



Avatar creation in virtual worlds: Behaviors and motivations



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ABSTRACT

Avatar creation has become common for people to participate and interact in virtual worlds. Using an online survey ($N = 244$), we investigated both the behavioral characteristics and major motivations for avatar creation in virtual worlds. Our results suggest that a majority of the participants had multiple avatars; these avatars' appearance did not merely resemble the human players; and their personality did not necessarily mirror the player's real personality. Furthermore, participants on average spent over 20 h per week and often interacting with others in the virtual worlds. Our exploratory factor analysis yielded four major motivations: virtual exploration, social navigation, contextual adaptation, and identity representation.

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1. Introduction

Virtual worlds are simulated environments with digital resemblance of animated actors and their physical surroundings where they can engage in interactive activities through computer-generated tools (Bainbridge, 2007). Although virtual worlds have been around since the 1970s, they have evolved from text-based MUDs in the early days to become more commonly executed through 3D modeling, sophisticated graphic design, and multimodal interactive features over the past decade. For example, the most popular types of virtual worlds nowadays are massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) such as *World of Warcraft* and creativity-oriented virtual environments (COVEs) such as *Second Life* (Bainbridge, 2007; Ducheneaut, Wen, Yee, & Wadley, 2009; See Fig. 1). These virtual worlds can easily engage millions of participants. In 2012, *World of Warcraft* claimed that they have over 10 million subscribers (Ziebart, 2012). *Second Life* had at least 1 million active users with \$700 million annual transaction in virtual goods (Lacy, 2012). The personal, social, and financial impact of virtual worlds has become increasingly significant all around the world.

A common practice for people to participate and interact in these virtual worlds is to create avatars. The term avatar is originally defined as the descent of a deity to the Earth in an incarnate form or some manifest shape in Hinduism (Ahn, Fox, & Bailenson, 2012). However, in today's society, it has been broadly adopted as any form of representation that marks a user's identity.

Therefore, a name, a voice, a photo, or an email address can all be considered as a user's avatar (Bailenson, Yee, Blascovich, & Guadagno, 2008). Nonetheless, the most popular use of the term avatar is to refer to the digital self-representation of participants in the virtual worlds (Bailenson et al., 2008; Yee & Bailenson, 2007) and that is how it is defined in this study.

With the advent of technologies, virtual world participants now have a wide range of choices to represent themselves. Graphically, it can be either a two-dimensional icon (Blackwood, 2006; Fink, 1999) or a three-dimensional human-like or fictional creature (Ahn et al., 2012). These avatars can be stock images pre-programmed by professional developers or unique representations created by users themselves with built-in artistic software (Cheng, Farnham, & Stone, 2002; Taylor, 2002). Options for avatar customization have increased significantly in recent years. For example, many virtual worlds now allow participants to modify their avatars' physical features from eye color, hairstyle, height, and body shape to clothing, accessories, and personality traits (see Figs. 2 and 3 for examples of avatar appearance in MMORPGs and COVEs). These features provide users freedom to experiment and build their self-representations with unique appearances, personalities, and personalized behavioral patterns to support their social interactions online (Ahn et al., 2012).

In the earlier work, scholars have found that despite the technological constraints, people prefer to having control of their avatar design (Schroeder, 2002); avatar customization can make digital gaming experiences more pleasant (Bailey, Wise, & Bolls, 2009; Trepte & Reinecke, 2010); and people actually spend considerable amount of time modifying their avatars to represent the characteristics essential to their identities when interacting with others online (Ducheneaut et al., 2009; Lim & Reeves, 2009; Neustaedter &

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Fig. 1. Examples of MMORPGs (top and bottom right) and COVEs (top and bottom left).



Fig. 2. An example of avatar appearance in MMORPGs.

Fedorovskaya, 2009; Ratan & Hasler, 2011; Taylor, 2002; Yee, 2006). Building on previous scholarship, we investigated both the behavioral characteristics and major motivations for avatar creation in virtual worlds in this study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Possible selves

In virtual worlds, users are given ample opportunities to imagine their “possible selves,” reconstruct and try out their identities and personas via avatar creation. Markus and Nurius (1986) first introduced the notion of possible selves. They posited that the self is a malleable construct; people act differently in different situations; they are influenced by social roles and cues; and they have a need for self-presentation. They describe possible selves as a type

of self-knowledge that has to do with how individuals think about their potential and future (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Possible selves “represent individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and especially what they are afraid of becoming” (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989, p. 212). Possible selves are constructed based on past experience and imaginary future, therefore can amplify both desirable characteristics (e.g., creative, rich, slim) and dreaded features (e.g., lonely, depressed, alcoholic). They provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation, incentives for future behavior, and a venue to evaluate people’s current self-perception (Markus & Nurius, 1986). In emerging interactive media such as virtual world, the malleable nature of the self becomes even more important as different aspects of the self can be primed. Therefore, it is important to study multiple aspects of the self-concept in avatar-based interactive media (Jin, 2010).

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