Creating Virtual Alter Egos or Superheroines?
Gamers’ Strategies of Avatar Creation in Terms of Gender and Sex

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ABSTRACT

Who do people want to be in virtual worlds? Video game players can create their avatars with characteristics similar to themselves, create a superhero that is predominantly designed to win, or chose an in-between strategy. In a quasi-experimental study, players’ strategies of avatar choice were investigated. Participants created an avatar they would like to play with for five game descriptions and two gaming scenarios by choosing from a list of (pre-tested) masculine and feminine avatar features. Additionally, participants chose their avatars’ biological sex. The results reveal a mixed strategy: On the one hand, the avatar’s features were chosen in accordance with the game’s demands to facilitate mastery of the game. On the other hand, players strived for identification with their avatar and thus preferred avatars of their own sex. Participants rated those game descriptions and gaming scenarios more entertaining which required avatar features in line with their own sex role. [Article copies are available for purchase from InfoSci-on-Demand.com]

Keywords: Avatars; Entertainment; Gender; Sex Role; Video and Computer Games

INTRODUCTION

Avatars and agents have become the major forms of media access to virtual environments. Via an avatar the player can elicit all kinds of social interaction. Thus, “avatar-mediated communication,” addressing the communication and the social interaction between users and avatars as well as its potential effects, seems to be the upcom-
ing issue in the studies of human-computer interaction, virtual environments, and video games. Avatars will increasingly be the first access and the “face” of computer-mediated communication, such as games, Internet or learning software (Donath, 2007; Nowak & Rauh, 2008). Studies on avatars and agents indicate that people get a more emotional access to computer-based environments by communicating with an avatar or agent (Dryer, 1999; McQuiggan & Lester, 2007; Rizzo, Neumann, Enciso, Fidaleo, & Noh, 2001). This has several implications. With avatars and agents people concentrate easier, learn better, and find computer-mediated communication more enjoyable and fun (Gaggioli, Mantovani, Castelnuovo, Wiederhold, & Riva, 2003; Ku, Jang, Kim, Kim, Park, Lee et al., 2005; Whalen, Petriu, Yang, Petriu, & Cordea, 2003).

In video and computer games, avatars are not limited to the visual characteristics of the interface players use to navigate through games. Game avatars are also embedded into the game narratives and may have different personalities and histories, offering different roles players may take. An increasing number of games, like massively multiplayer online role-playing games, allow their users to create the avatars’ visual appearance, but also skills and personality. With their avatars the players can engage in social interaction and even behave like human beings. Thus, communication between players and avatars evolves to a new form and it has potential effects on user identity as well as on the experience of video and computer gaming (Bailenson, 2006; Bailenson & Beall, 2005; Bessière, Seay, & Kiesler, 2007; Hsu, Kao, & Wu, 2007; Hsu, Lee, & Wu, 2005). Depending on the game’s features and the player’s skills, the player might gain enormous freedom by interacting with an avatar. The players can either create an avatar with characteristics similar to themselves, create a virtual superhero with attributes far beyond reality, or chose an in-between strategy. Consequently, the manner in which a player designs an avatar triggers two questions: 1.) Who do people want to be in virtual worlds? 2.) If they have the freedom to create their avatars, do they prefer to resemble themselves in real life or to be somebody else, for example, a virtual superhero? To answer these questions, this article will deal with the similarity between avatars and players. It will be investigated whether the similarity has any impact on how enjoyable a game is perceived.

To measure the avatar-player similarity, many avatar characteristics such as outer appearance or physical strength could be taken into account. Here, gender attributes will be addressed. Avatars and gender have become crucial issues in studies on video games (Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006a; Lucas & Sherry, 2004; Ogletree & Drake, 2007; Smith, 2006). Not only do players create their avatar in terms of avatar-features, but also the players themselves are likely to be influenced by their avatars (Yee & Bailenson, 2007). Eastin (2006) reveals that the avatars’ features influence the players’ aggressiveness and their understanding of gender roles. Previous findings also indicate that a great part of computer gaming is still “a man’s world,” particularly in the action genre. Researchers criticize that video games portray women in a sex-stereotyped manner (Dietz, 1998; Ivory, 2006; Jansz & Martis, 2007; Smith, 2006) and that many games do not meet girls’ entertainment needs (Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006a; Lucas & Sherry, 2004). It has been shown that sex-stereotyped and aggressive games affect women by rendering sex-stereotyped role-behavior (Bartholow & Anderson, 2002; Chumbley & Griffiths,
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