Chapter 12
The Effects of Avatar–Based Customization on Player Identification

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ABSTRACT

Games allow players to perceive themselves in alternate ways in imagined worlds. Player identification is one of the outcomes of gameplay experiences in these worlds and has been shown to affect enjoyment and reduce self-discrepancy. Avatar-based customization has potential to impact player identification by shaping the relationship between the player and the character. This mixed method study aims to fill the gap in the identification literature by examining the effects of avatar-based customization on players' identification with and empathy towards their characters in a massively multiplayer online game, Lord of the Rings Online (LotRO). Participants (N = 66) played LotRO either in customization or in no-customization groups for about ten hours in four sessions over two weeks in a controlled lab setting. Data were collected through interviews, surveys and observations. Results showed both time and avatar-based customization positively impacted players' identification with their avatars. Self-Determination Theory is used to interpret results.

INTRODUCTION

Media researchers have been writing about the ramifications of assuming technologically mediated identities since the inception of online virtual worlds (see Turkle, 1994; 1995). These virtual environments can provide anonymity and the freedom from the conventions of our everyday identities in areas such as gender, age or social status. They also offer opportunities to take on various personas, create or adopt new identities without fear of disapproval by members in their real-life social circle (Turkle, 1995).

There are multiple types of virtual worlds (i.e., social, gaming, educational) with various affordances. Massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) have emerged to be one of the most popular gaming genres over the last decade, and

have been studied from various perspectives (e.g., player demographics, addiction, socialization, player motivations). This popularity is partly because MMOs' affordances allow players to temporarily become a game character and adopt the salient characteristics of that character (Looy, Courtois & de Vocht, 2010). As detailed in the following section, player identification with the avatar/character is central to how players experience the game. For instance, identification impacts player engagement with, and enjoyment of, the game (Klimmit, Hefner & Vorderer, 2009). Determining aspects of games, such as avatar customization, that improve players' identification with their characters would be of interest to game designers as well as educators who choose games for their students.

Avatar customization is an understudied factor when it comes to identification. Yet, it allows making each character different in MMOs by providing various combinations of attributes, adornments/physical properties, skills, and traits (Dickey, 2007). This customization experience may help the player to get into the mindset of the character, increasing the likelihood of affecting his/her self-identity. This paper examines players' identification with their characters over several gameplay sessions, varying the participants' ability to customize their characters, and poses the following main research question and two exploratory research questions:

RQ$_1$: Is there a relationship between engagement with initial avatar customization and players' identification with and empathy toward their avatars?

RQ$_2$: Does players' identification with and empathy toward their characters change over time?

The background section below clarifies the theories and present previous studies that guided the formation of the research questions. Following the background, the methods section introduces the participants and describes the study. Before

proceeding, however, it is worth clarifying the difference between avatar and character. Avatar is defined as the embodiment of the user in virtual environments (e.g., Ducheneaut, Wen, Yee, & Wadley, 2009). Characters in games are fictional identities within the narrative setting of the game. In this paper, "avatar" and "character" are used interchangeably because the research design does not differentiate avatar customization from character customization.

BACKGROUND

Many scholars have discussed the important role of online identities in videogames and virtual worlds in development and exploration of real selves (Turkle, 1995; Thomas 2007; Gee 2003). In these technologically mediated social virtual environments, players establish digital identities using a combination of modalities including text, audio and visuals. Such identity construction is necessary to communicate with others and with the virtual environment. Avatars are the most commonly used expression of identity in virtual worlds (Hamilton, 2009). Visual characteristics of an avatar, name, as well as abilities of player characters, provide users with an expression of identity and an opportunity for extended identity formation (Turkle, 1995).

Self-representation is intentional within the given choice structure of a virtual world. For example, initial character creation choices may indicate how the player expects the avatar to function as a channel for her identity. Considering part of identity formation is thinking about what type person we want to be (Arnett, 2010, p.340), and virtual worlds can function as "identity construction environments" (Bers, 2001, p. 365). In these environments, users can explore and experiment with the dynamic nature of identity by interacting with and through their avatars (Kafai, Fields, & Cook, 2010). Similarly, Turkle (1995) describes the creation of an identity in virtual environments

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