

CULTURE • POLITICS • TECHNOLOGY

Stream

A Graduate Journal of Communication • Spring 2009 • 2(1) • ISSN 1916-5897 • www.streamjournal.org

Stream: Culture/Politics/Technology is a peer-reviewed, open-access e-journal published by the Communication Graduate Student Caucus at Simon Fraser University.

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Introducing ‘Surveylady’: A Case for the Use of Avatars as Part of Gaming Research

Kelly M. Bergstrom

Introduction

Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (frequently shortened to MMORPGs or MMOs) are computer games that allow for thousands of players to be connected to the same server simultaneously, playing in a shared virtual universe. Frequently located within (although certainly not limited to) the genre of fantasy, MMOs are a popular variety of computer games. A venue for play and socialization, the virtual environments that exist within MMOs offer a rich resource for researchers interested in studying the interaction, communication, and lives of gamers. This paper is intended to act as a brief introduction to a pilot project done in late 2006 with the ultimate goal of making a case for avatar-based research for future MMO related studies.

Other work has been done to study MMOs by interviewing players or game developers, or doing forms of data analysis such as network analysis, or content analysis of game forums. These are all valid forms of collecting data about MMO players, but this paper questions why one would limit themselves to sitting on the sidelines when there is a massive (and immersive) world waiting to be tapped. Instead of conducting research in venues that exist outside the game world, this paper argues that researchers should dive right in and engage with gamers while they play the game, using the virtual worlds of MMOs to collect data (such as interviews, ethnographic data, observations, etc.) from inside rather than remaining on the periphery.

Focusing on *World of Warcraft* (an extremely popular MMO developed by Blizzard Entertainment) this paper is part of my research surrounding the slippage between online and offline worlds. Overall, I am interested in the mapping of offline behaviours into online worlds (such as social structures and hierarchies that exist in the offline world that get carried forward into virtual environments) and vice versa (such as the new slang and language created by gamers in MMOs that gets used in day to day non-gaming life).



Pilot project details

This pilot project was conducted as part of my research for my undergraduate honours project at Simon Fraser University and continues to inform my graduate work at the University of Calgary. The goal of the project was to answer the following questions:

1. Is it possible to create an avatar that can be used as a virtual pollster to survey players in the game?
2. Will players interact with this avatar in a positive or meaningful way?
3. Will this avatar find the same information as interviews with players that are conducted offline in the real world?

Primarily, this pilot study acted as a proof of concept—could a study such as this even be completed within the virtual environment of *World of Warcraft*?

Why World of Warcraft?

World of Warcraft was chosen as the venue for this pilot study for a number of reasons. First of all, personal interest and familiarity with the game—I have played the game extensively and I am familiar with the game’s environment and layout. Second, *World of Warcraft* is extremely popular. Released in the fall of 2004, *World of Warcraft* continues to remain on top in the MMO market. Currently there are upwards of 11.5 million subscribers to the game. While a new game may emerge to supersede *World of Warcraft*, for the time being it remains by far the most popular MMO on the market. Third, I was attracted to the fact that *World of Warcraft* is firmly in the realm of fantasy and there are no advertisements within the game. Players are able to enter into the virtual environment and will never be faced with billboards or logos for products. Finally, it is the built-in socialization tools that made *World of Warcraft* a prime site for this pilot study. Built into the code of the game is the ability for players to create guilds, maintain a list of friends to keep track of who is online (similar to instant messaging software such as MSN Messenger or AIM), and in more recent incarnations of the game, a built-in voice chat feature is included (players must still provide their own microphones). Also important to note is that the structure of the game encourages social interaction – the game requires players to cooperate with other players in order to reach certain content in the game. For these reasons, this pilot study was conducted in the world of Azeroth, the fictional world of *World of Warcraft*.

Constructing the avatar

If you were to load up *World of Warcraft* for the first time, you will find yourself at the character creation menu with a variety of choices set before you. Potential players must first choose between Alliance and Horde—two warring factions (who cannot communicate with each other in any meaningful way) within the world of Azeroth. I decided that this avatar would be a member of the Alliance, as it is generally understood that the Alliance is the faction with more players than the Horde. Once the faction is decided, players must then choose between a variety of race and class combinations. While the Alliance does give the option of playing as a human, I decided that I did not want to merely replicate myself exactly in the online world. Instead, I decided to create a female Night Elf for two reasons: first, the Night Elves are firmly rooted in fantasy (one of the reasons I was attracted to the game); second, the Night Elves are physically attractive and I did not want to create an avatar that is unapproachable or intimidating in any way. Finally, once all the other decisions have been made, I had to give this avatar a name. Ultimately I named the avatar “Surveylady” as I wanted other players to know immediately that this wasn’t a typical avatar, and I wanted to be up front about the fact that I was wearing my “researcher hat” as opposed to my “gamer hat.” Also important to note is that this avatar was created on a server that I had never played on before—I feel that it is important to keep my research and social life as separate as possible.

