Chapter 11

A Study of Relationships in Online Virtual Environments: Making a Case for Conducting Semi–Structured Interviews with Avatars and What We Can Learn about Their Human Operators

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ABSTRACT

In an age when estimates of nearly a billion people around the globe are spending time in online games, researchers, organizations, governments, educational institutions, and businesses cannot ignore the potential impact of this behavior. Understanding online cultures, especially those where individuals can create and customize an avatar as their virtual counterpart and carry on the equivalent of a virtual life, requires an ethnographic approach. This study utilizes a mixed-method ethnography over a two-year period including semi-structured interviews to get to know the “residents” of this virtual world. This chapter outlines the challenges and opportunities inherent in the technology when conducting interviews with avatars and offers insights on what can be learned from them.

INTRODUCTION

As the growth of new media technologies occurs more rapidly than research can often keep pace with, likewise is the challenge of navigating these technologies as research environments.

Technologies such as social network giant Facebook, microblogging leader Twitter, video-sharing phenomenon YouTube or latest Internet sensation Pinterest continue to receive massive attention in the media and in research agendas. Meanwhile, another technology that continues to
evolve and grow yet does not garner nearly the same attention is the realm of 3-D online immersive environments. Yet, the fastest growing U.S. retail category during the worst financial market since the Great Depression was video games. And while not the giant that World of Warcraft and others available on Wii and Xbox are, the online immersive social environment Second Life averaged 17,000 daily registrations in 2010 and approximately 20,000 through 2011 (Linden Lab, 2012). According to Second Life creators Linden Lab, there are currently more than 50 million user hours logged per month and more than $500 million user transactions per year (Linden Lab, 2012).

As the numbers of people across the globe that are logging in to virtual worlds continues to increase, it has become increasingly important to understand how this digital media technology influences relationships from local and global perspectives and on personal and professional levels. To that end, this research explored the influence of virtual presence on the strength of ties and development of social capital (including the development of trust) in the 3-D immersive social worlds specifically using the virtual world Second Life. This study sought to collect rich descriptive stories of individuals as they “lived” their virtual lives and as such ethnography was the chosen methodological approach. The two-year study included participant observation, chat log analysis and semi-structured interviews. The focus of this chapter is on the interview process and the implications of conducting interviews with avatars.

For example, when conducting live text chat interviews it is important to remain aware of technology glitches such as lag and/or potential text slang that may not readily translate, especially across cultures. Clear communication and confirmation of understanding by restating or summarizing responses is important to insure accuracy of the messages exchanged. Additionally, establishing formal consent in the virtual world is still complicated from an IRB perspective as there is little agreement on whether “virtual people” can be studied as “real people.”

Perhaps more important to the advancement of understanding the potential advantages of using virtual worlds for conducting interviews was in the discovery of the importance of anonymity. Ridings, Gefen and Arinze (2002) found that there are different types of information that people are willing to share online. In this study, participants indicated a sense of “safety” in revealing their innermost feelings and secrets because the person with whom they were sharing the information would never know their real-life identity. The psychological implications of this finding were also evident when one of the study participants revealed very intimate details very early in the interview. The researcher enlisted the support of an “expert other” to analyze the interview transcripts to validate the findings, a real-life clinical psychologist known as Reflection Freenote in Second Life who summarized:

It is notable that he opened up in the first 15 minutes with enormously private information about childhood abuse, and severe behavioral pathology “cutting” which would be very unusual (very unusual) even in a face-to-face psychotherapeutic encounter, where people routinely take many sessions to get comfortable enough to do that even with a therapist.

The individuals performing as the avatars who participated in this study revealed that although they may have felt ‘marginalized’ in their real lives as a result of isolation, age, gender, race, or even extreme shyness, they were able to create an online persona and essentially role play their ‘idealized self’ and build meaningful connections. These bonds were reportedly equal to or greater than the bonds they had been able to create in their physical worlds. This is important, for example, if companies or organizations want to invite those individuals ‘from the edges’ to participate and