

Chapter 16

Towards a Bespoke Framework for Eliciting Consumer Satisfaction in Second Life

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ABSTRACT

Second Life is a virtual world, a multi-user, 3D, immersive environment, which has its own internal economy. The aim of this chapter is to develop a framework that can be used to understand the complex and inter-related factors that affect the use of Second Life in terms of consumer satisfaction in a virtual world. Based on prior works, a framework has been developed which identifies seven interrelated components that provide a wider context to perceive the user experience of Second Life. The approach taken by the framework allows for it to be used as a means to consider Second Life both as a product and as a platform.

The approach taken to data gathering, analysis, and interpretation in the context of the framework is described; as well as refinements made to the framework as a consequence of emergent themes revealed through the analysis of the gathered data.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the development of a framework for eliciting consumer satisfaction perceptions in the context of the social virtual world Second Life. An introduction to Second Life is followed by an overview of the relevant literature. The framework and the inter-related component parts that it is made up from are then described in detail. This is followed by an evaluation of the framework through semi-structured in-world interviews as well as the refinement of the framework as a consequence of our evaluation. Finally an overview of how the framework can be used by others is given along with the wider context of its use.

Virtual worlds are multi-user, 3D, immersive environments which fall into two basic categories: game worlds such as World of Warcraft and social worlds such as Second Life. Both types of environment allow for computer mediated shared experiences where users can interact with one another, but social virtual worlds do not have an explicit storyline, plot or the necessity to achieve pre-determined goals.

AN OVERVIEW OF SECOND LIFE

Released by Linden Lab in 2003, Second Life has operated a free-to-use model since 2005. Second Life has its own internal economy based on Linden dollars (L\$); the economy has an approximate exchange rate of L\$265 to \$1(US). User-to-user transactions during the third quarter of 2009 reached \$150 million (US), an increase of 54% from the same quarter in 2008 while resident-held Linden dollars rose by 19% for that same period (Linden, 2009). Although a full history of the development of Second Life is somewhat beyond the scope of this chapter, there are many sources for those interested. An excellent primer on Second Life and its evolution is available as a series of

online articles named 'The Virtual Whirl: A brief history of Second Life'¹, written by Tateru Nino.

Typical face-to-face communication relies on verbal and non-verbal cues (Moore et al. 2007). When the richness of multimodal communication, such as that in face-to-face (De Ruiter et al. 2003) is curbed through the use of mediating technology, the communicative process becomes leaner. Thus leaner communication capability in virtual worlds can be exemplified by the limitedness of non-verbal cues. Users are typically proxied 'in-world' by a character or 'avatar'. There is a limited translation capability from user to avatar in terms of body language and facial expressiveness; therefore, there is limited in-world communicative feedback (Gerhard et al. 2004; Moore et al. 2007). Expressing the context of a message through such leaner communications requires either extended communication about the original message or some form of in-channel adaptation such as the use of emoticons in text based communication (Walther & D'Addario 2001). The situation is made more complex when we take into account, that just because multimodal interaction is available, users may prefer not to use all of the modalities available (Oviatt, 1999).

RELATED WORK

Here we consider the most relevant literature investigating the consumption process within virtual worlds. Second Life has received academic interest within a variety of academic disciplines. One reason for this, as Castranova (2006) points out about virtual world research in general, is that virtual worlds can be perceived to be social science research tools in the same manner that a supercollider is perceived among physicists. The literature on virtual worlds tends to be focussed on similar technologies, with standard definitions but with authors often using different names to identify them. Virtual worlds, virtual environments, immersive worlds, synthetic worlds, meta-verse,

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