Entering the world as Surveylady

After entering the world of Azeroth for the first time I took my avatar from the Night Elf beginning areas to Ironforge, a major city for Alliance players. I began by approaching players in the bank area of Ironforge, a high traffic area of the city. At first I had a hard time getting players to respond to my queries – my first few requests for participation were met with silence. Rather than getting frustrated, I thought about my own patterns of gameplay and remembered that I would often step away from the keyboard (otherwise known as going AFK) after visiting my character’s bank. Realizing that I was probably not the only person who engaged in this behaviour, I decided to move my survey location to an area that I knew people would have to be actively in front of their keyboard—the Ironforge Deeprun Tram. The in-game equivalent of a subway, the Tram will carry your avatar between two major Alliance cities. In order to leave the Tram area a player has to actively move their avatar by means of a keyboard or mouse. I knew that I could position myself at the doors of the Tram station and have a much higher rate of contacting someone who was actually in front of their computer rather than being AFK. It occurred to me after my first attempt at contacting a player was met with success that I was behaving much like a pollster who positions themselves at

the entrance to a busy subway station, asking people as they pass if they had a few moments to spare to complete a short survey.

In addition to realizing that I myself was behaving in a manner that was familiar to me in the world outside of *World of Warcraft*, I began to realize that my interviewees were exhibiting behaviour that resonated with the behaviours of the offline world. I was conducting the interviews by means of “whispers,” a one on one private chat feature built right into the game that allows players to talk to each other no matter where either party is located in the game world. Despite the fact that my interviewees could continue on their way and chat with me while continuing with their chosen activities within the game, many chose to stay in my immediate area. Once again I would like to stress that physical proximity has no affect on this form of conversation within the game, nor did I ask interviewees to stay in my general area while completing the survey. However, interviewees often decided to move their avatar so that it was standing in front of my own avatar, very much as one would answer a survey outside of a busy train station or stand and have a conversation with someone in the offline world. Many would go out of their way to be cordial, for example waving hello to my avatar or greeting me using emotes provided by the game.

Preliminary results

Overall, the pilot study was quite encouraging. I had quite a high response rate, much higher than one might expect from a telephone or email survey. Even when a potential interviewee declined to participate in the survey, they were usually quite apologetic—had it been a more convenient time they would certainly have participated.

Returning to the questions put forward earlier, the answer to each is a resounding “yes”: Surveylady was successfully unleashed into the *World of Warcraft*, and I was not asked to stop what I was doing by players or Blizzard.¹ Players interacted with the Surveylady avatar in an extremely positive way; no one was upset or questioned my circumvention of the usual behaviours expected within the game. Instead, quite the opposite happened—upon completion of the survey a few players were quite interested in my research, one even went so far as to offer Surveylady a spot in the guild that she or he lead. Finally, when comparing the results of the survey conducted as Surveylady to a survey that was conducted of *World of Warcraft* players in a face to face (offline) setting, the results were quite similar. Therefore, I feel confident in the fact that this pilot study was a successful proof of concept—successful surveys can be conducted within an MMO.

1. Blizzard Entertainment is the company responsible for *World of Warcraft* and many other popular games such as *StarCraft*. To be fair to the company, I doubt that my activities were even on their radar.

Conclusions

By comparing the results of the survey conducted with an avatar with the results from the survey conducted in a face to face setting, there is enough similarity between the two venues to show that surveys conducted within an MMO can be a viable means for collecting data about virtual world participants. Upon reflection of the research process, I am amazed at how easy it was to conduct this pilot study. Participants were eager to talk to me about their experiences playing *World of Warcraft*, volunteering information over and above the questions they were asked as part of the survey. Participants were also appreciative of the fact that as a researcher, I had made the effort to engage with my chosen subjects within the online world, rather than a venue outside of *World of Warcraft*.

Future research

This pilot study was only the tip of the iceberg—much more work can be done with avatar-based research. Future plans for Surveylady include using the avatar as a means to corroborate data collected in the offline world from my informants for my Masters project, as well as other projects tangentially related to my degree. I will continue to explore the ways in which Surveylady can be an agent both within the game environment, as well as a means of conducting observation and data collection within the offline world. I am sure that it will only be a matter of time before I cross paths with a fellow researcher's incarnation of Surveylady, and I look forward to that day.

Author

Kelly M Bergstrom has recently defended her MA thesis at the University of Calgary. Her thesis explored the multitude of ways in which romantic couples use MMOs as part of their shared leisure time.