

Chapter 16

Visual Analyses of the Creation of Avatars

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ABSTRACT

Video games are becoming more popular; there has been a particular rise in interest and use of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). These games utilize avatar creation; avatars can be seen as the technological instantiation of the real person in the virtual world. Little research has been conducted on avatar creation. Although it has been anecdotally postulated that you can be anything you want online, there is a dearth of research on what happens when participants are told to create avatars, particularly avatars within given contexts. In this study, we used the Second Life avatar creation tool to examine what would happen when participants were told to create avatars as heroes, villains, their ideal self, and their actual self. Data analyses reveal that characters often refuse to change permanent aspects of their features, instead modifying only temporal aspects. This research has provided support for the quantitative review of avatar characteristics as predictors of vignette groupings.

INTRODUCTION

Video games have emerged as a mainstream form of entertainment in today's popular culture. One popular form of gaming is the MMORPG that allows hundreds of gamers to interact in real time. Millions of gamers now participate in these evolving virtual worlds simultaneously over the Internet. The number of active MMORPG player subscriptions worldwide doubled between July 2004 and June 2005 to a 500-million player base (Chen, Huang & Lei, 2006). Research by Griffiths, Davies, and Chappell (2003) indicate that the majority of MMORPG players are male (approximately 85%), over 60% of players were older than 19 years and players possessed a wide variety of education.

MMORPGs are generally thematically oriented, representing genres ranging from science fiction to knights-of-the-round-table fantasy. Players interact with the game and other players through an interface which usually consists of a viewing screen that allows for control of the player's character and several rows of buttons that allow players to perform game-related actions such as casting a spell or utilizing a special ability. Communication between players is facilitated by typing text in a chat box located within the interface (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006).

In order for a player to interact within the gaming environment, a character must be created. This character represents the physical representation of the self in virtual environments. 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).

Through the experience of interacting in a virtual environment, the avatar's appearance can develop. 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). 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). As such the analysis of the avatar can provide a window into the individual, granting the opportunity to explore what is typically not revealed.

The act of *being* online means you can create whatever character you want, unfortunately, we know very little about what people decide to create when given the opportunity. More importantly, we know even less about what they decide to create when given a context or scenario for creation. Previous research by Kafai, Fields, and Cook (2007a, 2007b) studied avatar development by adolescents in an online community. Research by Bruckman (1993) illustrated the complexities of gender exploration and identity in text-based multi-user dungeons (MUDs). Kolko (1999) described the rhetorical process of avatar creation, Yee (2008) focused his analysis on the characteristics of World of Warcraft avatars, and research by Baylor, Rosenberg-Kima, and Plant (2006) has evaluated avatar task efficacy based upon aspects of their appearance. Because an online game generally provides the scenario or context through which a player constructs a character, studying avatar development within a given context or scenario is essential.

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