

Performed Intimacy in Virtual Worlds

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Intimacy Show & Tell Marathon
Goldsmiths College, London
08 December 2007

Introduction

Virtual worlds (especially massively multiplayer online role playing games, MMORPGs in short) are growing in terms of population and significance, as millions of people spend many hours in them every day. The currently most popular virtual world *World of Warcraft* has reached 9 million active subscribers.ⁱ Players not only spend substantial amounts of time in virtual worlds, but they also invest emotion, money, and social capital. In these worlds, they play roles, they perform, and while doing so, they create sometimes intimate connections with other players. Intimacy exists in virtual worlds, and paradoxically it is facilitated by the anonymity they give, and the performance they require from the player.

Virtual World

Before examining how performance and intimacy relate in virtual worlds, we need to establish what the subject of our inquiry is. Firstly, when referring to intimacy in virtual worlds, we only mean the psychological dimension of intimacy (emotional and intellectual), not the physical dimension, as there is no physical contact in online interaction (yet). Secondly, when referring to virtual worlds or MMORPGs, we are talking about online games that are persistent (ie. when the player logs out, the world continues to exist), are "inhabited" by a very large number of players (at least thousands), and have a three-dimensional graphical representation of the game world (not text-only MUDs). In these 3D worlds, the player is usually represented by a character that is generally referred to as the avatar.ⁱⁱ

The avatar is usually a humanoid creature (such as a human, elf, dwarf, orc, or troll) whose appearance the player can control (somewhat), by choosing sex, hair style, eye color, height, and clothing, to give a few examples. Thus, the player has a large degree of control over how he or she wants to be represented to other players in the virtual world.

MMORPGs usually involve monsters that have to be fought and quests to be completed, both of which often require the players to work in teams to succeed. In *World of Warcraft*, some objectives require a large group of players, who fight in a highly coordinated way for several hours to complete so-called "raids" — highly difficult tasks that are very rewarding, as the players advance quicker in the game by gaining large amounts of

experience and highly valuable items. In this way, the game facilitates and requires frequent interactions with other players.

Additionally, virtual worlds generally contain an economic system, as items in the game have a value to the player — some items are valued in the hundreds of real-world euros. Thus, the in-game economy (of trading virtual items or services) can be converted into real-world dollars. The currency of *World of Warcraft*, for example, is worth over five times as much as the Japanese Yen.ⁱⁱⁱ Due to this high level of interconnectedness between players and the economic importance of MMORPGs, they constitute "genuine human societies in their own right."^{iv}

Virtual Life

Having established the importance of virtual worlds in the lives of the people who play them, we shall now examine the philosophical and psychological explanations for people's emotional investment in virtual worlds, and why they have become so popular.

When examining today's media landscape, especially relating to the internet, to computer-mediated communication, and computer games, it should be fair to say that we live in a society of simulation, as Jean Baudrillard pointed out.^v We accept simulations as part of the real world, often as windows into other parts of the real world, or to understanding it. Why should simulations not be accepted as worlds in their own right? According to a recent study, 20 percent of players feel that their main place of residence is the virtual world, not the material world.^{vi} "The hyperreality of virtual fantasies is no less important, no less real, no less actual than what noncyborgs would call 'everyday life'," reports the performance theorist Kurt Lancaster in his study of role-playing.^{vii}

This closely follows the research observations of MIT psychologist Sherry Turkle, who interviewed a large number of people who spend a significant amount of time on MUDs (the text-only precursor to MMORPGs) in order to find out how they relate to their virtual homes, and how their identity is projected into these worlds. She postulated that today, identity is no longer a unit, but a conglomerate of identities — some of which reside within our body, while others manifest themselves only in the realm of virtuality. The probably most striking answer in her research was: "RL [Real-Life] is just one more window... and it's usually not my best one."^{viii} This attitude could be considered to be what Katherine Hayles calls the "posthuman:" The body is seen as the "original prosthesis," which is simply the tool for interacting with the world. It can be extended into the virtual world, and even be replaced (by an avatar, for example). Identity is fluid, as it is not only multiple and ever-changing, but it can be transferred away from the material body.^{ix}

This, to the computer game designer, is not surprising. It is precisely what a well-made computer game aims to achieve. The difference is that in game jargon this effect is called "immersion." According to Richard Bartle, teaching fellow at Essex University and creator of the first text-based virtual world (MUD), immersion is when the player forgets that he is controlling a character: "It's about identity. When player and character merge to become a persona, *that's* immersion, *that's* what people get from virtual worlds that they can't get from anywhere else, *that's* when they stop playing the world and start living it."^x

In the totally immersed state, the player becomes the avatar. The distinctions between the self, the body, and the avatar blur, until they converge and the self and the avatar become one, leaving the body behind (until the player logs out, or loses immersion). Due to this immersion, what occurs in the virtual world can have the same significance as real-world events — even if only for a short period of time.

