

Avatars, Characters, Players and Users: Multiple Identities at/in Play

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ABSTRACT

Avatars are ubiquitous in virtual worlds (VWs). As such, they have become central to how we understand the way they are experienced. Common conceptualisations of the user avatar relationship invoke an identity binary which has influenced discussions of presence and game enjoyment. This paper presents findings from *EVE Online* which suggest there are more than two identities involved in playing games in VWs. As such, we argue for a more nuanced approach to notions of identity in VWs and discuss how this approach understands the impact of VW design on the way identity is constructed by players.

Author Keywords

Avatar, Character, Player, MMORPG, EVE Online, Virtual World, Embodiment, Interface Agents, Identity, Proteus Effect

ACM Classification Keywords

K.8.0 [Personal Computing]: General – Games.

INTRODUCTION

Due to their ubiquity in virtual environments, avatars are generally seen in HCI research as central to how we understand the user experience of virtual worlds (VWs); they afford presence, interaction with the virtual environment and between users (Schroeder, 2011), and are frequently seen as having an important role in the motivational appeal of digital games (Yee et al., 2009).

Avatars are commonly defined as the *embodiment of a user in a virtual environment*, and several authors theorize a process of user identification with the identity of this embodiment as being central to how VWs and digital games are experienced (Yee et al., 2007, 2009 & Klimmt et al., 2009). Based upon findings from our ongoing study of *EVE Online* players, we argue that this approach is problematic because it represents the assumption of an identity binary; limited to ‘user’ (conflated with ‘player’) and ‘avatar’ (conflated with ‘character’).

Rather, differentiated concepts of ‘player’ (the persistent, socially performed identity), ‘character’ (the fictional identity within the narrative or setting of the VW), user (the offline identity) and avatar (the virtual visualization) are needed to describe and understand the identities

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involved in the user experience of VWs. This research also demonstrates the noteworthy impact that virtual world design can have on the way identity is constructed by users.

This is an important and relevant topic for HCI because avatars are ubiquitous in virtual world applications, and present in many other networking systems. As they become increasingly employed in non-game systems (eg, mobile (Satchell & Graham, 2010), marketing and e-health (Gorini, 2008)). Investigating the role that avatar implementation has on identity construction is thus of significant interest for computer-mediated communication research and the wider HCI community.

IDENTITIES IN PLAY

The dominant definition for avatars generally emerges in the literature through a discussion of the historical origins of the term. Avatar is derived from the Sanskrit *avatāra* which literally means ‘the crossing down’, referring in Hindu mythology to the incarnation of a deity in the physical world (Boellstorff, 2010). The literature overwhelmingly applies these conceptual origins to the modern digital avatar; just as a supreme being becomes embodied in the real, the real becomes embodied in the virtual. In consequence, avatars are most commonly defined as the *embodiment* of the user (e.g., (Ducheneaut, Wen, Yee, & Wadley, 2009).

Yet what constitutes an ‘avatar’? Some studies are quite broad, acknowledging any form of embodiment or representation as being an avatar, such as a textual name or customized font (Boberg, Piippo, & Ollila, 2008), forum avatars (Hamilton, 2009) or instant messaging icon (Nakamura, 2008). Generally, we see avatar being limited to the navigational visualization of a user within a digital system. In the context of VW research, the avatar has become term for the interactive, customizable 3D humanoid common in VWs like *Second Life* and online games like *World of Warcraft* through which the users “*embody themselves, and make real their engagement with the virtual world*” (Taylor, 2002, p. 40).

It is easy to see how the embodiment definition appeals to the study of VWs such as *Second Life*, where the user’s interaction with the VW is conducted through the avatar, and the avatar provides presence and acts as a point of view for the user. As Jillian Hamilton states, “*we become coupled with the avatar through the process of embodied interaction*” (Hamilton, 2009, p. 2). It is frequently theorized in the literature that this coupling leads to the user identifying with their avatar.

