

Close intimate playthings? Understanding player-avatar relationships as a function of attachment, agency, and intimacy

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Abstract

The study of the player-avatar relationship has been central to scholars of video games and virtual worlds. Work has attempted to explain the relationship by focusing on the technologies of social presence, the socio-emotional relationship between players and avatars as distinct social others, the capability of players to adopt the personae of their avatars, and the psychological merging of player and avatar as a unified person. While these approaches are useful in explaining specific forms and types of player-avatar relationships, they tend to adopt qualitatively-different approaches to the phenomenon that limit their ability to inform one another and, in turn, our understanding of the holistic player-avatar experience. To this end, the following paper demonstrates how player-avatar archetypes generated from narrative analysis can be reanalyzed for dimensions of character attachment to highlight intersections with agency and intimacy, and suggests the utility of such an approach to understanding the larger video game entertainment experience.

Keywords

avatars; character attachment; intimacy; agency; video games; entertainment

Introduction

Central to research on video games and virtual worlds is the player-avatar relationship (PAR): the interaction between a corporeal person and a digital body. Research perspectives on the nature of this relationship vary, suggesting it to be: a feature of social presence (de Kort, IJsselsteijn, & Poels, 2007), a function of emotional intimacy and perceived agency (Banks, 2013), identification with avatar personae (Yee, Bailenson, & Ducheneaut, 2009), and a merging of player and avatar psyches (Lewis, Weber, & Bowman, 2008). Yet, each recognizes that there are real physical humans and real digital avatars interacting in digital spaces. The following study uses in-depth player interviews to integrate (Banks, 2013) and Lewis et al.'s (2008) perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of PARs and suggests how a more integrative approach might aid our understanding of the gaming experience from an entertainment perspective.

Emotional intimacy and perceived agency in PARs

Recent scholarship (Lee, 2007) has questioned whether humans can form intimate relationships with technologies made *by them* and *for them*. For Turkle (2007), the focus is less on the capability of machines to feel emotion but rather the extent to which humans can become emotionally vulnerable to their machines. Here, we consider emotional intimacy – the *perception of closeness* resulting in feelings of mutual care and understanding (Sinclair & Dowdy, 2005). In massively multiplayer online games (MMOs), an avatar is taken up by a player over extended periods of time and “cared for” as it advances in the game. Related to emotional intimacy is the notion of perceived agency, or the degree to which the player sees herself or the avatar as being “in charge” of gameplay experiences. Banks (2013) suggested these two dimensions coalesce, with lower intimacy associated with player agency and higher intimacy associated with avatar agency. Specifically, four PAR archetypes were identified along this Intimacy/Agency (I/A) continuum: avatar-as-object (high player agency, low intimacy, focus on combat and competition), avatar-as-Me (high player agency, moderate intimacy, focus on social play), avatar-as-symbiote (mixed agency, moderate to high intimacy, focus on negotiating identities), and avatar-as-other (high avatar agency, high intimacy, focus on escape and demarcations of the physical and digital).

Character attachment

The notion of character attachment (CA: Lewis et al., 2008) argues that unlike most forms of mediated entertainment, video games and immersive digital environments are interactive spaces requiring players to interact via virtual embodiments. This interactivity suggests that we frame the PAR as a varying degree of “psychological merging of a player’s and [avatar’s] mind” (p. 515). CA is (a) a sense of identification as one’s avatar, (b) a suspension of disbelief in accepting the avatar’s in-game environment as a real space, (c) a sense control over an avatar’s in-game actions, and (d) a sense of responsibility for an avatar’s needs. Bowman, Schultheiss, & Schumann (2012) found differences in CA to be significantly associated with anti- and pro-social gameplay motivations in online roleplaying games, with anti-social players feeling less responsible for and pro-social players feeling more control over their avatars. Bowman, Rogers, Sherrick, Woolley, & Chung (2013) found that players who reported on enjoyable video games – games that lead to feelings of excitement, arousal, and hedonic-rooted positive affect – were players who tended to feel great senses of control over their avatars, while players who reported on meaningful video games – games that fostered a sense of appreciation, introspection, and self-reflection of the game experience – were players who tended to feel strong senses of responsibility over their avatars.

Mapping character attachment to relationship archetypes

To address potential alignment between I/A and CA approaches, transcriptions from 70 hours of *World of Warcraft* player interviews conducted by Banks (2013) were re-analyzed for the presence of CA dimensions (Lewis et al., 2008). The initial interviews used iterative grounded theory analysis to establish the four PAR archetypes, and the re-analysis employed thematic narrative analysis to identify CA dimensions.

	Avatar as Object	Avatar as Me	Avatar as Symbiote	Avatar as Other
Identification (I am that avatar)	Low My avatar is a digital form.	High My avatar is <i>me</i> in digital form.	Mid My avatar is a part of me.	Low My avatar is its own being.
Suspension of Disbelief (Accepts Digital World as Real One)	Low The environment is a space of competition.	Mid I appropriate the world to fit my own view of it.	Mid I am able to visit my avatar's world.	High My avatar lives in a digital world with its own norms.
Sense of Control (Physical)	High My avatar is a tool for mastery of in-game challenges.	Mid My avatar is my social surrogate to accomplish my social play goals.	Mid My avatar and I use each other to accomplish negotiated goals.	Low I am a tool for my avatar; it tells me how to control it to accomplish its goals.
Sense of Care & Responsibility (Affective)	Low My avatar has no needs.	Mid My avatar <i>is me</i> - it needs what I need.	Mid My avatar and I know each other's needs.	High I help my avatar get the things it needs in his/her world.

