Seeing and Being Seen: Presence & Play in Online Virtual Worlds

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Over the past three years, I have conducted extensive research in massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) and social virtual worlds, also known as "metaverses." My focus has been the study of large-scale emergent group behaviors, social phenomena that seem to fall outside of the game or virtual world's intended purpose. As part of this research, I conducted an 18-month ethnography of refugees from the MMOG *Uru*, set in the world initially introduced in the single-player game *Myst,* who had immigrated into and created fictive ethnic communities in other virtual worlds. (Pearce 2006) A number of outcomes of this research are relevant to presence, and may provide some interesting contrasts with traditional VR research on the topic.

There are, there are a number of qualities that distinguish MMOGs and metaverses from traditional "immersive" VR. These qualities contribute to moving the emphasis away from "immersion" and towards "engagement," that is, sustained interest in participating in the world, especially at a social level. My research with Uru refugees, as well as in other virtual play spaces, revealed some significant dimensions of presence that might distinguish them from traditional VR, each of which is tied to one of these qualities. While this list is by no means exhaustive, it provides opening for both discussion and new research initiatives.

- **Shared Fantasy/Consensual Hallucination:** MMOGs and virtual worlds take place in a shared fantasy world; this means that issues of "realism" typical of some presence research are less relevant, although issues of verisimilitude (believability) remain crucial. Inhabiting a *shared* fantasy also creates what novelist William Gibson called a "consensual hallucination." (Gibson 1984) We see similar patterns in analog cultural practices, such as a Renaissance Faire, where participants enter into a social agreement to engage in an alternate reality. I would hypothesize that the introduction of imagination may in fact *enhance* the sense of co-presence due to its intimate nature.

- **Seeing and Being Seen/The Avatar:** One of the hallmarks of games and metaverses is the use of an avatar to represent the player. This adds the dimensions of both *seeing oneself* and *being seen* by others. *Myst* players, accustomed to a first-person viewpoint, reported that in *Uru* the simple act of seeing *themselves* inside the fantasy world created a profound transformation in their sense of presence. One player described the avatar as creating a sense of proprioception, which firs-person perspectives lack. Conversely, the avatar enhances the sense of social presence, best summarized best by R.C. MacKinnon vis à vis Usenet: "I am perceived, therefore I am." (MacKinnon 1995) This brings new relevance to sociologist Erving Goffman's now-classic theory of performance in everyday life that suggested that people are engaged in a constant performance. (Goffman 1959) Thus, the inclusion of the avatar transforms the virtual world into both a stage and a mirror. The *Uru*/*Myst* transition gave us a glimpse into a larger research question exploring the differences in perception of presence between "first person" and avatar-based virtual worlds.

- **Social Construction of Identity:** The "Being Seen" dimension relates to another dimension of co-presence in games, which I call the social construction of identity. My findings show that not only are play communities emergent, but so are individual identities. Players' avatar identities emerge through a system of social feedback. Many players find themselves surprised by who they've become in their alternate personals, and reported having a transformative experience as a result.

- **Play Communities:** Social play creates particular types of co-presence that are unique to mediated spaces that have play as their primary function. The sense of co-presence required of a play space requires design features that are specific to games and metaverses; furthermore, a social bond may form around play communities that significantly enhances the sense of social presence. This occurs quite naturally in corporeal space, as eloquently described by Bernie DeKoven. (DeKoven 1978) However, because play is highly spontaneous and fluid, I would argue that it is actually more difficult to create software for mediated play than for mediated work.

- **Citizenship/Ownership:** After a period of time in a virtual world, players often develop a sense of citizenship. This includes a feeling that they have "rights" and a sense of entitlement to fair representation. Some players may feel themselves to be "natives" of the virtual world, such as the 20% of players in an *Everquest* study who said they felt they lived *primarily* in the game's imaginary world, Norrath, occasionally or frequently "visiting" the real world. (Castronova 2001) The sense of ownership is enhanced in metaverses and games where players have a direct hand the world's creation: they see *themselves* reflected in the world, thus the world itself is an extension in some way of their avatar identities. This sense of presence does not seem to require any verisimilitude whatever, and we can see it taking place as far back as text-based MUDs and what I would call first-generation metaverses, such as *ActiveWorlds* and *OnLive*. Anthropologist Alfred Gell describes the way in which art functions as a form of social agency, and I would argue that this is particularly the case in virtual worlds where the intersubjective project of *creating* the world also becomes a marker of both individual and group identity. (Gell 1998)

These dimensions are provided as a starting point for discussion. Additional dimensions may also be identified that pertain to specific aspects of game and metaverses, such as learning. In MMOGs, for instance, it is common for players to assist each other in learning various aspects of the game and its world.

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