Several research projects have involved concepts of avatar identity with accounts for the motivational appeal of games. Nick Yee and Jeremy Bailenson have conducted research into what they term the *Proteus Effect*; the phenomenon of users - conflated with player (Yee et al. 2009) - in online environments conforming “to the expectations and stereotypes expected of the identity of their avatars” (2007, p. 274). They understand the avatar as being a user’s entire self-representation, as well as “the primary identity cue in online environments” (p. 274). Yee et al. (2009) also appear to use the term ‘character’ synonymously with avatar.

Klimmt et. al. (2009) have developed a highly regarded, empirically validated theory for video game enjoyment as ‘true’ identification that applies the character based responses of media enjoyment to the video game experience, formulating a theory of enjoyable alterations of self-concept. Central to this theory is a notion that the player’s identification with an avatar (synonymous with character) is central to how they experience the game. This is through a process of enjoyable alterations that “refers to a psychological reconstruction of the perceived “merger” of user (non-distinct from ‘player’) and character within the exposure situation” (2009, p. 356).

Essentially, when a user plays *Goldeneye* the N64 James Bond video game, Klimmt et al understands them as temporarily *being* James Bond and adopting the salient characteristics of Bond’s character; physical attractiveness, strength, courage, charisma etc. This process of identification and alteration of self-concept is selective (2009, p. 359) and based on the players motivations (p. 360). This alteration is itself playful (ala Turkle, 1995) or reduces self-discrepancy between a users desired and actual self-concept (p. 363-364).

Bessièrè et. al. (2007) performed an empirical study into *World of Warcraft* players to measure discrepancies between player and avatar identity. Again, we see *character* being used as something synonymous with avatar - “to construct an avatar, or character” (p. 530). They theorize that avatars provide opportunity for a “better virtual self” (p. 531), a new alternate identity which can players adopt. Their study concludes that “MMORPG virtual worlds offer players the opportunity to create idealized characters as virtual, alternative selves” (p. 533). In doing so, they attribute to this virtual identity properties such as conscientiousness, neuroses and extraversion.

In consequence, we see that the avatar identity is often understood to encompass not just the aesthetic, 3D model but also the salient characteristics, role and history of the game character. Based on findings from *EVE Online*, we believe this approach is problematic; more than one identity is at play.

(THE LACK OF) AVATARS IN EVE ONLINE

EVE Online is a dystopic space sci-fi massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) developed by the Icelandic developer CCP Games. All *EVE Online* players participate in the same virtual universe; *EVE* is truly one world. In *EVE*, users assume the role of a ‘capsuleer’;

functionally immortal space-pilots that navigate the vast VW in interchangeable, aesthetically uncustomizable spaceships. Users view their spaceships from a third person perspective, and are able to zoom out from this view to the extent that their ship is no longer visible. Users are also able to detach their viewpoint from this ship, and have another user or agent as the visual focus.



Figure 1 - EVE Online 'Character Sheet'

For each (~\$15/mo) subscription, users can have three capsuleer’s; each with unique names, as well as a racial and class background situated in the game’s narrative. Unlike other MMOs, this background has no influence on in-game capacity; leveling up is completed in real time by selecting skills to train. These skills improve over time, even when not logged into the game, but only one skill can be trained at a time on each subscription. Consequently, many users have several subscriptions, each with capsuleers uniquely skilled towards specific tasks. The phenomenon of ‘mains’ and ‘alts’ (see, (Ducheneaut, et al., 2009) and (Williams et al., 2006) occurs in *EVE*; where users have a single account which is understood as being the ‘main’ account while others are alternative (‘alt’) accounts.