Figure 1: Conceptual classification of Banks’ (2013) player-avatar archetypes with Lewis et al.’s (2008) dimensions of character attachment. Note that moving from left to right across each column represents an increase in emotional intensity and a focus on avatar-agency, with “low” “mid” and “high” designating perceived levels of each character attachment sub-dimension.

As seen in Figure 1, CA dimensions of suspension of disbelief and sense of care and responsibility align with the Intimacy/Agency (I/A) continuum archetypes, with “Object” players expressing the lowest degrees and “Other” players expressing the highest. For sense of control, however, there is an inverse relationship with the I/A archetypes, as “Object” players expressed high control and “Other” players expressed low control. Finally, the CA dimension of identification diverged from the I/A

continuum, with “Me” players expressing the greatest sense of identification (see Figure 2 for illustrative narrative excerpts).

	Avatar as Object	Avatar as Me	Avatar as Symbiote	Avatar as Other
Identification (I am that avatar)	“I know who I am and so an avatar on a screen is not going to be me.”	“He’s just kind of more <i>my style</i> than others ... Dwarves are kind of rough and tumble, and I’m a little that way.”	“She’s just kind of that part of me that I don’t allow to come out in... real life.”	“I’m Missy the player and she’s Missy the Tauren Shaman.”
Suspension of Disbelief (Accepts Digital World as Real One)	“I’m a woman in real life. ... Well, I’m not a guy in real life. But then I’m not a Paladin in real life, either, so I don’t really see whether that should matter.”	“I needed to play Alliance because I’ve always personally felt I’ve been on the side of good rather than on the side of evil.”	“I’d just go into the park and find a tree and just kind of chill. Same thing I do in Org. I’m around people ... but in my own world enjoying it.”	“I always kind of envisioned his retirement, sort of golden years, as patrolling in the Barrens. He was tasked by the Warchief to lend aid to the young’uns.”
Sense of Control (Physical)	“I feel like I have a lot more control over the success of a group [as a healer] than I did as just a damage dealer and it’s much more engaging.”	“I think as long as the game is a place that people can interface with each other with pixels ... I think that I’ll continue to play it.”	“He’s a digital way of exploring things that I don’t have the capacity to really get into in real life ... I wish I could be doing in real life.”	“I know his voice, I know his stance and I will frequently make choices in-game based on how I know he would act.”
Sense of Care & Responsibility (Affective)	“[When I’m raiding] I feel kind of a responsibility. You have 24 other people counting on you or 9 other people counting on you.”	“Someone had hacked my account ... I felt really violated ... like somebody had taken something from me.”	“[She] is my outlet, so to speak. [She] is a way for me to be the me that I would be had - not - everything happened.”	“His entire family died. He barely escaped and had to learn how to take care of himself.”

Figure 2: Exemplar player interview statements associating varying levels of character attachment with different player-avatar archetypes.

These patterns can be explained when we consider self-differentiation as a requirement for emotional intimacy and transferred agency. According to Bowen (1978), emotional intimacy requires that people exist both separately and together as distinct participants in a relationship. Here, a player must be able to see the avatar as separate from him/herself in order to emotionally care for it and to see it as a legitimate agent. From this, it makes sense that suspension of disbelief and increased responsibility would align with the I/A-continuum archetypes. Further, the inverse relationship with sense of control also makes sense: as a player increasingly sees the avatar as a moral agent (rather than merely a tool), there appears to be a tendency toward perceptions that the avatar may “control itself” according to a perceived inherent subjectivity or narrative trajectory. However, players experiencing a “psychological merging” have diminished self-differentiation; as a condition for intimacy is the recognition of another as a separate actor, we would expect that players high in CA (for example, high on identification) to be less emotionally intimate with them. In a sense, these players appropriate their avatars to place themselves in virtual spaces rather than partnering with the avatar in those spaces.

Implications for the gaming entertainment experience

Such an integrative approach to understanding PARs holds implications for understanding those relationships’ influence on gameplay’s entertainment gratifications, namely those of enjoyment (hedonic reactions related to arousal and positive affect) and appreciation (eudaimonic reactions related to reflecting on humanity; Oliver & Raney, 2011; Bowman et al., 2013). For example, “Object” players may be more likely to focus on in-game mechanics and challenges, resulting in enjoyment experiences linked to “pleasures of control” (Bowman et al., p. 13). By contrast, “Other” players may be more likely to focus on social and relational dimensions of the game narrative and virtual environment, resulting in appreciation experiences linked to “pleasures of cognition” (Bowman et al., p. 13). Examining these possibilities not only allows us to better understand the outcomes of

gaming as a function of PARs, but also to examine the motivations for and formations of PARs as a function of the desire for different entertainment outcomes.

Conclusion

Our early analysis of two seemingly-divergent approaches to PARs – one looking at intimacy and agency between player and avatar and one looking at their psychological merging – not only demonstrates the compatibility of both perspectives in highlighting fundamental elements of PAR, but also informs related work in areas such as the qualitative entertainment experience of the video game.

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