

Chapter 20

Investigating Perceptions of Avatar Creation for Use in Educational MUVES

Joseph DiPietro
University of Florida, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry is to extend the investigation of perceptions and experiences of users creating avatars for interactions in online learning environments. Using Linden Lab's Second Life, volunteers created three-dimensional representations of themselves, called avatars, under the premise of participating in a hypothetical online class. Avatar creation sessions were book-ended with pre- and post- interviews focused on participant perceptions of various elements of self-representation and interactions as situated in online environments. Human computer interactions (HCI) of avatar creation were also explored. Findings indicate users created avatars that mirrored their respective physical appearances as closely as possible and were collectively adamant in feeling morally obliged to do so.

INTRODUCTION

Multi User Virtual Environments (MUVES) and Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) are exponentially growing sectors of a billion dollar industry (Entertainment Software Association, 2009). Worldwide fervor

for online, subscription-based titles like Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft (WoW)* clearly exemplifies the demand as, according to their Web site (2008), the company boasted over 11.5 million active accounts just a month after *WoW*'s fourth anniversary. Interaction within subscription-based worlds requires users to purchase software and pay an additional monthly fee, usually ranging between US\$10 and US\$15 per month (Cyber

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Creations Inc., 2009). This fee entitles access to new content that is added via downloadable software patches on a regular basis.

Unlike subscription-based applications, free-to-play (F2P) titles provide the core software at no cost and do not require recurring monthly fees. Rather, these games and simulations sell various perks to their users that are not necessarily required but are usually highly desired by their respective populations. *Runescape* is a F2P game boasting over 120 million registered accounts since 2001 with an average 8.5 million of those still active each month (Gibson, 2008). Another F2P application is Linden Lab's *Second Life (SL)*, an online simulation focused on social interaction. Some recent reports from Linden Lab have claimed as many as 16 million "residents" inhabiting the virtual world, yet only around a million of these users log in each month (2009a).

Jonassen, Carr, and Yueh (1998) refer to these virtual spaces as "microworlds" and purport they "are perhaps the ultimate example of active learning environments, because the users can exercise so much control over the environment" (p. 27). Participants in MUVES interact with each other and their virtual surroundings through self-representations called avatars. Users are free to create their avatars as they see fit and are limited only by whatever constraints or restrictions may be set in place by the software manufacturers. As online learning environments continue to shift from text-based, direct instruction models to more immersive and engaging polymodal paradigms, educational institutions are seeking to incorporate various aspects of MUVES, namely avatars, into their academic programs.

SL is a prime example of a F2P MUVE being employed as a tool for distance learning (Conklin, 2007). The Open University, Harvard, Texas State, and Stanford are examples of major research institutions that own virtual real estate in *SL* where users create avatars in order to interact with one another, their instructors, as well as academic content (Linden Lab, 2009b). Picciano and Seaman

(2009) reported a 47% increase in K-12 student participation in online courses between 2005–2006 and 2007–2008 and most colleges and universities with online programs exceed this growth. The logical conclusion is that all instructors, regardless of grade level focus or subject area expertise, should be as informed as possible regarding their respective student populations. Academia has held its watchful gaze on first-world and F2F interactions for centuries, and only recently has this focus shifted to the exploration of text-based online interactions.

A void exists within academic literature related to self-representation within MUVES and the decision-making processes behind avatar creation. Further investigation within this realm could lead to the answering of important questions of equity and to the determination of whether people are treated differently in MUVES based on personal choices of self-representation. Akin to seminal research focusing on first-world interactions between teacher and pupil (Clark & Clark, 1950; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992), human-avatar interactions must be investigated in hopes of adding to the scientific body of knowledge concerning effective instruction in virtual environments. As distance-based models of education grow in popularity and number, the need for further research in this emerging realm is paramount in order to ensure equitable, high quality instruction for all students. If the exponential growth of distance education continues, online courses and virtual learning environments could well become the dominant form of instruction in the very near future.

The vast majority of interactions inherent to MUVES are analogous to first-world ones. Users can synchronously chat via text or voice, congregate within virtual spaces, and even collaborate to accomplish common goals, tasks, or quests. An important difference between reality and its virtual counterpart is that users often have greater control over personal appearance within online spaces given the ability to self-represent via an avatar. As Turkle (1995) explained, "You

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