broadly defined, 'avatar' encompasses not only complex beings created for use in a shared virtual reality but any visual representation of a user in an online community" (Hemp, 2006, p. 50).

The etymology of the term avatar finds its roots in the Sanskrit word for incarnation, *Avatāra*. The first documented usage of the term in regards to video games is somewhat malapropism. Origin

Studios' *Ultima IV* was published in 1985. The game placed players in the role of an actual avatar returning to save the digital land from a great evil. The highly customizable nature of the character, in regards to other contemporary game titles, gave way for the evolution of the terminology to its modern and more commonly used definition.

Through the experience of interacting in a virtual environment, the avatar's appearance can evolve. Gamers can purchase or earn clothing or equipment that personalizes the avatar's appearance, tailoring the look and characteristics of their online persona. While *avatars*' anonymity is part of their appeal, many gamers take substantial efforts to tailor their avatars to aspects of their identity. "You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative. You can be less talkative. Whatever..." (Turkle, 1995, p. 184). Players will often spend endless hours in an attempt to earn better armor or items to further customize the look of their online character. Entire bands of virtual adventurers may unite in a single goal, task, or quest that results in reward for only one member of the group.

The avatar and its role in the psychology of its owner runs parallel to the concept of the possible self: the cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears, and threats (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The possible self provides a link to self-concept and imparts understanding as to how an individual thinks about his or her potential and future.

With an understanding of the possible self in mind, the analysis of the avatar and comparison to its owner can provide a window into the individual, granting the opportunity to explore an individual's conception of his or her own identity. This chapter will discuss a methodology for visual analysis of character avatars, presenting a possible framework for use in mixed methods research.

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