Do Online Computer Games Affect the Player's Identity?

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Abstract. In this paper we look at online computer games and their effect on the forming of identity. We will first take a look at computer games in general and then at the differences which exist between offline and online computer games. The online aspect is then argued to come forth most in massively multiplayer online role playing games and real life simulation games, as they have the most interaction with other players. Also, what effect the game environment itself introduces is looked at, as this is the major differentiating feature from 'traditional' chat programs and bulletin boards.

1   Introduction

The main aim of this article is to shed some light on whether online computer games as platforms create a different situation for identity building than do other online or offline situations in which people participate; and if, what are the differentiating factors. In the article it is hoped that the game environment can be shown to be in various ways such a differentiating factor. The actions the players perform in the game through their characters speak louder than mere words – but of whom or what? The player or the character? How does this affect the view players build of each other?

   This article is especially concerned with Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) and 'Real Life' Simulations (Sims, not to be confused with Flight Simulators, of which there are some that are online playable) as these are the games in which the 'taking on the role of the character' is most prevalent. Real Time Strategy games (RTSs) and First Person Shooters (FPSs) do not have the same effect to the same degree as the social environment within the games is typically

poorer. This is countered to a degree – especially in FPSs – through using external voice over IP (VOIP) software, such as TeamSpeak or even Skype.

The practical parts of article are based on participatory research conducted by one of the authors. The author has played online computer games for years and has observed the behaviours depicted as well as participated in them both as the party doing them himself and as an 'external' observer.

2   Computer Games and Identity

One effect of computer games on the building of the identity of the players is clear. The players identify with computer games and their characters in various levels. The clearest implication of this is calling the character "me" – when the character in the game "dies" the player does not say "my character died", but rather "I died". The same holds true for any and all actions "I did this, I did that" instead of "my character did this, my character did that". (See e.g. [10]) The player often also feels irritation when a character is in the game is killed or elation if the player through the character succeeds in some deed.

Of course, the player talks about "I did X" also when they use the user interface and control the game and its functions. It is, for an experienced gamer (typically even when not familiar with the game in question) easy to distinguish between these two modes of "I". Thus, such far fetched claims, as "I shot this soldier in the game" and "I went on a killing spree on our high school" are quite clearly rather far fetched over simplifications of the effects a computer game has on the players. Other typical examples of claiming a game caused the acts done by people who (also) play games could include examples such as

1.   a man being stabbed to death because he sold a virtual sword (the real reason being the worth of the virtual item – three months pay, not playing the game) [6]
2.   a gamer jumping out of a window of a tall building (the reason being that he lost in something he believed important, not playing the game, per se)
3.   young men in Japan staying in their rooms playing computer games (a possible reason being that they feel inadequate for the exceedingly competitive society, not playing a game) [3]

None the less, spending significant amounts of time doing anything is bound to affect the one doing it. A typical computer game player (of any sophisticated game, not counting Mine Sweeper, Solitaire, Tetris and the like) can spend hours after hours playing a computer game. Computer games can shape the image players have of the world; for example the image one of the authors has of the Caribbean is undoubtedly affected by the game "Pirates!" by Sid Mayer. He has learned the geography, the locations of cities (maybe falsely?) etc. from the game and considers himself somewhat capable of placing things to the Caribbean even though he has never been there himself. The same or similar experience applies to various computer games.

In addition to games made solely for entertainment purposes, there exists a genre of games termed as "edugames". Edugames have a more deliberate intention to "feed the facts" to the player and thus make one adopt the trivia of the given subject area presented as a game. Today's subject areas for these games range from abstract and general topics like mathematics, grammar and botany to more focused information collection that concern e.g. personal histories of famous persons or historical overviews of important events. Target audience for these games in many cases is school aged people, time when the identity formation of a person is seemingly frivolous, but the effects of assimilated information can have such a long term consequences for opinion construction that the origin cannot be easily traced back. All in all, as with any educational tool the intention is to change the thinking of the learner, i.e. change the mental imagery of the subject.

Also, the effect of computer games on agility and fine motorics is somewhat proven. Being more agile has effects on the personality (builds trust in ones capabilities in the field), and thus affects identity.

3   Online Computer Games and Identity

Online games are a special breed of computer games. Their effect on ones identity in the digital age is clearly stronger than that of solitarily played games. The main difference is that there is another human player or, more typically other players on the other end of the line. This changes the dynamic from the situation of 'just playing against a machine'. The line between human player and machine becomes blurred.

Discussing issues through a computer game differs fundamentally from the more typical online messaging systems such as email, bulletin boards, instant messages or other chat software – or even video discussions such as YouTube and other sites offer. In these, the users can either have a direct or indirect contact to someone else, some others or all of the (current) users amongst other possibilities. The topics can range from personal issues through public debates about politics to specific topic areas such as philosophy or nuclear physics.

What is typically the case, however, is that all this discourse in chats and bulletin boards is real life dependent. The issues discussed are of the real world. In online computer games, however, the discussion is typically about the game itself. The game, which is non-real, is the focus of the discussion.

4   Clans or guilds

The 'clans', 'guilds' and other groups that form in the games can have a strong effect on the individual's identity. The individual taking part in these groups can identify with the groups very strongly. The groups can be local, composed of a local friend group who would see each other IRL in any case or start to see each other IRL as well as is often the case with FPS clans, it can be composed of friends that do not see each other that often (e.g. due to distances), but more typically it is a group of

"random" (within the game's context) people interested in the game. Likely the most typical groups in MMORPGs consist of a combination of these.