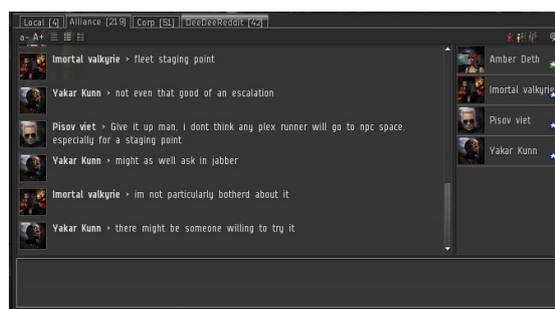


Figure 2 - Chat in EVE Online

Prior to the June 2011 *Incarna* expansion, *EVE* did not truly have avatars that were functionally significant to any aspect of the game. The ‘avatars’ in *EVE* are better described as mug-shots; static square photographs of a customized avatar that was secondary in the interaction between users. In consequence, there was no immediacy of avatar movements and thus no process of embodied interaction. These mug-shots were not visible in the virtual environment of *EVE*, they only appeared in a similar manner to forum avatars in player chat (see fig 2) or when a player right clicked on another user’s ship and selected ‘see info’ (fig 1).

These mug-shots perform some of the functions that are normally attributed to avatars. They convey limited information about a player's persona (for example, Carter's research avatar looks silly and non-serious), are to an extent a doll (better clothing and accessories can be purchased) and can display status (some accessories are expensive, conveying success at the implicit game goals of the game's capitalistic narrative). Yet they perform a limited role in conveying presence, skills or ability and are not the source of interaction with the VW – the non-identifiable, interchangeable ships performs these functions. In the context of the body of literature that deems identification with the identity-holding avatar through embodiment central or important to the motivational appeal of video games, *EVE Online* is a suitable site for testing these theories.

METHODOLOGY

We interviewed 11 male *EVE Online* players, aged between 19 and 25, asking questions modeled on Van Looy et al.'s (2010) empirically validated scale for player identification. This scale breaks down the "three distinct yet related roles with which a player of an MMORPG identifies" (p. 128) to; the character, their role as a guild member and their role as a member of the game community. Based on the theoretical approaches to identification in media studies (p. 126-127), the identification with an avatar is further broken down into three dimensions; wishful, embodied and similarity. Contextual data (age, play history, gender etc) was also collected.

This research was conducted as part of a larger study into persistent social groups in games. As a result, all the participants in the interviews were all long-standing, contributing members of a large (3,000+ members) persistent social group called Test Alliance Please Ignore. Grounded theory thematic analytic techniques were used in the analysis of the interview transcripts. As illustrated by Guest et. al. (2006), we considered this sample size sufficient in the search for qualitative data saturation.

RESULTS

Multiple themes emerged in the interviews in response to the identification questions that suggest a binary identity approach is problematic. In several of the interviews, respondents clarified that they were discussing their 'main' account or character; an important distinction in the context of 'online identities' discussed by others (see, Ducheneaut, et al., 2009) and (Williams et al., 2006)

What quickly became apparent was that these users, most of whom played for over 20 hours a week, conceptualized their participation in the game with more than one identity. These findings are best epitomized in this response. The user was asked, 'how do you identify with your character?'

"I identify with the name... But the actually character itself is not really important, if I were to have the choice of keeping the character itself (skills/assets etc) or the name and my current reputation I have built (positive or negative) I would choose to keep the name and lose everything else"

Other responses to the same question were similar;

"I have a small amount of attachment to [Capsuleer name], as I have put nearly a year of work into him, he is also my main, otherwise I give no fucks. I have other characters that I have used in the past and then either abandoned or sold, so no real attachment."

To a later question, 'If someone else played your character (and pretended to be you) would you be upset? Would you feel violated?' another player responded;

"I would not like it. I would not feel violated, as that would imply I care about the character itself. I care about the name and the reputation."

These interviews suggest that players conceptualize at least two identities involved in their experience of *EVE*. Firstly there was the identity associated with the capsuleer; the fictional in-game character with player earned skills and assets, to which players attributed the narrative of the game. The visual appearance of their capsuleer, expressed by the 'mugshots' discussed earlier, was a component of the capsuleer's identity.