Virtual Anonymity

This significance also extends to intimate encounters with other players, but before examining this aspect of virtual worlds, we need to establish how they come to be, why they occur in a non-physical environment, and to what extent.

Firstly, it is important to keep in mind that the internet is rather anonymous. In the material world, we are always recognizable, and people make judgments whenever they meet a new person. Our sex, age, and good looks are immediately visible, and we can usually make quick judgments about other people's class and lifestyle choices as well. This is because everybody has a "front" that they wear: clothing, demeanor, mannerisms, or simply cleaning the house before visitors come. A front is a mechanism that is built, acquired, and learned from society, family, and friends' influences. Human beings change their fronts, depending on the situation they are in.

Online, in virtual worlds, this front does not exist. People cannot have any preconceptions about others they meet online, as there is nothing to build them from, no front. This front thus protects, which makes it easier for players of MMORPGs to be daring, try things they would not (or cannot) try in real-life: being evil and violent, being a cunning thief, or being of the other sex. Our online identity is a pure construct, a large part of which is consciously constructed by the player. The part that is unconsciously constructed, though, is far more important.

How a player is perceived by others hardly depends on the front he has in the game, as the available fronts are very limited and standardized (there are thousands of red-bearded evil dwarven warriors with chainmail around). Players' perceptions of each other are purely based on their actions and behaviors: "The anonymity of an online world not only protects, it also reveals. To appear intelligent in the game, you have to perform intelligent acts."^{xi}

Virtual Performance

At the same time, the appearance is also modulated by performance. Kurt Lancaster noted: "When one plays, one performs, and when one performs, one is playing."^{xii} Play, though, is not confined to games. Play permeates all society, as Johan Huizinga established: Play is a cultural function of society, a way to find the restraints of society, to learn them, and to escape them. Not only children play, but everyone does, in daily life.^{xiii} Society is a game of performance: Every day we perform the roles of lover, friend, businessman, public person, and many more. In each situation we behave differently, we behave in ways that we think will make us more loved, liked, accepted, respected, et cetera.

Most people only play a few roles, and never at the same time. For the cyborg, the posthuman inhabitant of virtual worlds, these performances can occur contemporaneously, and all of them are part of the person performing them as much as they would be in real life. In fact, they can be mixed: One can be a mother, a businesswoman, and a dwarven warrior at the same time. The metaphor of life consisting of "windows" mentioned in Turkle's research above summarizes this state of mind aptly.

When we are in a virtual world, we play and perform just like we would in the real world — just in a more exaggerated way. This is similar to what Roland Barthes would call a "language of excess."^{xiv} In a role-playing environment, especially a fantasy-themed one, it is necessary to use more flamboyant expressions: Firstly, it is expected, as the genre of fantasy is traditionally based on flamboyance. Secondly, and probably more importantly, due to the limitations of virtual worlds, facial expressions are not visible, the choice of clothes, poses, and actions to perform is very limited, and text can only convey a certain amount of emotion

(as the tonality of voice is lost). In order to convey the same message, the player has to employ more exaggerated modes of speech, actions, and reactions.

The performances in virtual worlds are thus different from quotidian real-world performances, but only in degree. While real-world performance usually relies on subtlety, the virtual-world performance relies on flamboyance. Nonetheless, both are equally part of someone's persona.

Virtual Intimacy

In a rather comical way, game design consultant and BBC columnist Margaret Robertson wrote on relationships forming in *World of Warcraft*: "There's an intimacy available in games that the real world takes time to match. Warcraft is a world where you can right-click on someone you've just met and inspect their underwear."^{xv}

While this is true to some extent, it is not what constitutes intimacy in virtual worlds. As discussed above, the player's anonymous performance is what causes intimacy. Certain qualities that most people hide (or have learned to hide) in the real world are easily revealed. The choice of character reminds us of Jungian archetypes: Are you a strong brash warrior, a weak but powerful wizard, a nature-loving druid, a clever rogue, or a helpful healer? Each of these character types that are nearly ubiquitous in MMORPGs tell us something about the player behind the avatar.