The players form their image of the other players through their actions in the game. This again reflects to the image of the people playing through comments, praise and complaints by the other players. The playing style of a person can also reveal things about a person which are not readily visible IRL, such as a hidden anxiousness or a capability for tactical thinking, either of which might not manifest in the contact a person has with a friend IRL.

This has been the case since early online games such as Lambda-MOO [1], in which already a 'virtual rape' was considered an attack towards the individual 'raped' and her identity. The more inclusive the games become – and they have clearly become more inclusive, especially in the field of various online role playing games, be they of the fantasy or of the real life simulating genre's, such as Diablo series, various D&D series, World of Warcraft, EverQuest or similar, or games such as Sims or Second Life. The more enduring the character is, the more the individual relates their identity to the character. If real wrongs can be committed in virtual communities, as [7], has proposed and the other computer game players offended by online activities as [4-5,8] have proposed, surely they affect the identity of the players as well; as would any offence or real moral wrong towards them.

Also, identifying with a group in a game can be strong. Even though the characters are 'members' of a guild/clan, the people can feel strong belonging to the groups their characters are members of. This seems to be especially true for 'officers' or grounding members of a group. A group-mentality can form from belonging to a certain kind of group; of course, it is plausible to think that the members have been (and often are specifically sought because they are) similarly minded in the first place. The group itself can, though, strengthen this identity the players already had previous to joining and thus affect their identity.

The friendships that form through online games can be lasting and strong, resulting to travelling around the world to meet the other people playing or even marriage. Now, if the in-game personality of the person does not match that of the IRL personality this can lead to problems. Even though the in-game actions do reveal some parts of the person's identity, those are at best a very limited amount of what the person really is like. The problems of chats and other online messaging are manifold in the gaming environment. Fortunately the kinds of IRL relationships – be they friendships or even love relations – which form are typically strengthened through the use of either in-game private chat/email or, more typically game-external messaging.

The game provides both the physical distance from the other players (as do other, more commonly studied online media, such as chats or bulletin boards), but the game, as a place to play a role, explicitly encourages this kind of behaviour, unlike chats in which it happens even though it is not encouraged. Both chats or bulletin boards as well as the kinds of online games (especially MMORPGs and Sims) distance us from the other players (see e.g. [4-5]), lessening the social pressure – especially in its physical form – of condoning to the norms. Of course, not only a player assumes a role – many do. Thus, the replies from other players are done via their character and the role they see the character depicting. Yet, as a player, one

often feels anger, joy, sadness towards the other characters – or towards the other players?

5   Limits set by the game environment

These phenomena – the merging of human and machine, and the meaningful relationships and group associations that emerge from the 'cybernetic' interactions, strongly affect the identity of the participants. They do it through cognitive experiences the participants feel, e.g. through emotions, aesthetic impressions but also through being conditioned to the culture the players partake in. The game itself is created in a certain culture, which may not necessarily – at least originally – be shared by the players. (See e.g. [2]) This affects how the context of the game is interpreted. It can be interpreted as meant, but also by creating new meanings for the contexts, meanings, which were not originally meant by the designers.

The world view and ideas of the player get filtered through the actions possible/encouraged by the game and then get transferred through the online aspect of the game to the other players game, which then represents them to the other player and they affect the other player's view of the game. Do they affect the other player's view of the world? How much and in what ways?

Player → Game → Online → Game → Player

The game itself affects the amount of choices the player has. When the player wants to do something, they have to do it according to the implicit rules of the game. This then gets transferred online to the other player again through the interface. Thus the game dictates the choices – to a degree – which the players have available for them.

An example of this is using the games as identity experiment platforms. Most online games (MMORPGs and Sims) even support this by allowing/encouraging to play e.g. different gender to ones own. When one takes the role of another gender to ones own, it, by definition modifies the player pattern to what one envisions the opposite sex doing. This, reflected through the game then shows in the other end as a function of the selected sex's way to behave, even though it is not a member of that sex using the character. A similar effect happens also when the player chooses to play (in a MMORPG) an 'evil' character. When assuming the role of an 'orc', 'troll', or, even 'undead', the behaviour patterns present in the character often do not reflect those of the one playing.

Google has just filed for a patent on following the actions and discourse of players in games for advertisement purposes [9]. Apparently at least some belief in being able to mine information from in-game actions or discourse to real world use exists. As has been explained through the article, however, the actions and discourse engaged in a game do not necessarily reflect the off-line character of the player. Thus such advertisement might direct gun marketing towards FPS players, cooking marketing towards MMORPG players and so forth, even though the actions (such as repeated cooking in many if not most MMORPGs) has nothing to do with the

character of the person in off-line situation – when was the last time you saw a teenager go to the kitchen to do a gourmet meal?

6   Discussion

Computer games change the way we perceive the world. We learn things from them, sometimes correctly, at other times falsely. Online computer games also offer us a way to communicate with other players. The communication, however, happens through an artificial situation created by the game world, unlike in chat applications where the topics or the chat is controlled by 'real world' interests and contacts. This difference manifests in many ways. It is seen in the way players consider actions to be important in creating their view of other players. It also offers possibilities for identity experiments which can be practiced in online chats but are typically not encouraged, unlike in most online games where the experiments are part of the game itself.

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