The second identity conceptualized was their identity in the community; their identity as an 'EVE player' which seemed to be heavily associated with their persistent, social identity and reputation in the community. This identity is importantly separate from their 'offline' user identity. The only in-game attribute firmly connected with this second 'player' identity was the unique name of their capsuleer. This distinction is well illustrated in this response;

"My character is nothing more than a nameplate for me, the EVE player."

One of the likely reasons for the in-game name being so important is *EVE*'s 'auth' (authentication) system which allows players to verify their identity on external, non-game sites. In consequence, users interact using a single, unique name such as 'The Questioner' on forums, in-game, via voice and in text chat and other users are able to trust that in all those situations that it is authenticated as the same user.

In the context of the impact that avatars have on the way we perceive other users online, one interviewee interestingly mentioned;

"I'm told, though, that sometimes people assume I'm black IRL because my character is. Heh"

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Through our literature review, we highlighted a tendency in existing research to simplify identity and identification in VWs with many authors conceptualizing VW identities with a user/avatar binary. Within this binary, the 'avatar identity' is often conflated with the character, while the user's identity is often synonymised with that of the player. While this is appealing when considering avatar-based virtual worlds such as *Second Life*, in VWs like *EVE*, a more nuanced approach is necessary.

Through data collected from users of the MMOG *EVE Online*, it has become apparent to us that users

conceptualize a ‘player-identity’ which is overlooked in the literature; the “*EVE player*” to whom their community reputation is attributed. The ‘player’ is separate to the game-character or user. Various properties of the avatar (name, appearance, possessions) are a resource, split or shared between these concurrent, substantially distinct identities. We argue that depending on the design of the user interface, and how the user is embodied at different times in the virtual environment and in social interactions, qualities of their ‘avatar’ (their visual appearance) are appropriated to these identities differently.

In *EVE*, the persistent name of the user’s capsuleer is ubiquitous in their interactions as a player, both in-game and out-of-game, whereas the aesthetic avatar is not. It appears that players consequently put more emphasis on this ‘nameplate’ than other aspects of their avatar, such as appearance, skills or inventory. We expect that this design feature has a significant impact on other types of playful activity; such as roleplay, perhaps making it more difficult. In a game such as *EVE*, where all characters are human, this will likely have a lower impact than it would in a Tolkien-esque fantasy environment. We also believe these findings may be a vestige of the phenomenon of ‘mains’ and ‘alts’; the frequent shifting between different *EVE* characters may necessitate the development of a persistent identity with a reputation tied to a specific ‘nameplate’ – a ‘main’. The increased importance of the game community in *EVE* (discussed in Carter et al. 2012) may also have a role in the player identity being so distinct. Furthermore, we expect that further research may indicate differing focuses of identification based on various fleeting situations. For example, in *EVE*, players are permitted to steal from each other. In those moments of moral ambiguity, players may experience heightened identification with their equally morally ambiguous capsuleer, rather than their player identity which is more closely aligned to the identity of the user.

As avatars increasingly become employed in non-game applications these findings have important implication for future research into understanding the experience of interactive media. They also suggest that the centrality of avatars in our current understanding of presence, social interaction and the enjoyment of digital games may need to be examined more closely.

The findings presented here were identified as part of a wider study into *EVE Online* communities, and thus further concentrated study is necessary. As *EVE* further develops the capacity for players to navigate and socially interact through avatars, there is potential to perform valuable longitudinal research that maps the effect of system design changes on the identities in play.

We also believe that investigating the presence of concurrent player identities and character identities in other VW settings is worthy of future research. If these findings are unique to *EVE Online* players, understanding the affect this has on the way the game is experienced offers tantalizing data for the way we understand how VW design affects identity. If evidence for this is found in other MMOGs, it should be considered in any future empirical research into the user experience of VWs.

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