More so, the playing style is highly revealing, as Robertson also noted in her column. As many quests require highly coordinated team play (especially the high-level ones), leadership skills are required: Coordinating 40 people to kill a dragon is no easy task, as it requires knowledge of the enemy, tactical understanding of the situation, quick reactions, and communication skills to make people follow the orders. Similarly, leaders of guilds (in-game player organizations) must have leadership skills, albeit different ones: Here, social leadership is more important, as players need to be evaluated to be admitted into the guild, quarrels between guild members must be resolved tactfully, and inter-guild diplomacy can be more than tricky. Fighting situations in general reveal how a person acts and reacts under pressure, and dealing with other annoying players reveals a lot about patience, friendliness, and tact.

As there is no social barrier, no "front," and the felt security of everything being a fantasy performance, players are revealing a lot more about themselves than they ever would in any real-life social situation. Online sexuality and relationship columnist Regina Lynn, when examining instant-messaging and email relationships (without any avatar representation) noted: "We are often more naked in our writing than we are in person, more apt to divulge secrets and 'go deep'. And we do it a lot sooner online than we do in real life." She also mentions that, according to a recent psychological study, online relationships are highly similar to those formed in the real world, in terms of breadth, depth, and quality.^{xvi}

While virtual world relationships do occur in increasing numbers, we need to keep in mind that intimacy not only applies to relationships, but to any kind of communication that reveals a significant amount about a person's true self. In this way, intimacy is highly prevalent in the virtual world, while it appears to be decreasing in the real world.

Conclusion

As argued above, it should be apparent that intimacy in virtual worlds exists, but is different from real-world intimacy. As the player believes in the virtual world, or directly lives in it, he or she loses all distance and acts as a true persona in the virtual realm.

Paradoxically, intimacy is encouraged and made more likely to occur due to anonymity and performance — both concepts that generally are unlikely to be associated with intimacy. Anonymity and performance are both much stronger and more apparent than in the material world, and they give players freedom to explore their identities and express them in a secure setting, without fears of losing social status, or being looked down upon. This combined with the feeling of truly being in the world fosters intimate encounters in MMORPGs.

- i Blizzard (2007), *World of Warcraft Surpasses 9 Million Subscribers Worldwide*, 24 July 2007 (<http://www.blizzard.com/press/070724.shtml>).
- ii In Hindu mythology, the avatar is the worldly incarnation or bodily manifestation of a god.
- iii The current exchange rate for the Warcraft Gold is worth 0.049 USD, while the Japanese Yen is worth 0.009 USD. Based on the price of 1000 Warcraft Gold on IGE.com and the USD-JPY exchange rate on 04 December 2007.
- iv Castronova, Edward (2006), 'On the Research Value of Large Games: Natural Experiments in Norrath and Camelot' in *Games and Culture* Vol. 1, No. 2, April 2006 (London: Sage), p. 18.
- v Baudrillard, Jean (1994), *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press).
- vi Castronova, Edward (2005), *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 2.
- vii Lancaster, Kurt (1999), *Warlocks and Warpdrive: Contemporary Fantasy Entertainment with Interactive and Virtual Environments* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company), p. 6.
- viii Turkle, Sherry (1995), *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (London: Simon & Schuster), p. 13.
- ix Hayles, Katherine (1999), *How we became Post-Human: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press).
- x Bartle, Richard (2004), *Designing Virtual Worlds* (Berkeley, CA: New Riders), p. 156.
- xi Mortensen, Torill Elvira (2007), 'Me, the Other' in *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press), pp. 300f.
- xii Lancaster, Kurt (1999), *Warlocks and Warpdrive: Contemporary Fantasy Entertainment with Interactive and Virtual Environments* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company), p. 9.
- xiii Huizinga, Johan (1950), *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: the Beacon Press).
- xiv Hall, Stuart (1997), *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage), p. 36.
- xv Robertson, Margaret (2007), "State of Play: The Game of Love" in *BBC News* 04 September 2007 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/6976167.stm>).
- xvi Lynn, Regina (2005), *The Sexual Revolution 2.0* (Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press).