

Chapter 19

Playing Myself or Playing to Win?

Gamers' Strategies of Avatar Creation in Terms of Gender and Sex

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ABSTRACT

Who do people want to be in virtual worlds? Video game players can create their avatars with characteristics similar to themselves, create a superhero that is predominantly designed to win, or chose an in-between strategy. In a quasi-experimental study, players were expected to prefer their avatars to have their sex, but to create avatars with gender attributes that best meet the requirements of the game. In the main study, participants created an avatar they would like to play with by choosing from a list of (pre-tested) masculine and feminine avatar features. Additionally, participants chose their avatars' biological sex. The results reveal a mixed strategy: On the one hand, the avatar's features are chosen in accordance with the game's demands to facilitate mastery of the game. On the other hand, players strive for identification with their avatar and thus prefer avatars of their own sex. Participants rated those game descriptions and gaming scenarios more entertaining which require avatar features in line with their own sex role.

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INTRODUCTION

Avatars and agents have become a crucial interface between media users and virtual environments. Via an avatar, the player can elicit all kinds of social interactions. Thus, “avatar-mediated communication”, the communication and the social interaction between users and avatars as well as its potential effects, seems to be one crucial issue in the studies of human-computer interaction, virtual environments, and video games. Avatars will increasingly be the “face” of computer mediated communication in games, the internet or learning software (Donath, 2007; Nowak & Rauh, 2008). Studies on avatars and agents indicate that people get a more emotional access to computer based environments by communicating with an avatar or agent (Dryer, 1999; McQuiggan & Lester, 2007; Rizzo et al., 2001). This has several implications. With avatars and agents, people concentrate easier, learn better, and find computer mediated communication more enjoyable and fun (Gaggioli et al., 2003; Ku et al., 2005; Whalen et al., 2003).

In video and computer games, avatars are not limited to the visual characteristics of the interface players use to navigate through games. Game avatars are also embedded into the game narratives and may have different personalities and histories, offering different roles players may take. An increasing number of games like massively multiplayer online role playing games allow their users to create the avatars’ visual appearance, but also skills and personality. With their avatars, players can engage in social interaction and even behave like human beings. Thus, communication between players and avatars evolves to a new form and it has potential effects on user identity as well as on the experience of video and computer gaming (Bailenson, 2006; Bailenson & Beall, 2005; Bessièrè et al., 2007; Hsu et al., 2007; Hsu et al., 2005). Depending on the game’s features and the player’s skills, the player may experience enormous autonomy in the interaction

with an avatar. Players can create avatars with characteristics similar to themselves, create virtual superheroes with attributes far beyond reality or choose an in-between strategy. Consequently, the manner in which a player designs an avatar triggers two questions: Who do people want to be in virtual worlds? If they have the freedom to create their avatars, do they prefer to resemble themselves in real life or to be somebody else, e.g. a virtual superhero? To answer these questions, this chapter will deal with the similarity between avatars and players and will explore the impact of the similarity between the player and the avatar on game enjoyment.

Avatar-player-similarity is a multifaceted construct, and many avatar or player characteristics, such as outer appearance or physical strength, can be taken into account. A particularly prevalent issue in research on players and avatar characteristics is gender (Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006a; Lucas & Sherry, 2004; Ogletree & Drake, 2007; Smith, 2006).¹ Content analyses demonstrate that many video games portray women in a sex-stereotyped manner (Dietz, 1998; Ivory, 2006; Jansz & Martis, 2007; Smith, 2006)—a great part of video gaming is still “a man’s world”, particularly in the action genre. Consequently, many games do not meet female users’ entertainment needs because of their violent content and the predominantly male gender stereotypes represented in the games (Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006a; see also Lucas & Sherry, 2004). Beyond affecting user’s affinity for games, the features of video game characters can impact player cognition and behavior (Yee & Bailenson, 2007). For example, playing as a female (i.e., playing a female avatar) against a male avatar increases aggressive thoughts, whereas playing as a male against a female opponent consistently and significantly decreases aggressive thoughts (Eastin, 2006). Sexually stereotyped portrayals of video game characters influence the players’ understanding of gender roles (Eastin, 2006) as well as attitudes toward and beliefs about women

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