

Avatar Appearances and Representation of Self: Learning from Second Life®

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Abstract

Choice of avatars and rendering preferences in a virtual world reveal users' typology regarding their intention to realize different domains of self concept, thus influencing their self awareness, and social and psychological functions. New tools are required to meet these needs.

Introduction

Second Life® (SL) is a unique virtual world that has characteristics of both social media and a massively multiplayer online game. Users of SL create avatars to represent their virtual identities, which may resemble or differ from their real life identity (Bartle, 2004). Existing research illustrates that avatar appearance (AA) is important in many aspects including confidence, self disclosure, self awareness, and interactional context (Vasalou and Joinson, 2009). However, questions of how different types of virtual identities relate to created AA, and, most importantly, to the structure and attributes of a person's self in real life, and what implications it has for design and development of new technologies, remain largely unanswered. We investigated these issues by conducting interviews with Second Life® users.

Study Methodology

Semi-structured interviews with 11 males and 11 females were conducted within SL. Chat transcripts and field notes were analyzed using grounded theory and open-coding.

Results

Avatar appearances were very important to users, evolving over time. There was a significant social pressure prompting users to change their AA by purchasing appearance items, e.g., hair, clothes, body shapes, in SL

stores. Importantly, appearance characteristics were chosen according to the identity people aimed to present. Four types of users were identified: Realistics, Ideals, Fantasies, and Roleplayers. They differed according to users' intent to represent their real self, ideal self, or fantasized self, and degree of desired rendering realism.

Discussion

Our findings indicate that choice of avatars and rendering preferences reflect different domains of self concept, which participants seek to explore. The results therefore emphasize the importance of personalized avatars and their visual appearances in virtual worlds and other virtual environments. This points toward a need for a wider repertoire of tools to create sophisticated graphical representations of avatars with various degrees of resemblance between the avatar and a physical appearance in real life, and thereby rendering realism.

At the same time, AA choices will influence self awareness, which is linked to a number of important social and psychological phenomena. Arguably, different types of AA may not provide for sufficient self awareness, especially when fantasy selves are employed. Therefore, specific technological means are required to explicitly address self-awareness issues. Possible ways may include increased perceptual immersion using stereo displays, utilization of different sensing modalities with real-time feedback mechanisms, such as real-time representation of communication via voice, body language, and tactile sensations.

References

- Bartle, R., 2004. *Designing Virtual Worlds*, New Riders Publishing.
Vasalou, A., and Joinson, A.N., 2009. Me, Myself and I: The Role of Interactional Context on Self-presentation through Avatars. *Computers in Human Behavior* 25: 510-520.