Chapter 43

Weaving the Social Fabrics:
Recognizing Social Signals to Support Awareness and Group Interaction in Online Games

Tiffany Y. Tang
Konkuk University, South Korea

Pinata Winoto
Konkuk University, South Korea

ABSTRACT

Users in rich social media environments such as Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) accomplish various kinds of tasks through maintaining a constant high degree of awareness and social awareness. Generally, being aware of each other's presence provides a clue for one's own action in a situated environment. It guides one's own actions accordingly; and serves as virtual traces to coordinate and collaborate with partners. The ability to appropriately incorporate social spaces in the design of MMOGs socially-oriented game elements is critical. In other words, do MMOGs games and their designs facilitate social interactions from players' perspective? In order to shed light on this issue, we conducted a series of usability studies through the typical ethnographic evaluation on the SIMs Online (TSO) and two other MMOGs. Our findings are mixed and they revealed that while players admitted tools and group-oriented tasks exist in the game, their usability are inadequately satisfactory; that is they are not well utilized by the players, and in some cases, there are too many which makes them difficult to decide which one(s) to notice. In addition, some of these tools are not readily accessible to players to unfold some critical information before/during their interactions with others. Similar findings were obtained from our study on a number of other MMOGs.

This chapter describes our evaluation which shed light on the impact of appropriate technology and its design elements in promoting and supporting social awareness and seamless group interactions.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most foremost goals of the emergent popular Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) is a rich social platform for players to interact and socialize (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004; Ducheneaut et al., 2006; Tang et al., 2008), as Will Wright, creator of the blockbuster game *The SIMS* put it "*In some sense, what we're really building with these games are communities. That's our primary thing*" (Wright, 2003). This social platform is regarded as a virtual 'third-place' for millions of people to socialize at anytime and anywhere. As originally coined by Oldenburg, these 'third places' (in addition to *work* and *home*) should provide ' *a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individual s beyond the realms of home and work*' (Oldenburg, 1989, p.16). In other words, these third places construct a contemporary rich platform for people to be together and interact freely (Rao, 2008).

As such, in the rich social media places such as MMOGs, in order to accomplish various kinds of tasks, players need to constantly maintain a high degree of *awareness* and *social awareness* (Prasolova-Forland et al., 2007). The former, first defined in (Dourish & Bellotti, 1992), outlines awareness in a broader way; that is, it is '*the knowledge of the presence of other people, including their interactions and other activities*'. Generally, being aware of each other's presence (including the workspace environment, their actions, and the manipulating artifacts) provides a clue for a user's own action in the situated environment, guides their own actions accordingly (Galston, 2000) and serves as virtual traces to coordinate and collaborate with partners. In the literature, a number of writers are devoted to study awareness, especially in a socially intelligent environment where users collaborate and socialize, including how to make various awareness tools in a wide variety of applications (Cadiz et al., 2002; Ducheneaut

& Moore, 2004; Gutwin & Greenberg, 1998a, b; Gutwin et al., 2004; Liechti, 2000).

Social awareness encompasses all the basic *awareness* elements, but is set in a social context where all users involved in a group and/or community in a shared environment. It is known that awareness has been regarded as one of the most discriminating factors contributing to the success of the social environments. Generally, being aware of each other's presence (including the workspace environment, their actions, and the manipulating artifacts) provide a clue for a user's own action in the situated environment, guide their own actions accordingly (Gutwin & Greenberg, 1998a; Nova, 2002) and serve as virtual traces to coordinate and corporate with their partners.

Careful incorporation of awareness tools in these online spaces thus becomes more and more imperative to foster both collaboration and competition. As such, in social spaces such as MMOGs, the fundamental issue is whether or not players can exploit the various elements in the social space to make the most out to engage in seamless collaboration and social interaction, which motivates our study documented here. Specifically, we conducted a series of usability studies through the typical ethnographic evaluation on the SIMs Online (TSO) and two other MMOGs, to probe into the issue of whether or not players have make the most out of these tools to facilitate the in-group and inter-personal interactions. We are also interested in comparing different players' point of views on these awareness tools and their patterns of interaction.

In MMOGs, in order to construct an effective social third places, various innovative socially intelligent game elements have been implemented, ranging from in-game chatting tools to encourage players' textual communications, directorial maps to prevent players from 'lost in the cyber-gameworld' and let them be aware of the environments, special places designed specifically for players to regain their energies (such as the cantinas in SWG where players can have a rest, and find others to

Related Content

An Empirical Investigation of the Impact of an Embodied Conversational Agent on the User's Perception and Performance with a Route-Finding Application
Ioannis Doumanisand Serengul Smith (2019). *International Journal of Virtual and Augmented Reality (pp. 68-87).*
www.irma-international.org/article/an-empirical-investigation-of-the-impact-of-an-embodied-conversational-agent-on-the-users-perception-and-performance-with-a-route-finding-application/239899

Smart Classroom-Based Innovative Solution Toward Uninterrupted Education: Perspective
Sudhir K. Routrayand Sasmita Mohanty (2022). *International Journal of Virtual and Augmented Reality (pp. 1-14).*
www.irma-international.org/article/smart-classroom-based-innovative-solution-toward-uninterrupted-education/306689

Exploring Virtual Reality for the Assessment and Rehabilitation of Executive Functions
Elisa Pedroli, Silvia Serino, Federica Pallavicini, Pietro Cipressoand Giuseppe Riva (2018). *International Journal of Virtual and Augmented Reality (pp. 32-47).*
www.irma-international.org/article/exploring-virtual-reality-for-the-assessment-and-rehabilitation-of-executive-functions/203066

Towards a Participative Platform for Cultural Texts Translators
Aurélien Béneland Philippe Lacour (2012). *Virtual Community Building and the Information Society: Current and Future Directions (pp. 153-162).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/towards-participative-platform-cultural-texts/56288

An Immersive Tractor Application for Sustainability: A South African Land Reform and Learners' Perspective
Ofentse Mabiletsa, Sarel J. Viljoen, Jason Arthur Farrell, Lwando Ngqwemlaand Omowunmi Elizabeth Isafiade (2020). *International Journal of Virtual and Augmented Reality (pp. 35-54).*
www.irma-international.org/article/an-immersive-tractor-application-for-sustainability/262623